# C's Memory Model









### Balance Sheet ... so far

Lost	Gained
<ul> <li>Contracts</li> <li>Safety</li> <li>Garbage collection</li> <li>Memory initialization</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Preprocessor</li> <li>Whimsical execution</li> <li>Explicit memory management</li> <li>Separate compilation</li> </ul>

### Arrays in C

## Creating an Array

• Here's how we create a 5-element int array



#### In C arrays and pointers are the same thing\*

- No special array type
- No special allocation instruction

malloc returns NULL when we have run out of memory

we use xmalloc instead



### Using an Array



• Arrays are accessed like in C0



○ Like in C0, C arrays are 0-indexed

int main() {
 int \*A = xmalloc(sizeof(int) \* 5);
 A[1] = 7;
 A[2] = A[1] + 5;
 A[4] = 1;
 ...
}



- If A is a pointer, then \*A is a valid expression
   O What is it?
- A is an int\*, so \*A is an int
   it refers to the first element of the array
   \*A is the same as A[0]

\*A = 42;

sets A[0] to 42

- int main() {
   int \*A = xmalloc(sizeof(int) \* 5);
   A[1] = 7;
   A[2] = A[1] + 5;
   A[4] = 1;
   \*A = 42;
   ...
  }
- A is the address of the first element of the array
- What is the address of the next element?
   It's A + one int over: A+1
   In general the address of the i-th element of A is A+i





• This is called **pointer arithmetic** 

int main() {
 int \*A = xmalloc(sizeof(int) \* 5);
 A[1] = 7;
 A[2] = A[1] + 5;
 A[4] = 1;
 \*A = 42;
 ...
}

- A+i is the address of A[i]
  - so \*(A+i) is A[i]
    > the value of the element A[i]
     so printf("A[1] is %d\n", \*(A+1));

prints 7

A+1 A+2 A+3 Α A+4 0xBB0 0xBB4 0xBB8 **0xBBC** 0xBC0 42 7 12 1 A[0] A[1] A[2] A[3] A[4] \*A \*(A+1) \*(A+2) \*(A+3) \*(A+4)

• In fact, A[i] is just convenience syntax for \*(A+i)

In the same way that p->next is just convenience syntax for (\*p).next

А	A+1	A+2	A+3	A+4	
0xBB0	0xBB4	0xBB8	0xBBC	0xBC0	
42	7	12		1	
A[0]	A[1]	A[2]	A[3]	A[4]	
*A	*(A+1)	*(A+2)	*(A+3)	*(A+4)	

 Pointer arithmetic is one of the most error-prone features of C



But no C program needs to use it
 Every piece of C code can be rewritten without
 change \*(A+i) to A[i]
 change A+i to ... (later)

Code that doesn't use pointer arithmetic
 is more readable
 has fewer bugs

# **Initializing Memory**



 (x)malloc does not initialize memory to default value
 A[3] could contain any value

0xBB0	0xBB4	0xBB8	0xBBC	0xBC0	
42	7	12	$\bigcirc$	1	
 A[0]	A[1]	A[2]	A[3]	A[4]	

To allocate memory and initialize it to all zeros, use the function calloc



- calloc returns NULL if there is no memory available
  - lib/xalloc.h provides xcalloc that aborts execution instead



# Freeing Arrays



- A was created in allocated memory
   o on the heap
- Therefore we must free it before the program exits
   otherwise there is a memory leak

free(A);

• The C motto

### If you allocate it, you free it

# The Length of an Array

int main() {
 int \*A = xcalloc(5, sizeof(int));
 A[1] = 7;
 A[2] = A[1] + 5;
 A[4] = 1;
 \*A = 42;
 free(A);
}

- In C0, we can know the length of an array only in contracts
- In C, there is no way to find out the length of an array
   We need to keep track of it meticulously

C0 stores it secretly

But free knows how much memory to give back to the OS
 The memory management part of the run-time keeps track of the starting address and size of every piece of allocated memory ...
 but none of this is accessible to the program

# Arrays Summary

#### Arrays in C

- Arrays are pointers
- Created with (x)malloc
   > does not initialize elements
   or with (x)calloc
  - does initialize elements
- Must be freed
- No way to find the length

#### Arrays in C0

- Arrays have a special type
- Created with alloc\_array
   *Initializes the elements to 0*

- Garbage collected
- Length available in contracts



### **Out-of-bound Accesses**

```
int main() {
    int *A = xcalloc(5, sizeof(int));
    A[1] = 7;
    A[2] = A[1] + 5;
    A[4] = 1;
    *A = 42;
}
```

• What if we try to access A[5]?

printf("A[5] is %d\n", A[5]);

- In C0, this is a safety violation
   o array access out of bounds
- In C, that's \*(A+5)

 $\odot$  the value of the  $6^{th}$  int starting from the address in A



• What will happen?

# **Out-of-bound Accesses**

• What will happen?

#### printf("A[5] is %d\n", A[5]);



#### • It could

- print some int and continue execution
- abort the program
- o crash the computer
- O do weirder things \_\_\_\_\_\_ Google joke: (within the laws of physics)
   Google joke: order pizza for the whole team



#### printf("A[5] is %d\n", A[5]);

could do different things on different runs
 ○ it could work as expected most of the times but not always
 > corrupt the data and crash in mysterious ways later

#### • Same thing with

printf("A[-1] is %d\n", A[-1]); printf("A[1000] is %d\n", A[1000]);

#### Linux Terminal # gcc -Wall ... # ./a.out A[5] is 1879048222 A[1000] is -837332876 A[-1] is 1073741854 Segmentation fault (core dumped)

#### • But

printf("A[1000000] is %d\n", A[1000000]);

will consistently crash the program

> with a **segmentation fault** 

- The code could work as expected most of the times but not always
  - $\odot$  Extremely hard to debug
- Valgrind will often point out out-of-bound accesses

printf("A[5] is %d\n", A[5]);



Valgrind will often point out out-of-bound accesses



Here we are *writing* to A[5]



• Valgrind will often point out out-of-bound accesses

printf("A[-1] is %d\n", A[-1]);



• Valgrind will often point out out-of-bound accesses

printf("A[1000] is %d\n", A[1000]);



○ It doesn't give as much information further away from the array

• Valgrind will often point out out-of-bound accesses

printf("A[1000000] is %d\n", A[1000000]);



• What does this mean?

### **Out-of-bound Accesses**

printf("A[5] is %d\n", A[5]);
printf("A[-1] is %d\n", A[-1]);
printf("A[1000] is %d\n", A[1000]);

all access memory in the heap, near A

printf("A[1000000] is %d\n", A[1000000]);
accesses memory outside in the heap
in a different segment of memory
That's why the program crashes with a segmentation fault



• Valgrind cannot catch all out-of-bound accesses

A[-1000] = 42;



 Valgrind keeps track of likely locations where programmers make mistakes

e.g., off-by-one errors

○ it does not monitor the whole memory

Out-of-bound accesses may do different things on different runs

- Why?
- Because the C99 standard does not specify what should happen

is a nightmare

Out-of-bound accesses are undefined behavior
 o different compilers do different things
 o often just carry on \_\_\_\_\_\_ That's what will make the code run fastest
 > read or write other program data
 > unless accessing a restricted segment

#### Every safety violation in C0 is undefined behavior in C

C0 was engineered this way

everything that could happen

during execution is defined

bad thing that could happen

abort the program

on purpose:

- $\odot$  accessing an array out-of-bound
- dereferencing NULL
- o (plus other violations we will examine later)
- But there is more in C than in C0
- Almost anything else slightly weird is undefined behavior in C
  - reading uninitialized memory
    - ➤ even if correctly allocated
  - $\ensuremath{\circ}$  using memory that has been freed
  - double free

O ... More later



- What's so bad about them?
  - Security vulnerabilities
    - Heartbleed, Stuxnet
  - Software bugs
    - buffer overflow



- Why does C have undefined behaviors?
   These were the early days of programming language research
- Why haven't they been fixed?
  - Some legacy code relies on the behavior of a specific compiler on a specific OS to do its job
    - Fixing it would break this code

### Aliasing



### Aliasing into an Array

• We have a new form of aliasing

$$B[1] = 35; B B+1 B+2$$
assert(A[3] == 35); A A+1 A+2 A+3 A+4
$$0xBB0 0xBB4 0xBB8 0xBBC 0xBC0$$

$$42 7 12 35 1$$

$$A[0] A[1] A[2] A[3] A[4]$$

B[2]

B[1]

B[0]

### Aliasing into an Array

int $*B = A+2$ :			В	B+1	B+2	
— — — , — — . — . — . — ,	А	A+1	A+2	A+3	A+4	
B[1] = 35;	0xBB0	0xBB4	0xBB8	0xBBC	0xBC0	
	42	7	12	35	1	
	A[0]	A[1]	A[2]	A[3]	A[4]	
			B[0]	B[1]	B[2]	

We are not allowed to free B
 It was not returned by (x)malloc or (x)calloc
 Doing so is undefined behavior

### **Casting Pointers in C**

#### In C1, we can

cast any pointer to void\*

o cast void\* only to the original pointer type

In C, we can cast any pointer to any pointer type
 this never triggers an error

char  $*C = (char^*)A;$ 





- C[16] is the 17<sup>th</sup> character in C
   i.e., the first byte of A[4]
- Since A[4] is 1 == 0x00000001
   we expect C[16] to be 0



#### printf("The 16th char in C is %d\n", C[16]);

#### • We expect C[16] to be 0



Integers can be represented in various way over 4 bytes

gcc uses little-endian format

The most significant byte has the highest address



As an array, each element of D is two ints
 o accessing D[1].y is the same as accessing A[5]

- $\succ$  out of bounds
- > undefined behavior
- When casting pointers, we must be mindful of alignment



- Careless casting can be outright dangerous
- In practice,
- cast a pointer of arbitrary type to void\* or char\* only
   accessing pointers cast to other types is undefined behavior

### Casting to void\*

In C1, void\* stands for a pointer of any type
 this is the basis for building generic data structures
 as long as the elements are pointers

In C, void\* is also the type of an array of ... void
 > but void is not a type in C

 void\* can be viewed as the address of the first element of any array

 $\succ$  there is no way to infer the size of the elements

nor the number of elements

 With this, we can write generic operations on arrays with arbitrary elements

not just pointers

### **Generic Array Operations**

We can write generic operations on arbitrary arrays by

 casting their address to void\*
 specifying the element size
 specifying the number of elements

• Example: a generic sort function



### **Stack Allocation**

### Stack-allocated Arrays

- In C0, arrays can only live on the heap
- C allows creating arrays on the stack
   these are stack-allocated arrays
- The instruction

int E[8];

allocates an 8-element int array on the stack

 $\odot$  It is accessed using the normal array notation

E[0] = 3; E[1] = 2 \* E[0];



### Stack-allocated Arrays

 Stack-allocated arrays can be initialized to array literals



allocates a 5-element int array on the stack and initializes with the given values

Array literals are really useful to write test cases

 $\odot$  but they cannot be very big



### Stack-allocated Structs

Similarly, C allows allocating structs on the stack

struct point p;

 and we can conveniently initialize them struct point q = { .x = 15, .y=122 };

Stack-allocated structs are not pointers

 their fields must be accessed using the dot notation

![](_page_44_Picture_6.jpeg)

# **Disposing of Stack-allocated Data**

 The space for stack-allocated arrays and structs is reclaimed when exiting the function that declared them

#### $\odot$ No need to free them

○ In fact, this is undefined behavior!

- Because of this they cannot be used for traditional data structures
  - if queue\_new were to allocate a queue on the stack, other queue functions wouldn't be able to use it when it returns

Traditional queues must be heap-allocated

![](_page_45_Picture_7.jpeg)

### Address-of

# Capturing Memory Addresses

- In C1, & can only be used on function names
- In C, & can get the address of anything that has a memory address
  - functions
  - local variables
  - fields of structs
  - array elements
- In general, for any exp for which

exp = ...

is syntactically valid, we can write

&exp

![](_page_47_Picture_11.jpeg)

![](_page_47_Figure_12.jpeg)

# Capturing Memory Addresses

![](_page_48_Figure_1.jpeg)

0x0

All code using pointer arithmetic can be rewritten without
 O Code is more readable
 O and has fewer bugs

#### • Change

○ *(A + i)	to	A[i]
○ <b>A + i</b>	to	&A[i]

### Bad Uses of Address-of

 In general, for any exp for which exp = ...
 is syntactically valid, we can write

&exp

○ &(i+2)

X

Х

X

- > i+2 = 7; is not legal
- &(A+3)

A+3 = xcalloc(4, sizeof(int)); is not legal

0 **&&i** 

> &i = xmalloc(sizeof(int)); is not legal

### Really Bad Uses of Address-of

int\* bad() { int a = 1;return &a;

X

 Returns the address of a stack value that will be deallocated upon return!

The next function call will overwrite it

• This is a huge security vulnerability

![](_page_51_Figure_5.jpeg)

### Strings in C

- There is no type string in C
- Strings are just arrays of characters
  - of type char\*
  - $\odot$  The string syntax

"hello"

is just convenience syntax for an array containing 'h', 'e', ...

Given

char \*s1 = "hello";

#### the statements

printf("%c%c%c%c\n", s1[0], s1[1], s1[2], s1[3], s1[4]);
printf("%s\n", s1);
produce the exact same output

# NUL

```
char *s1 = "hello";
printf("%s\n", s1);
```

- How does printf know when to stop printing characters?
   the length of an array is recorded nowhere
- The end of a string is indicated by the NUL character
   o written '\0'

 $\circ$  whose value is 0

• Thus, s1 is an array of **six** characters and s1[5] == '\0'

# The <string> Library

- The <string> library contains lots of useful functions to work with strings
  - $\odot$  strlen returns the number of characters in a string
    - > up to the first NUL character, excluded

char \*s1 = "hello";

assert(strlen(s1) == 5);

> s1 is an array of 6 characters but it has length 5

This is an endless source of bugs

- o strcpy(dst, src) copies all the characters of string src to dst
  - > up to the NUL character, included
  - > dst must be big enough to store all the characters in src plus NUL

and many more utility functions

![](_page_55_Picture_12.jpeg)

• Strings can live in three places

○ in the DATA segment
 char \*s1 = "hello";
 > these strings are read-only
 s1[0] = 'm';
 s1[0] = 'm';
 is undefined behavior
 > no need to free them
 in fact, that's undefined behavior

o in the heap

o on the stack

![](_page_56_Figure_5.jpeg)

• Strings can live in three places

o in the DATA segment

![](_page_57_Figure_3.jpeg)

![](_page_57_Figure_4.jpeg)

• Strings can live in three places

o in the DATA segment

o in the heap

on the stack
char s3[] = "world";
char s4[] = {'s', 'k', 'y', '0'};
if using array literals, we often need to include the NUL terminator
no need to free them

![](_page_58_Picture_5.jpeg)

# Strings in Summary

• Strings can live in three places

```
o in the DATA segment
    char *s1 = "hello";
```

 $\odot$  on the stack

char s3[] = "world"; char s4[] = {'s', 'k', 'y', '\0'};

![](_page_59_Picture_6.jpeg)

### Strings in Summary

• Strings can live in three places

	Writable?	Allocation	Deallocation
DATA	No	Automatic (when execution starts)	N/A
Stack	Yes	Automatic (when function is called)	Automatic (when function returns)
Неар	Yes	Manual (with malloc)	Manual (with free)

![](_page_60_Figure_3.jpeg)

### Summary

- Reading/writing to non-allocated memory
- Reading uninitialized memory
   o even if correctly allocated
- Use after free
- Double free
- Freeing memory not returned by malloc/calloc
- Writing to read-only memory

### **Balance Sheet**

Lost	Gained
Contracts	<ul> <li>Preprocessor</li> </ul>
Safety	<ul> <li>Undefined behavior (?)</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Garbage collection</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Explicit memory management</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Memory initialization</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Separate compilation</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Well-behaved arrays</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Pointer arithmetic (?)</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Fully-defined language</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Stack-allocated arrays and structs</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Strings</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Generalized address-of</li> </ul>