

Using Valgrind to detect undefined value errors with bit-precision

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Abstract

We present Memcheck, a tool that has been implemented with the dynamic binary instrumentation framework Valgrind. Memcheck detects a wide range of memory errors in programs as they run. This paper focuses on one kind of error that Memcheck detects: undefined value errors. Such errors are common, and often cause bugs that are hard to find in programs written in languages such as C, C++ and Fortran. Memcheck's definedness checking improves on that of previous tools by being accurate to the level of individual bits. This accuracy gives Memcheck a low false positive and false negative rate.

The definedness checking involves shadowing every bit of data in registers and memory with a second bit that indicates if the bit has a defined value. Every value-creating operation is instrumented with a shadow operation that propagates shadow bits appropriately. Memcheck uses these shadow bits to detect uses of undefined values that could adversely affect a program's behaviour.

Under Memcheck, programs typically run 20–30 times slower than normal. This is fast enough to use with large programs. Memcheck finds many errors in real programs, and has been used during the past two years by thousands of programmers on a wide range of systems, including OpenOffice, Mozilla, Opera, KDE, GNOME, MySQL, Perl, Samba, The GIMP, and Unreal Tournament.

1 Introduction

The accidental use of undefined values is a notorious source of bugs in programs written in imperative languages such as C, C++ and Fortran. Such *undefined value errors* are easy to make, but can be extremely difficult to track down manually, sometimes lurking unfound for years.

In this paper we describe Memcheck, a practical tool which detects a wide range of memory errors, including undefined value errors. Memcheck is implemented using the dynamic binary instrumentation framework Valgrind [10, 9].

1.1 Basic operation and features

Memcheck is a dynamic analysis tool, and so checks programs for errors as they run. Memcheck performs four kinds of memory error checking.

First, it tracks the addressability of every byte of memory, updating the information as memory is allocated and freed. With this information, it can detect all accesses to unaddressable memory.

Second, it tracks all heap blocks allocated with `malloc()`, `new` and `new[]`. With this information it can detect bad or repeated frees of heap blocks, and can detect memory leaks at program termination.

Third, it checks that memory blocks supplied as arguments to functions like `strcpy()` and `memcpy()` do not overlap. This does not require any additional state to be tracked.

Fourth, it performs *definedness checking*: it tracks the definedness of every bit of data in registers and memory. With this information it can detect undefined value errors with bit-precision.

All four kinds of checking are useful. However, of the four, definedness checking is easily the most sophisticated, and it is this checking that this paper focuses on.

Memcheck uses dynamic binary instrumentation to instrument the program to be checked (the *client*) on-the-fly at run-time. Execution of the added instrumentation code is interleaved with the program's normal execution, not disturbing normal program behaviour (other than slowing it down), but doing extra work "on the side" to detect memory errors. Because it instruments and analyses executable machine code, rather than source code or object code, it has the following nice properties.

- Wide applicability: it works with programs written in any language.¹
- Total coverage: all parts of the client are executed under Memcheck's control, including dynamically linked libraries and the dynamic linker, even if the

```

int main(void) {
    int x, y, z, *p;
    char buf[10];
    write(1, buf, 1);          // bug 1
    x = ( x == 0 ? y : z );    // bug 2
    return *p + x;            // bug 3
}

```

Figure 1: Example program `badprog.c`

source code is not available on the system. Indeed, it is only by doing this that Memcheck can be accurate—partial coverage leads either to lots of missed errors (false negatives) or lots of invalid errors (false positives).

- Ease of use: unlike many similar tools, it does not require programs to be prepared (e.g. recompiled or relinked) in any way.

Memcheck is part of the Valgrind suite, which is free (GPL) software, and is available for download from the Valgrind website [14]. It currently runs only on the x86/Linux platform, although work is currently underway to port it to other platforms such as AMD64/Linux, PowerPC/Linux, x86/FreeBSD, and PowerPC/MacOSX.

1.2 Using Memcheck

Memcheck is easy to use. As an example, consider the (contrived) program `badprog.c` in Figure 1. It contains three undefined value errors. To check the compiled program `badprog` the user only has to type:

```
valgrind --tool=memcheck badprog
```

The `--tool=` option specifies which tool in the Valgrind suite is used. The program runs under Memcheck’s control, typically 20–30 times slower than usual. This slow-down is partly due to Memcheck’s definedness checking, partly due to its other checking, and partly due to Valgrind’s inherent overhead. The program’s output is augmented by Memcheck’s output, which goes by default to standard error, although it can be redirected to a file, file descriptor, or socket with a command line option.

Figure 2 shows the resulting output. The first three lines are printed by Memcheck on startup. The middle section shows three error messages issued by Memcheck. The final three lines are printed at termination, and summarise Memcheck’s findings. Each line of Memcheck’s output is prefixed with the client’s process ID, 27607 in this case.

The three error messages are quite precise. The first indicates that the memory passed to the system call `write()` via the `buf` argument contains undefined values; its last line indicates that the undefined value is on

```

void set_bit ( int* arr, int n ) {
    arr[n/32] |= (1 << (n%32));
}
int get_bit ( int* arr, int n ) {
    return 1 & (arr[n/32] >> (n%32));
}
int main ( void ) {
    int* arr = malloc(10 * sizeof(int));
    set_bit(arr, 177);
    printf("%d\n", get_bit(arr, 178));
    return 0;
}

```

Figure 3: Unsafe use of a bit-array

the stack of thread 1 (the main thread). The second indicates that a conditional jump depends on an undefined value. The third indicates that an undefined value is used as a pointer. All three error messages include a stack trace that indicate precisely where the error is occurring. In order to get exact line numbers in the stack traces, the client must be compiled with debugging information. If this is missing, the code locations are less precise, as can be seen with the location within the `write()` function (not to be confused with the `write()` system call)—GNU libc on this system was not compiled with debugging information.

Attentive readers may note that the final line of `badprog.c` could cause a segmentation fault due to the use of the uninitialised variable `p` as an address. On one system we tried this test on, exactly that happened, and so Memcheck issued an additional “Invalid read of size 4” warning immediately before the memory access, thanks to its addressability checking. For the run presented, the memory access (un)luckily hit addressable memory, so no addressability error message was issued.

1.3 Bit-level precision

Memcheck is the first tool we are aware of that tracks definedness down to the level of bits. Other tools track definedness at byte granularity (Purify) or word granularity (Third Degree).

This means Memcheck correctly handles code which deals with partially-defined bytes. In C and C++, two common idioms give rise to such bytes: use of bit arrays and use of bitfields in structures. Tools which track definedness at byte or word granularities necessarily give inaccurate results in such situations – either they fail to report genuine errors resulting from uses of uninitialised bits, or they falsely flag errors resulting from correct uses of partially defined bytes.

The program shown in Figure 3 uses an uninitialised bit in a bit-array. Memcheck reports this, but Purify does not². Memcheck is known to have found previously-

```

==27607== Memcheck, a memory error detector for x86-linux.
==27607== Copyright (C) 2000-2004, and GNU GPL'd, by Julian Seward et al.
==27607== For more details, rerun with: -v
==27607==
==27607== Syscall param write(buf) contains uninitialised or unaddressable byte(s)
==27607==   at 0x420D2473: write (in /lib/tls/libc-2.3.2.so)
==27607==   by 0x8048347: main (badprog.c:6)
==27607==   Address 0x52BFE880 is on thread 1's stack
<junk character printed by write()>
==27607==
==27607== Conditional jump or move depends on uninitialised value(s)
==27607==   at 0x804834F: main (badprog.c:7)
==27607==
==27607== Use of uninitialised value of size 4
==27607==   at 0x804836B: main (badprog.c:8)
==27607==
==27607== ERROR SUMMARY: 3 errors from 3 contexts (suppressed: 11 from 1)
==27607== malloc/free: in use at exit: 0 bytes in 0 blocks.
==27607== malloc/free: 0 allocs, 0 frees, 0 bytes allocated.

```

Figure 2: Example output for `badprog.c`

undetected uses of single uninitialised bits in C++ structure bitfields, in at least one large, widely used C++ code base.

1.4 Contributions

Our main contribution is a detailed description of Memcheck’s definedness checking, which has only been briefly touched upon in previous publications about Valgrind [10, 9]. Memcheck’s definedness checking improves on that performed by previous tools by being accurate to the level of individual bits. Its false positive and false negative rates are very low. Finally, the run-time overhead of the definedness checking is reasonable enough that it is practical to use on very large programs.

1.5 Paper structure

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes how Memcheck works, in particular the details of shadow bit operations, which are crucial in ensuring Memcheck’s accuracy and speed. Section 3 evaluates Memcheck by considering the cost of its use—in terms of how easy it is to obtain and run, the ease of using its results, and its impact on performance—and the benefits provided by its bug-finding abilities. Section 4 discusses related work. Section 5 concludes.

2 How Memcheck works

2.1 Valgrind

Memcheck is implemented as a plug-in to Valgrind [10, 9]. Valgrind is a framework for creating tools that use dy-

namc binary instrumentation; it does all the hard work of inserting instrumentation into machine code at run-time. Tools are created as plug-ins, written in C, to Valgrind’s *core*. The basic view is:

Valgrind core + tool plug-in = Valgrind tool.

The resulting tool loads the client at start-up, grafting itself onto the process as it does so. It then starts executing the client, by (re)compiling the client’s code, one basic block at a time, in a just-in-time, execution-driven fashion. The compilation process involves disassembling the machine code into an intermediate representation called UCode. UCode is instrumented by the tool plug-in, and the instrumented UCode is then converted back into x86 code. The resulting code is stored in Valgrind’s code cache, to be rerun as necessary.

The core spends most of its execution time making, finding, and running translations. None of the client’s original code is run. The core also provides many services to tools, to ease common tasks such as recording errors and reading debug information. Only one tool can be used at a time.

The Valgrind distribution contains the core, plus five tools: Memcheck, Addrcheck (a lightweight version of Memcheck that omits definedness checking), a cache profiler, a memory space-use (heap) profiler, and a data race detector for POSIX pthread-ed programs.

2.2 Overview

The basic idea underlying the definedness checking is straightforward.

- Every single bit of data, *b*, maintained by a program, in both registers and memory, is *shadowed*

by a piece of metadata, called a *definedness* bit. For historical reasons these are often also referred to as *V bits* (V being short for “validity”). Each V bit indicates whether or not the bit *b* it shadows is regarded as currently having a properly defined value.

- Every single operation that creates a value is shadowed by a *shadow operation* that computes the V bits of any outputs, based on the V bits of all inputs and the operation. The exact operations performed by this *shadow computation* are important, as they must be sufficiently fast to be practical, and sufficiently accurate to not cause many false positives.
- Every operation that uses a value in such a way that it could affect the observable behaviour of a program is checked. If the V bits indicate that any of the operation’s inputs are undefined, an error message is issued. The V bits are used to detect if any of the following depend on undefined values: control flow transfers, conditional moves, addresses used in memory accesses, and data passed to system calls.

Most operations do not directly affect the program’s observable behaviour. In such cases, the V bits are not checked. Instead, V bits for the result of the operation are computed. Hence, for the most part, Memcheck silently tracks the flow of undefined values, and only issues an error message when use of such a value is potentially dangerous. This scheme is required because undefined values are often copied around without any problem, due to the common practice, used by both programmers and compilers, of padding structures to ensure fields are word-aligned.

From this overview, the main overheads of definedness checking are apparent. First, the use of V bits doubles the amount of memory in use. Second, most instructions compute new values, and thus require a shadow operation itself consisting of one or more instructions.

2.3 Details of V bits

A V bit of zero indicates that the corresponding data bit has a properly defined value, and a V bit of one indicates that it does not. This is counterintuitive, but makes some of the shadow operations more efficient than they would be if the bit values were inverted.

Every 32-bit general purpose register is shadowed by a 32-bit shadow register, and every byte of memory has a shadow V byte. After that, there are some exceptions to the basic rule of “one V bit per data bit”.

- The x86 condition code register (`%eflags`) is approximated with a single V bit, since tracking all

6 condition codes individually is expensive and mostly unnecessary.

- The program counter is not shadowed. Instead, we regard it as always defined, and emit an error message whenever a conditional jump depends on undefined condition codes. One way to interpret such a jump is as an attempt to assign an undefined value to the program counter, but since we are not tracking the program counter’s definedness state, we regard it as always-defined, and so must immediately report any attempt to “assign” it an undefined value.
- Floating point, MMX and SSE registers are not shadowed. Memcheck can still perform definedness checking on code using these registers, but such checks may produce a higher false positive rate than would have occurred had the registers been shadowed.

2.4 Instrumentation basics

In principle it is possible to directly state the V bit transformations required to shadow each x86 instruction. In practice, the x86 instruction set is so complex and irregular that this would be difficult and fragile. Fortunately, UCode (Valgrind’s intermediate representation) is RISC-like and clearly exposes all memory and arithmetic operations, which makes Memcheck’s instrumentation task much easier.

Another important aspect of UCode is that it supports the use of an infinite supply of virtual registers. The initial translation from x86 is expressed in terms of such registers. Memcheck interleaves its own instrumentation UCode with it, using as many new virtual registers as required. Valgrind’s core has the job of performing instruction selection and register allocation to convert this sequence back to executable x86 code.

2.5 Abstract operations on V bits

The V bit instrumentation scheme is best described in terms of a family of simple abstract operations on V bits. We will use `d1` and `d2` to denote virtual registers holding real values, and `v1` and `v2` denote virtual shadow registers holding V bits. Also, some operations below use `X` and `Y` indicate the operand and result widths in bytes (and 0 represents an operand with a width of a single bit). Those operations for which the width is not specified are width-independent.

Memcheck uses the following binary operations.

- `DifD(v1, v2)` (“defined if either defined”) returns a V bit vector the same width as `v1` and `v2`.

Each bit of the result indicates definedness if either corresponding operand bit indicates definedness. Since our encoding is zero for defined and one for undefined, `DifD` can be implemented using a bitwise-AND operation.

- `UifU(v1, v2)` (“undefined if either undefined”) dually propagates undefinedness from either operand, again at a bitwise level, and can be implemented using a bitwise-OR operation.
- `ImproveAND(d, v)` and `ImproveOR(d, v)` are helpers for dealing with AND and OR operations. These have the interesting property that the resulting `V` bits depend not only on the operand `V` bits, but also on the operand data values. `ImproveAND` takes a data value (`d`) and a `V` bit value (`v`), and produces an “improvement value” bitwise as follows:

```
ImproveAND(0, undefined) = undefined
ImproveAND(0, defined)   = defined
ImproveAND(1, undefined) = undefined
ImproveAND(1, defined)   = undefined
```

The second case is the interesting one. If one of the arguments is a defined zero bit, we don’t care that the other argument might be undefined, since the result will be zero anyway. Hence `ImproveAND` creates a “defined” `V`-bit, which, as described in Section 2.6, is merged into the final result for AND using `DifD`. This has the effect of forcing that bit of the result to be regarded as defined. “undefined” is the identity value for `DifD`, so the other three cases have no effect on the final outcome.

For exactly analogous reasons, `ImproveOR` behaves similarly, with the interesting case being `ImproveOR(1, defined) = defined`.

The following unary operations are also needed.

- `Left(v)` simulates the worst-case propagation of undefinedness upwards (leftwards) through a carry chain during integer add or subtract. `Left(v)` is the same as `v`, except that all bits to the left of the rightmost 1-bit in `v` are set. For example, using 8-bit values, `Left(00010100) = 11111100`. `Left` can be implemented in two x86 instructions, a negation followed by an OR operation.
- `PCastXY(v)` are a family of size-changing operations which can be interpreted as “pessimising casts”. If *all* bits of the operand are zero (defined), `PCast` produces a `V` bit vector at the new width in which all bits are zero (defined),

else it produces a value with all bits one (undefined). For example, `PCast12(00010100) = 1111111111111111`, and `PCast12(00000000) = 0000000000000000`.

These casts are used in various approximations in which the definedness checking needs to consider the worst-case across a whole word of bits. It is important to appreciate that the narrowing casts (where $X > Y$) do not simply discard the high bits of the operand. Similarly, the case where $X = Y$ is not the identity function. In all cases, each result bit depends on all operand bits, regardless of their relative sizes. `PCast` can be implemented in at most three x86 instructions: for narrowing casts, negation followed by subtract-with-borrow; for widening casts, a shift, a negation, and a subtract-with-borrow.

- `ZWidenXY(v)` are a family of widening operations which mimic unsigned (zero-extend) widening of data values. As with `PCast`, `X` and `Y` denote argument and result widths, with the additional requirement that $Y \geq X$. Zero-widening a data value produces zeroes in the new positions, and so `ZWiden` needs to indicate these new positions are defined. Since defined values are encoded as zero bits, `ZWiden` can itself be implemented using a zero-widen instruction. This is the first of several cases where choosing zero (rather than one) to mean “defined” simplifies the implementation.
- `SWidenXY(v)` is the dual family of signed widening operations. A signed widening copies the top argument bit into all new positions. Therefore `SWiden` has to copy the top definedness bit into all new positions and so can itself be implemented using a signed-widen instruction.

2.6 The instrumentation scheme proper

Every operation (instruction or system call) that creates a value must be instrumented with a shadow operation that computes the corresponding `V` bits. This section describes these shadow operations in detail.

Recall that for each virtual register `d1, d2...` in the incoming UCode, `Memcheck` allocates a shadow virtual register `v1, v2...` to carry the corresponding `V` bits.

Register and memory initialisation At startup, all registers have their `V` bits set to one, i.e. undefined. The exception is the stack pointer, which has its `V` bits set to zero, i.e. defined.

All memory bytes mapped at startup (i.e. code and data segments, and any shared objects) have their `V` bits set to zero (defined).

Memory allocation and deallocation The Valgrind framework intercepts function and system calls which cause usable address ranges to appear/disappear. Memcheck is notified of such events and marks shadow memory appropriately. For example, malloc and mmap bring new addresses into play: mmap makes memory addressable and defined, whilst malloc makes memory addressable but undefined. Similarly, whenever the stack grows, the newly exposed area is marked as addressable but undefined. Whenever memory is deallocated, the deallocated area also has its values all marked as undefined.

Memcheck also uses such events to update its maps of which address ranges are legitimately addressable. By doing that it can detect accesses to invalid addresses, and so report to the user problems such as buffer overruns, use of freed memory, and accesses below the stack pointer. Details of this addressability checking are beyond the scope of this paper.

Literals All literals are, not surprisingly, considered to be completely defined.

Data copying operations These are straightforward. Register-to-register moves give rise to a move between the corresponding shadow registers. Register-to-memory and memory-to-register transfers are instrumented with a move between the corresponding shadow register and shadow memory.

x86 contains a byte-swap (endianness-change) instruction. As this merely rearranges bits in a word, a byte-swap instruction is also applied to the shadow value.

Addition and subtraction Given $d3 = \text{Add}(d1, d2)$ or $d3 = \text{Sub}(d1, d2)$, each result bit can simplistically be considered defined if both the corresponding argument bits are defined. However, a result bit could also be undefined due to an undefined carry/borrow propagating upwards from less significant bit positions. Therefore Memcheck needs to generate $v3 = \text{Left}(\text{UifU}(v1, v2))$.

The same scheme is used for multiplies. This is overly conservative because the product of two numbers with N and M consecutive least-significant defined bits has $N + M$ least-significant defined bits, rather than $\min(N, M)$ as the Add/Sub scheme generates. It would be possible to do a better job here, but the extra expense does not seem justified given that very few, if any, complaints have arisen over the subject of false positives arising from multiplies.

The shadow operation for Neg (negation) is trivially derived by constant-folding the shadow operation for $\text{Sub}(0, d)$, giving the result $\text{Left}(v)$, where v is the shadow for d .

Add with carry and subtract with borrow These take the CPU's carry flag as an additional single-bit operand. Let $vf1$ be the virtual 1-bit-wide register tracking the definedness of the condition codes (%eflags). If this extra operand is undefined, the entire result is undefined, so the following formulation derives straightforwardly from the Add/Sub case:

$$v3 = \text{UifU}(\text{Left}(\text{UifU}(v1, v2)), \text{PCast0X}(vf1))$$

where X is the width of $v1, v2$ and $v3$.

Xor A simple case: given $d3 = \text{Xor}(d1, d2)$, generate $v3 = \text{UifU}(v1, v2)$.

The rule for Not is trivially derived by constant-folding the rule for $\text{Xor}(0xFF \dots FF, d)$, giving, as one might expect, the simple result v , where v is the shadow for d ; i.e. the V bits are unchanged.

And and Or These require inspection of the actual operand values as well as their shadow bits. We start off with a bitwise UifU of the operands, but fold in, using DifD, "improvements" contributed by defined zero-arguments (for And) or defined one-arguments (for Or). So, given:

$$d3 = \text{And}(d1, d2) \\ d3 = \text{Or}(d1, d2)$$

the resulting instrumentation assignments are, respectively:

$$v3 = \text{DifD}(\text{UifU}(v1, v2), \text{DifD}(\text{ImproveAND}(d1, v1), \text{ImproveAND}(d2, v2))) \\ v3 = \text{DifD}(\text{UifU}(v1, v2), \text{DifD}(\text{ImproveOR}(d1, v1), \text{ImproveOR}(d2, v2)))$$

This means instrumentation of And/Or is quite expensive. However, such instructions are often used with one constant operand, in which case Memcheck's post-instrumentation cleanup pass can fold these expressions down to a single ImproveAND/OR term.

Shl, Shr, Sar, Rol, Ror (Shift left, Unsigned shift right, Signed shift right, Rotate left, Rotate right). In all cases, if the shift/rotate amount is undefined, the entire result is undefined. Otherwise, for reasons which are somewhat subtle, the result V bits are obtained by applying the same shift/rotate operation to the V bits of the value to be shifted/rotated.

Given input $d3 = \text{OP}(d1, d2)$, where $d2$ is the shift/rotate amount, and the sizes of $d1/d3$ and $d2$ are respectively X and Y , the resulting instrumentation assignment is

```
v3 = UifU( PCastYX(v2), OP(v1,d2) )
```

In all five cases, the definedness bits are processed using the same operation as the original. For `ROL` and `ROR`, the definedness bits must be rotated exactly as the data bits are. `SHL` and `SHR` shift zeroes into the data, and so corresponding zeroes—indicating definedness—need to be shifted into the definedness word. `SAR` copies the top bit of the data, and so needs to also copy the top bit of the definedness word.

Widening and narrowing conversions A narrowing conversion on data throws away some of the top bits of the word, and so the same operation can be used to throw away the top bits of the shadow word.

Signed and unsigned widening conversions give rise respectively to a single `SWiden` or `ZWiden` operation.

Instructions which set flags On x86, most integer arithmetic instructions set the condition codes (`%eflags`) and Memcheck duly tracks the definedness state of `%eflags` using a single shadow bit. When an integer operation sets condition codes, it is first instrumented as described above. Memcheck pessimistically narrows the result value(s) of the shadow operation using `PCastX0` to derive a value for the `%eflags` shadow bit.

Loads, stores, conditional branches and conditional moves These are discussed in the next section.

Floating point (FP) and MMX, SSE, SSE2 (SIMD) operations Valgrind does not disassemble floating point or SIMD instructions to the same level of detail as it does integer instructions. Instead, it merely modifies some of the register fields in the instruction, marks any instructions referencing memory as such, and copies them otherwise unchanged into the output instruction stream.

Because of this, Memcheck can only offer crude instrumentation of such instructions. Such instrumentation is safe in the sense that all uses of undefined values, and all illegitimate memory accesses, will still be caught. The crudeness of the instrumentation has the effect that some computations, when done with FP or SIMD registers, may elicit false-positive undefined value errors, when similar or identical operations done using integer registers would not. The most notable case is that copying undefined data through the FP or SIMD registers will elicit false positives.

The instrumentation scheme is as follows. Neither the FP nor SIMD registers have any associated `V` bits. When a value is loaded from memory into such a register, if any part of the value is undefined, an error message is issued. When a value is written from such a register to memory,

shadow memory is marked as defined. This is in keeping with the **Eager** approximation scheme described shortly.

So far, this crude scheme has proven adequate, mostly because programmers and compilers rarely copy and manipulate partially-undefined data through FP or SIMD registers. However, vectorising compilers for SIMD architectures are becoming increasingly common [8], and this scheme cannot continue much longer—it is the biggest weakness of Memcheck. A new version of Memcheck under development will shadow data in floating point registers and in individual lanes of SIMD registers, thus remedying this deficiency.

Approximating everything else The above cases give sufficient accuracy to achieve a near-zero false positive rate on almost all compiler-generated and handwritten code. There are a multitude of other cases which *could* be tracked accurately, but for which there appears to be no point. These include: division, rotates through the carry flag, and calls to helper functions which implement obscure features (`CPUID`, `RDTSC`, BCD arithmetic, etc).

In such situations, two approximation schemes are possible.

- **Lazy.** The `V` bits of all inputs to the operation are pessimistically summarised into a single bit, using chains of `UifU` and/or `PCastX0` operations. The resulting bit will indicate “undefined” if any part of any input is undefined. This bit is duplicated (using `PCast0X`) so as to give suitable shadow output word(s) for the operation.

Using this scheme, undefinedness can be made to “flow” through unknown operations, albeit in a pessimistic manner. No error messages will be issued when such operations execute.

- **Eager.** As with **Lazy**, a summary definedness bit is pessimistically computed. If the bit is one (undefined), an error message is issued. Regardless of the bit’s value, shadow output word(s) are created indicating “defined”. Counterintuitive as this may seem, it stops cascades of undefined value error messages being issued; only the first observation of such values are reported.

Memcheck currently uses **Eager** for all floating point and SIMD operations, as described above, and **Lazy** in all other situations.

2.7 Deciding when to issue error messages

At every point where an undefined value could be consumed by an operation, Memcheck has a choice: should

it report the error right now, or should it silently propagate the undefinedness into the result? Both approaches have advantages.

- Reporting the error sooner (the eager strategy mentioned above) makes it easier for users to track down the root cause of undefined values. Undefined value errors originate primarily from reading uninitialised memory. Such values propagate through the computation until they hit a check point. If check points are rare, that path can be long, and users may have to trace back through multiple levels of procedure calls and through their data structures to find the root cause.
- Deferring error checking and reporting has two major advantages. Firstly, error checks are expensive—a test and conditional jump—and so minimising them improves performance. Secondly and more importantly, reporting errors too soon can lead to false positives: undefined values might be used in a safe way and then discarded, so an early check on them would give a pointless error to the user.

Memcheck mostly takes the second alternative, deferring error reporting as far as it can. Checks for undefined values are made only when the program is in immediate danger of performing one of the following actions, which could change its observable behaviour.

- Taking a memory exception due to use of an undefined address in a load or store.³
- Making a conditional jump based on undefined condition codes.
- Passing undefined values to a system call.
- Loading uninitialised values from memory into a SIMD or FP register.

Accordingly, instrumentation for such events is as follows.

- Memory access (all kinds): check address for definedness and issue an error message if any address bit is undefined.
- Conditional jump: check the V bit which shadows %eflags, and issue an error message if undefined.
- System call: check arguments (scalar and in memory) to the extent possible, and issue an error message if undefined values are being passed to the kernel. This requires in-depth knowledge of the kernel interface.

- Memory load into a SIMD or FP register: in addition to checking definedness of the address, also check the loaded data for definedness, and issue an error message if necessary.

Conditional moves could be handled using either the eager or lazy scheme. Memcheck handles them eagerly, testing the condition code and reporting any error immediately.

Each error check consists of testing a shadow virtual register⁴ against zero for any undefinedness, and calling a helper function to issue an error message if so. An important but non-obvious extra step is that, immediately following the test, the shadow register should be set to zero (“all defined”). Doing so prevents subsequent checks on it issuing essentially duplicate errors, which would confuse users. Consider the following C fragment:

```
int* p; /* not defined */
... = *p;
*p = ...
```

For the load, p’s shadow is tested, and an error message is issued if necessary. Subsequently in the store, reporting another such error for p would not help lead users to the root cause of the problem.

Loads from invalid addresses One interesting question is how to handle loads from memory which Memcheck regards as not validly addressable. Our solution is counterintuitive: data loaded from unaddressable memory is marked as defined.

This helps reduce error cascades. A load from an invalid address will in any case cause Memcheck to issue an invalid-address error message. If the loaded data was marked as undefined, Memcheck might, as a result, later issue undefined value error messages. These would confuse users and obscure the true cause of the error—the invalid address. Marking the loaded data as defined avoids that problem.

2.8 Avoiding false positives

Memcheck has a very low false positive rate. However, a few hand-coded assembly sequences, and a few very rare compiler-generated idioms can cause false positives. The few examples we know of are as follows.

- `xor %reg,%reg`: %reg is defined after the instruction, even if it is undefined prior to it. This is solved for Memcheck by Valgrind’s x86-to-UCode translation phase, which translates this idiom as if it had instead seen `mov $0,%reg; xor %reg,%reg`.

- `sbb %reg,%reg`: This copies the carry flag into all bits of `%reg`, and has no real dependence on `%reg`'s original value. The instrumentation described above preserves any undefinedness from `%reg`'s original value, which is inappropriate. Again, the front end solves this by instead translating `mov $0,%reg; sbb %reg,%reg`.
- A more difficult case: GCC occasionally generates code to do a conditional jump based on the highest bit in a register by moving the bit to the sign flag using `test %reg,%reg` and then doing a conditional jump based on the sign flag. Unfortunately, if bits below the highest bit in `%reg` are undefined, Memcheck's instrumentation scheme will conclude that all six condition codes are undefined, and so complain at the jump. The problem arises because only one bit is used to approximate the definedness state of all six condition codes. A possible solution is to model the sign flag separately from the rest, but so far we have resisted this extra complexity and run-time overhead.
- GNU libc contains highly-optimised, hand-written assembly routines for common string functions, particularly `strlen()`. These traverse the string a word at a time, relying on detailed properties of carry-chain propagation for correct behaviour. For such code, Memcheck's use of the `Left` operator to model such propagation is too crude, and leads to false positives.

Memcheck has a two-part work-around. First, it replaces the standard versions of these functions with its own less optimised versions that do not cause problems. But GCC sometimes inlines calls to these functions, and handling them currently involves a nasty hack. Such code requires addition/subtraction of carefully chosen constants, such as `0x80808080`. If Memcheck sees adds/subtracts with such suspect constants as operands, some undefined value checks in the containing basic block are omitted.

A better solution would be to use the presence of such constants as a signal that adds/subtracts in this block should be instrumented using an alternative, more accurate but more expensive formulation which properly tracks carry propagation [6]. We are developing such a scheme.

Finally, Memcheck's underlying assumptions are occasionally invalid. For example, some programs deliberately use undefined values as an additional source of entropy when generating random numbers.

2.9 False negatives

We believe there are very few situations in which Memcheck fails to flag uses of undefined values that could have any observable effect on program behaviour. The exceptions we are aware of are as follows.

- The abovementioned omission of some checks in blocks containing magic constants such as `0x80808080`. This hack could be removed as suggested above, probably with minimal performance loss.
- Caller-saved registers in procedures. Ideally, on entry to a procedure, caller-saved registers should be marked as undefined, since callees assume that caller-saved registers are fresh storage available for use. Memcheck does not currently do so. Doing this correctly is difficult, both because it is calling-convention dependent, and because reliably observing procedure entry/exit on x86/Linux is nearly impossible given the use of tail-call optimisations, leaf-function optimisations, and use of `longjmp()`.⁵ As a result, it is possible that registers which should be regarded as undefined at the start of a callee are marked as defined due to previous activity in the caller, and so some errors might be missed.
- Programs that switch stacks (usually because they implement user-space threading). There is no reliable way to distinguish a large stack allocation or deallocation from a stack-switch. Valgrind uses a heuristic: any change in the stack pointer greater than 2MB is assumed to be a stack-switch. When Valgrind judges that a stack-switch has happened, Memcheck does not take any further actions. So if a stack frame exceeding 2MB is allocated, Valgrind considers this a stack switch, and Memcheck will not mark the newly allocated area as undefined. The program could then use the values in the allocated area unsafely, and Memcheck will not detect the problem.⁶

Finally, Memcheck of course cannot detect errors on code paths that are not executed, nor can it detect errors arising from unseen combinations of inputs. This limitation is inherent from the fact that Memcheck uses dynamic analysis. As a result, Memcheck is best used in conjunction with a thorough test suite. In comparison, static analysis does not suffer these limitations, but the power of the analysis is necessarily much lower [1].

2.10 Setting realistic expectations

A system such as Memcheck cannot simultaneously be free of false negatives and false positives, since that

would be equivalent to solving the Halting Problem. Our design attempts to almost completely avoid false negatives and to minimise false positives. Experience in practice shows this to be mostly successful. Even so, user feedback over the past two years reveals an interesting fact: many users have an (often unstated) expectation that Memcheck should not report any false positives at all, no matter how strange the code being checked is.

We believe this to be unrealistic. A better expectation is to accept that false positives are rare but inevitable. Therefore it will occasionally necessary to add dummy initialisations to code to make Memcheck be quiet. This may lead to code which is slightly more conservative than it strictly needs to be, but at least it gives a stronger assurance that it really doesn't make use of any undefined values.

A worthy aim is to achieve Memcheck-cleaness, so that new errors are immediately apparent. This is no different from fixing source code to remove all compiler warnings, even ones which are obviously harmless.

Many large programs now do run Memcheck-clean, or very nearly so. In the authors' personal experience, recent Mozilla releases come close to that, as do cleaned-up versions of the OpenOffice.org-680 development branch, and much of the KDE desktop environment. So this is an achievable goal.

Finally, we would observe that the most effective use of Memcheck comes not only from ad-hoc debugging, but also when routinely used on applications running their automatic regression test suites. Such suites tend to exercise dark corners of implementations, thereby increasing their Memcheck-tested code coverage.

3 Evaluation

For a tool such as Memcheck to be worth using, a user must first be using a language such as C, C++ or Fortran that is susceptible to the kinds of memory errors Memcheck finds. Then, the benefits of use must outweigh the costs. This section considers first the costs of using Memcheck, in terms of its ease of use and performance. It then considers the benefits, that is, its effectiveness in helping programmers find real bugs.

As part of this, we refer to a survey of Valgrind users that we conducted in November 2003, to which 116 responses were received. The results are available on the Valgrind website [14]. Memcheck's operation has changed very little in the time since, so the responses about it are still relevant.

3.1 Ease of use

Ease of use has a number of facets: how easy Memcheck is to obtain, how easy it is to run, and how easy it is to

act upon its results.

Obtaining Memcheck Memcheck is very easy to obtain, because the Valgrind suite is free software, is available in source form on the Valgrind website [14], and is widely available in binary form on the web, packaged for a number of Linux distributions.

Running Memcheck Memcheck could hardly be easier to run. Using it only requires prefixing a program's command line with `valgrind --tool=memcheck`, plus any other desired Valgrind or Memcheck options.

Typically, the only further effort a user must make is to compile her program with debugging information, to ensure error messages are as informative as possible. Indeed, 40 of the 116 survey responders praised Valgrind/Memcheck's ease of running, and another another 14 commented that "it just works", or similar. Only one responder complained that it could be easier to use.

Custom allocators There are some cases where the user needs to expend a little more effort. If a program uses custom memory management rather than `malloc()`, `new` and `new[]`, Memcheck can miss some errors it would otherwise find. The problem can be avoided by embedding small number of *client requests* into the code. These are special assembly code sequences, encoded as C macros for easy use, that Valgrind recognises, but which perform a cheap no-op if the client is not running on Valgrind. They provide a way for the client to pass information to a Valgrind tool. For example, when using a custom allocator, client requests can be used to inform Memcheck when a heap block has been allocated or deallocated, its size and location, etc.

Self-modifying code Extra effort is also needed to handle self-modifying code. Dynamically generated code is not a problem, but if code that has executed is modified and re-executed, Valgrind will not realise this, and will re-run its out-of-date translations. Auto-detecting this is possible but expensive [7]; the cost is not justified by the small number of programs that use self-modifying code. Our compromise solution is to provide another client request which tells Valgrind to discard any cached translations of code in a specified address range.

Different behaviour under Memcheck Client programs sometimes do not behave exactly the same under Valgrind/Memcheck as they do normally. Programs that run successfully normally may fail under Memcheck. This is usually because of latent bugs that are exposed e.g. by different execution timings, or because Valgrind provides its own implementation of the Pthreads library.

This can be regarded as a good thing. More rarely, programs that fail normally may succeed under Memcheck for the same reasons, which can be frustrating for users who hoped to track down a bug with Memcheck.

Although Valgrind/Memcheck is robust—we have had feedback from users using it on systems with 25 million lines of code—it occasionally fails due to its own bugs. The main source of problems is that Valgrind interacts closely with the kernel and GNU libc. In particular the signal and thread handling is fragile and hard to get right for all Linux distributions, and a maintenance headache. By comparison, the parts dealing with x86 code and instrumentation cause few problems, because instruction sets change very slowly. We hope to decrease our level of interaction with the kernel and GNU libc in the future, and recent development efforts have made major progress in that area.

Acting upon Memcheck’s results In general, Memcheck’s addressability checking, deallocation checking, and overlap checking do quite well here, in that Memcheck’s report of the problem is usually close to the root cause. However, for definedness checking this is often not the case, as Section 2.7 explained.

To help on this front, Memcheck provides another client request that can be inserted into the client’s source code. It instructs Memcheck to check if a particular variable or memory address range is defined, issuing an error message if not. Judicious uses of this client request can make identifying root causes of undefined value errors much easier.

Ideally, error messages would indicate where the undefined value originated from, e.g. from a heap block whose contents have not been initialised. However, this would require augmenting each value with extra information about where it came from, and we cannot see how to do this without incurring prohibitive overheads.

Ease of interpreting error messages is also important. Ten survey responders complained that the messages are confusing, but 7 praised them. One issue in particular is the depth of stack traces: the default is four, but many users immediately adjust that to a much higher number. This gives more information, but also makes the error messages longer. This is a case where a GUI (requested by 8 responders) would be useful, in that large stack traces could be gathered, shown to a small depth by default, and then “unfolded” by the user if necessary. Some users also simply prefer graphical tools over text-based ones. As it happens, there are several GUI front-ends for Valgrind, including Alleyoop [17] and Valgui [2].

Program	t (s)	Mem.	Addr.	Nul.
bzip2	10.8	13.8	10.2	2.5
crafty	3.5	45.3	27.4	7.9
gap	1.0	26.5	19.2	5.6
gcc	1.5	35.5	23.7	9.2
gzip	1.8	22.7	17.7	4.7
mcf	0.4	14.0	7.1	2.6
parser	3.6	18.4	13.5	4.2
twolf	0.2	30.1	20.5	6.1
vortex	6.4	47.9	36.5	8.5
ampp	19.1	24.7	23.3	2.2
art	28.6	13.0	10.9	5.5
quake	2.1	31.1	28.8	5.8
mesa	2.3	43.1	35.9	5.6
median		26.5	20.5	5.6
geo. mean		25.7	19.0	4.9

Table 1: Slow-down factors of Memcheck, Addrcheck and Nulgrind (smaller is better)

3.2 Performance

This section discusses the performance of three Valgrind tools. Besides Memcheck, it considers two other tools: Addrcheck, and Nulgrind. Addrcheck is a cut-down version of Memcheck that does not perform definedness checking. The performance difference between Memcheck and Addrcheck give an indication of the cost of Memcheck’s definedness checking. Nulgrind is the “null” Valgrind tool that adds no instrumentation. It gives an idea of the overhead due to Valgrind’s basic operation.

All measurements were performed using Valgrind 2.1.2 on an 1400 MHz AMD Athlon with 1GB of RAM, running Red Hat Linux 9, kernel version 2.4.20. The test programs are a subset of the SPEC CPU2000 suite [16]. All were tested with the “test” (smallest) inputs. The time measured was the “real” time, as reported by `/usr/bin/time`. Each program was run once normally, and once under each of the Valgrind tools. This is not a very rigorous approach but that does not matter, as the figures here are only intended to give a broad idea of performance.

Table 1 shows the time performance of the three tools. Column 1 gives the benchmark name, column 2 gives its normal running time in seconds, and columns 3–5 give the slow-down factor for each tool relative to column 2 (smaller is better). The first nine programs are integer programs, the remaining four are floating point programs. The bottom two rows give the median and geometric mean for the slow-down factors.

The slow-down figures for Memcheck are quite high. This is partly due to the cost of definedness checking,

partly due to the cost of Memcheck's other kinds of checking, and partly because of Valgrind's inherent overhead.

Memcheck also has a large memory cost. Since each byte is shadowed by a byte holding V bits and also by a single A bit indicating whether that location is addressable, memory use is increased by a factor of approximately $(8 + 1)/8 = 9/8$, that is, slightly more than doubled. Shadow storage is allocated on demand, so programs which do not use much memory when running natively still do not use much when running under Memcheck. Another space cost is that of holding translations: Valgrind can store translations of approximately 200000 basic blocks, occupying about 70MB of storage. This too is allocated incrementally. Finally, Memcheck records on the order of 50 to 100 bytes of administrative information for each block allocated by `malloc/new/new[]`.

As a result of this, programs with large memory footprints (above about 1.5GB) die from lack of address space. Since V -bit storage is usually the largest component of the overhead, we are considering compressed representations for V bits. These rely on the observation that about 99.95% of all bytes are all-defined or all-undefined, and so their definedness state could be summarised using a single bit. This would be merely a representational change and would not affect Memcheck's ability to track definedness with bit-level precision.

Of the various costs to the user of using Memcheck, for many people the slow-down is the greatest cost. Among the survey responders, 9 praised Memcheck's performance, and 32 complained about it. In general, we have found that users who have used other, similar, memory checkers praise Memcheck's performance, and those who have not used other such tools complain about it. However, judging from overall feedback, Memcheck's performance is good enough for the vast majority of users.

3.3 Evidence of usefulness

It is never easy to convincingly demonstrate in a paper that a tool such as Memcheck, which is designed to find bugs in programs, works well. To truly appreciate the usefulness of such a tool, one must really use it "in anger" on a real system. Nonetheless this section provides two pieces of evidence that Memcheck, particularly its definedness checking, is effective. The first is a case study of using it on OpenOffice; the second is general information about Memcheck's popularity.

OpenOffice case study Jens-Heiner Rehtien used Memcheck with OpenOffice⁷, and systematically recorded all the error messages that Memcheck issued [13]. He ran OpenOffice's basic "smoke test" (with

Java disabled), which only exercises a fraction of OpenOffice's code. Memcheck detected 102 problems in 26 source files (plus 6 more in system libraries such as GNU libc). Table 2 (copied from [13]) gives a breakdown: column 1 numbers the problem category, column 2 describes the problem, column 3 gives the number of occurrences, and column 4 gives the number of distinct source files in which the error occurred.

Of the 11 categories, five (1, 2, 3, 7 and 10) involve undefined values. This accounts for 96 of 102, or 94%, of the problems found.

Rehtien estimates that, regarding the consequences of the detected problems, about one third would never show up as a program failure for the user, another third are bugs which have no consequences yet, but might lead to regressions later if code is changed, and the last third are plain bugs which might crash the application or lead to malfunction anytime. The commits made to fix these errors can be seen in the OpenOffice bugs database [11].

As for false positives, Rehtien states that when compiling with optimisation, he saw "a few", but none when compiling without optimisation.

From this example, Memcheck's usefulness is clear, in particular the usefulness of its definedness checking.

Popularity Another indication of the usefulness of Memcheck's definedness checking is its general popularity. We have received feedback from at least 300 users in more than 30 countries, and so can conservatively estimate its user base is in the thousands.

A short list of notable projects using Valgrind includes: OpenOffice, StarOffice, Mozilla, Opera, KDE, GNOME, AbiWord, Evolution, MySQL, PostgreSQL, Perl, PHP, Mono, Samba, Nasa Mars Lander software, SAS, The GIMP, Ogg Vorbis, Unreal Tournament, and Medal of Honour. A longer list is available at the Valgrind website [14]. This includes a huge range of software types, almost anything that runs on x86/Linux.

Our November 2003 survey also found that Memcheck is by far the most commonly used of the Valgrind tools, accounting for approximately 85% of Valgrind use. In comparison, Addrcheck, which is the same as Memcheck but without the definedness checking, only accounts for 6% of Valgrind use.

4 Related work

There are a number of tools that detect various kinds of memory errors in programs, particularly memory leaks and bounds errors. However, only a small fraction of them detect undefined values. This section discusses only work that relates directly to Memcheck's definedness checking.

Ref. no.	Error type	#problems	#files
1	not initialized instance data member	ca. 76	10
2	not initialized local variables	7	5
3	not initialized variable used as in/out parameter in method call	11	3
4	overlapping buffers in strncpy()	1	1
5	off by one error	1	1
6	unchecked return value of system call	1	1
7	partly initialized struct used in inappropriate ways	1	1
8	no check for potentially invalidated index	1	1
9	use of buffer size instead of content size for writing out data	1	1
10	write not initialized buffer into stream	1	1
11	feed unterminated buffer into method expecting a C-style string	1	1

Table 2: Errors found by Memcheck in OpenOffice

Huang [4] described, very early, the possibility of using dynamic analysis to detect variables that are written but never read, and reads of undefined variables. However, the proposed instrumentation was at the source code level rather than the machine code level.

Kempton and Wichmann [5] discussed the detection of undefined value errors in Pascal programs. They suggest using one shadow definedness bit per data bit in memory, just as Memcheck does. They did not discuss how the shadow bits would be propagated.

Purify [3] is a widely used commercial memory checking tool that can detect several kinds of memory errors including undefined value errors. It adds instrumentation to object code at link-time, in order to do checking at run-time. It shadows every byte of memory with a two-bit value that encodes one of three states: unaddressable, writable, and readable. Reads of writable (i.e. allocated but undefined) memory bytes may get flagged immediately as errors. This is a form of eager checking, as mentioned in Section 2.6. Because the shadowing is at the byte-level, it does not feature bit precision.

Third Degree [18] is a memory checking tool built using the ATOM object code instrumentation framework [15]. As well as detecting some accesses to unaddressable memory, it uses a crude form of definedness checking: when a stack or heap location first becomes addressable, it is written with a special “canary” value. An error is issued if any loads read this canary value. This could lead to false positives when undefined values are copied around, and there is a small chance that the canary value might occur legitimately, although the value is chosen carefully to minimise this likelihood. As Third Degree only ran on Alphas, it is unfortunately now defunct.

Insure++ [12] is a commercial memory checking tool. It detects various kinds of errors, including undefined value errors. It adds instrumentation to the source code (C or C++ only) at compile-time, in order to do checking at run-time. It has two modes of undefined-

ness checking: the first is eager, immediately reporting any reads of undefined variables; the second is less eager, allowing copies of undefined variables to occur without warning (but not other operations). Insure++ also comes with Chaperon, a tool for x86/Linux that works much like Memcheck—it also uses dynamic binary instrumentation—which can detect reads of uninitialised memory.

The most notable feature of Memcheck compared to previous tools is that its definedness checking is much more sophisticated, featuring bit-precision, which means it can be used reliably with bit-field operations.

5 Conclusion

We have described a tool named Memcheck, built with the dynamic binary instrumentation framework Valgrind, which can detect several kinds of memory errors that are common in imperative programs. In particular, we described the novel definedness checking that Memcheck performs to detect undefined value errors with bit-precision. We also considered the costs and benefits of using Memcheck, and concluded that it definitely is worth using, as shown by the 102 bugs found in OpenOffice by one user, and more generally by the thousands of programmers who use it on a wide range of software.

Memcheck works well, and is widely used. Our main challenge is ensuring that this remains true. Work is in progress to develop a new intermediate representation for Valgrind, which will provide sufficient description of FP and SIMD operations to keep up with the increasing capabilities of vectorising compilers. The new intermediate representation will also be architecture-neutral, in order to provide a solid foundation for ports to architectures other than x86, which will help keep Valgrind viable over the long-term. A key challenge here is that instrumentation should also be architecture-neutral, so that tools do not have to be partially or wholly re-written for each new

architecture supported. We also are working on ports to other operating systems, in order to remove Valgrind's dependence on Linux. This is a significant task, but one that is orthogonal to Memcheck's workings.

If you are developing programs in C, C++, Fortran or Pascal on the x86/Linux platform, you almost certainly should be using Memcheck. If you are not, all the bugs Memcheck would find will have to be found manually, wasting your development time, or not be found at all, compromising your code quality.

6 Acknowledgments

Thanks to Donna Robinson for encouragement, and Jens-Heiner Rehtien for his meticulous record-keeping. The second author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Trinity College, University of Cambridge, UK.

Notes

¹However, it is useful mostly for languages like C, C++ and Fortran, which have scant protection against memory errors.

²Purify 2003a.06.13 Solaris 2 (32-bit, sparc) running on Solaris 2.9. Compiler was Sun C 5.5. Optimisation level makes no difference: we tried -xO3, -xO5 and no optimisation, with the same result.

³Use of an undefined address is different from use of a defined but invalid address. Memcheck detects both kinds of errors, but only the former is the subject of this discussion.

⁴Or shadow memory byte, for memory arguments to system calls.

⁵A common question from aspiring Valgrind hackers is how to write a simple tool which observes procedure entries/exits. From experience we know that doing so reliably is extraordinarily difficult. Josef Weidendorfer's "Callgrind" tool [19] is the best attempt so far, and it is surprisingly complex.

⁶For similar reasons, the stack-switch heuristic can also confuse Memcheck's addressability checking.

⁷On the 680 branch, which will become OpenOffice 2.0.

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