Wirelessly Pickpocketing a Mifare Classic Card

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Abstract

The Mifare Classic is the most widely used contactless smartcard on the market. The stream cipher CRYPTO1 used by the Classic has recently been reverse engineered and serious attacks have been proposed. The most serious of them retrieves a secret key in under a second. In order to clone a card, previously proposed attacks require that the adversary either has access to an eavesdropped communication session or executes a message-by-message man-in-the-middle attack between the victim and a legitimate reader. Although this is already disastrous from a cryptographic point of view, system integrators maintain that these attacks cannot be performed undetected.

This paper proposes four attacks that can be executed by an adversary having only wireless access to just a card (and not to a legitimate reader). The most serious of them recovers a secret key in less than a second on ordinary hardware. Besides the cryptographic weaknesses, we exploit other weaknesses in the protocol stack. A vulnerability in the computation of parity bits allows an adversary to establish a side channel. Another vulnerability regarding nested authentications provides enough plaintext for a speedy known-plaintext attack.

1. Introduction

With more than one billion cards sold, the Mifare Classic covers more than 70% of the contactless smartcard market. Such cards contain a slightly more powerful IC than classical RFID chips (developed for identification only), equipping them with modest computational power and making them suitable for applications beyond identification, such as access control and ticketing systems.

The Mifare Classic is widely used in public transport payment systems such as the Oyster card in London, the Charlie Card in Boston, the SmartRider in Australia, EasyCard in Taiwan, and the OV-chipkaart in The Netherlands. It is also widely used for access control in office and governmental buildings and military objects.

According to [MFS08] the Mifare Classic complies with parts 1 to 3 of the ISO standard 14443-A [ISO01], specifying the physical characteristics, the radio frequency interface, and the anti-collision protocol. The Mifare Classic does not implement part 4 of the standard, describing the transmission protocol, but instead uses its own secure communication layer. In this layer, the Mifare Classic uses the proprietary stream cipher CRYPTO1 to provide data confidentiality and mutual authentication between card and reader. This cipher has recently been reversed engineered [NESP08, GKM+08].

In this paper, we show serious vulnerabilities of the Mifare Classic that enable an attacker to retrieve all cryptographic keys of a card, just by wirelessly communicating with it. Thus, the potential impact is much larger than that of the problems previously reported in [GKM+08, CNO08, KHG08, Noh08], where the attacker either needs to have access to a legitimate reader or an eavesdropped communication session. The attacks described in this paper are fast enough to allow an attacker to wirelessly ‘pickpocket’ a victim’s Mifare Classic card, i.e., to clone it immediately.

Vulnerabilities. The vulnerabilities we discovered concern the handling of parity bits and nested authentications.

- The Mifare Classic sends a parity bit for each byte that is transmitted. Violating the standard, the Mifare Classic mixes the data link layer and secure communication layer: parity bits are computed over the plaintext instead of over the

1. [http://www.nxp.com](http://www.nxp.com)
2. [http://oyster.tfl.gov.uk](http://oyster.tfl.gov.uk)
3. [http://www.mbta.com/fores_and_passes/charlie](http://www.mbta.com/fores_and_passes/charlie)
6. [http://www.ov-chipkaart.nl](http://www.ov-chipkaart.nl)

bits that are actually sent, i.e., the ciphertext. This is, in fact, authenticate-then-encrypt which is generically insecure [Kra01]. Furthermore, parity bits are encrypted with the same bit of keystream that encrypts the first bit of the next byte of plaintext. During the authentication protocol, if the reader sends wrong parity bits, the card stops communicating. However, if the reader sends correct parity bits, but wrong authentication data, the card responds with an (encrypted) error code. This breaks the confidentiality of the cipher, enabling an attacker to establish a side channel.

- The memory of the Mifare Classic is divided into sectors, each of them having its own 48-bit secret key. To perform an operation on a specific sector, the reader must first authenticate using the corresponding key. When an attacker has already authenticated for one sector (knowing the key for that sector) and subsequently attempts to authenticate for another sector (without knowing the key for this sector), that attempt leaks 32 bits of information about the secret key of that sector.

Attacks. We describe four attacks exploiting these vulnerabilities to recover the cryptographic keys from a Mifare Classic card having only contactless communication with it (and not with a legitimate reader). These attacks make different trade-offs between online communication time (the time an attacker needs to communicate with a card), offline computation time (the time it takes to compute the cryptographic key using the data gathered from the card), precomputation time (one-time generation time of static tables), disk space usage (of the static tables) and special assumptions (whether the attacker has already one sector key or not).

- The first attack exploits the weakness of the parity bits to mount an offline brute-force attack on the 48-bit key space. The attacker only needs to try to authenticate approximately 1500 times (which takes under a second).
- The second attack also exploits the weakness of the parity bits but this time the attacker mounts an adaptive chosen ciphertext attack. The attacker needs approximately 28500 authentication attempts. In this attack, she needs to make sure that the challenge nonce of the card is constant, which is why this takes approximately fifteen minutes. During these authentication attempts, the attacker adaptively chooses her challenge to the card, ultimately obtaining a challenge that guarantees that there are only 436 possibilities for the odd-numbered bits of the internal state of the cipher. This reduces the offline search space to approximately 33 bits. On a standard desktop computer this search takes about one minute.
- In the third attack the attacker keeps her own challenge constant, but varies the challenge of the tag, again ultimately obtaining a special internal state of the cipher. These special states have to be precomputed and stored in a 384 GB table. This attack requires on average \(2^{12} = 4096\) authentication attempts, which could in principle be done in about two minutes. A few extra authentication attempts allow efficient lookup in the table.
- The fourth attack assumes that the attacker has already recovered at least one sector key. When the attacker first authenticates for this sector and then for another sector, the authentication protocol is slightly different, viz., the challenge nonce of the tag is not sent in the clear, but encrypted with the key of the new sector. Because the random number generator has only a 16-bit state, because parity bits leak three bits of information, and because the tag’s random number generator runs in sync with the communication timing, this allows an attacker to guess the plaintext tag nonce and hence 32 bits of keystream. Due to weaknesses in the cipher [GKM+08], we can use these 32 bits of keystream to compute approximately \(2^{16}\) candidate keys. These can then be checked offline using another authentication attempt. Since this attack only requires three authentication attempts, the online time is negligible. The offline search takes under a second on ordinary hardware.

Related work. De Koning Gans et al. [KHG08] have proposed an attack on a Mifare Classic tag that exploits the malleability of the CRYPTO1 stream cipher to read partial information from a tag, without even knowing the encryption algorithm. By slicing a Mifare Classic chip and taking pictures with a microscope, the cipher was reverse engineered by Nohl et al. [NESP08]. Courtois et al. claim in [CNO08] that the CRYPTO1 cipher is susceptible to algebraic attacks and Nohl shows a statistical weakness of the cipher in [Noh08]. A full description of the cipher was given by García et al. in [GKM+08], together with a reverse engineered authentication protocol. They also describe an attack with which an attacker can recover a sector key by communicating with a genuine reader or by eavesdropping a successful authentication.

All attacks described in these papers have in common that they need access to a legitimate reader or intercepted communication. In contrast, the attacks
described in our paper only need access to a card.

**Impact.** The implications of the attacks described in this paper are vast.

Many ticketing and payment systems using the Mifare Classic sequentially authenticate for several sectors verifying the data in the card. In case of invalid data, the protocol aborts. With previous attacks, this means that an attacker has either to eavesdrop a full trace or walk from the reader to the card holder several times, executing a message-by-message man-in-the-middle attack. In practice, both options are hard to accomplish undetected. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that this allows an attacker to recover all useful data in the card, since some sectors might not be read in this particular instance. Our attacks always enable an attacker to retrieve all data from the card.

Our fourth attack, where the attacker already knows a single key, is extremely fast (less than one second per key on ordinary hardware). The first key can be retrieved using one of our first three attacks, but in many situations this is not even necessary. Most deployed systems leave default keys for unused sectors or do not diversify keys at all. Nearly all deployed systems that do diversify have at least one sector key that is not diversified, namely for storing the diversification information. This is even specified in NXP’s guideline for system integrators [MAD07]. This means that it is possible for an adversary to recover all keys necessary to read and write the sixteen sectors of a Mifare Classic 1k tag in less than sixteen seconds.

**Overview.** We start by gathering the relevant information that is already known about the Mifare Classic in Section 2: its logical structure, the encryption algorithm, the authentication protocol and the initialization of the stream cipher, how to undo the initialization of the stream cipher, and information about how the tag generates its random numbers. In Section 3 we continue with a precise description of the discovered weaknesses in the handling of the parity bits and nested authentications. In Section 4 we show how these weaknesses can be exploited to recover a sector key by communication with just a card. Section 5 gives some concluding remarks.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Communication

The physical layer and data link layer of the Mifare family of cards are described in the ISO standard 14443-A. We have used the Proxmark III⁷ for communication; this device implements, among others, these two layers of this standard and can emulate both a card and a reader.

Using information from [KHG08] about the command codes of the Mifare Classic and from [GKM+08], [NESP08] about the cryptographic aspects of the Mifare Classic, we implemented the functionality of a Mifare Classic reader on the Proxmark. Note that we can observe a tag’s communication at the data link level, implying that we can observe the parity bits as well. Furthermore, we have the freedom to send arbitrary parity bits, which is not possible using stock commercial Mifare Classic readers. However, many newer NFC readers can be used to communicate with a Mifare Classic card as well and are capable of sending and receiving arbitrary parity bits⁸. We have also executed the attacks described in this paper using an inexpensive (30 USD) stock commercial NFC reader. However, these readers are typically connected to a host PC using USB and it is harder to obtain accurate communication timing.

### 2.2. Memory structure of the Mifare Classic

The Mifare Classic tag is essentially a memory chip with secure wireless communication capabilities. The memory of the tag is divided into sectors, each of which is further divided into blocks of sixteen bytes each. The last block of each sector is the sector trailer and stores two secret keys and the access conditions for that sector.

To perform an operation on a specific block, the reader must first authenticate for the sector containing

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that block. The access conditions determine which of the two keys must be used. See Figure 2.1 for an overview of the memory of a Mifare Classic tag.

2.3. CRYPTO1

After authentication, the communication between tag and reader is encrypted with the CRYPTO1 stream cipher. This cipher consists of a 48-bit linear feedback shift register (LFSR) with generating polynomial $x^{48} + x^{43} + x^{39} + x^{38} + x^{36} + x^{34} + x^{33} + x^{31} + x^{29} + x^{24} + x^{23} + x^{21} + x^{19} + x^{13} + x^{9} + x^{7} + x^{6} + x^{5} + 1$ and a non-linear filter function $f$ (NESP08). Each clock tick, twenty bits of the LFSR are put through the filter function, generating one bit of keystream. Then the LFSR shifts one bit to the left, using the generating polynomial to generate a new bit on the right. See Figure 2.2 for a schematic representation.

We let $F_2 = \{0, 1\}$ the field of two elements (or the set of Booleans). The symbol $\oplus$ denotes addition (XOR).

Definition 2.1. The feedback function $L: F_2^{48} \rightarrow F_2$ is defined by $L(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{47}) := x_0 \oplus x_5 \oplus x_9 \oplus x_{10} \oplus x_{12} \oplus x_{14} \oplus x_{15} \oplus x_{17} \oplus x_{19} \oplus x_{24} \oplus x_{25} \oplus x_{27} \oplus x_{29} \oplus x_{35} \oplus x_{39} \oplus x_{41} \oplus x_{42} \oplus x_{43}.$

The specifics of the filter function are taken from [GKM08].

Definition 2.2. The filter function $f: F_2^{48} \rightarrow F_2$ is defined by

$$f(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{47}) := f_c(f_a(x_9x_{11}x_{13}x_{15}), f_b(x_{17}x_{19}x_{21}x_{23}), f_b(x_{25}x_{27}x_{29}x_{31}), f_a(x_{33}x_{35}x_{37}x_{39}), f_b(x_{41}x_{43}x_{45}x_{47})).$$

Here $f_a, f_b: F_2^4 \rightarrow F_2$ and $f_c: F_2^2 \rightarrow F_2$ are defined by $f_a(y_0, y_1, y_2, y_3) := ((y_0 \lor y_1) \lor (y_0 \land y_1)) \lor (y_2 \land ((y_0 \lor y_1) \lor y_3))$, $f_b(y_0, y_1, y_2, y_3) := ((y_0 \lor y_1) \lor y_2) \lor ((y_0 \lor y_1) \lor (y_2 \lor y_3))$, and $f_c(y_0, y_1, y_2, y_3) := (y_0 \lor ((y_1 \lor y_4) \land (y_3 \lor y_4)) \lor ((y_0 \lor (y_3 \lor y_4)) \land ((y_2 \lor y_3) \lor (y_1 \land y_4))).$ Because $f(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{47})$ only depends on $x_9, x_{11}, \ldots, x_{47},$ we shall overload notation and see $f$ as a function $F_2^{32} \rightarrow F_2,$ writing $f(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{47})$ as $f(x_9x_{11} \ldots x_{47}).$

Note that $f_a$ and $f_b$ here are negated when compared to [GKM08] and $f_c$ is changed accordingly. The expressions for $f_a, f_b,$ and $f_c$ given here have the minimal number of logical operators in $\{\land, \lor, \oplus, \neg\};$ in practice, this allows for a fast bitsliced implementation of $f$ [Bih97].

For future reference, note that each of the building blocks of $f$ (and hence $f$ itself) have the property that it gives zero for half of the possible inputs (respectively one).

Theorem 2.3. Let $Y_0, Y_1, \ldots, Y_4$ be independent uniformly distributed variables over $F_2.$ Then

$$P[f_a(Y_0, Y_1, Y_2, Y_3) = 0] = 1/2$$

$$P[f_b(Y_0, Y_1, Y_2, Y_3) = 0] = 1/2$$

$$P[f_c(Y_0, Y_1, Y_2, Y_3, Y_4) = 0] = 1/2.$$

Proof. By inspection. □

2.4. Tag nonces

For use in the authentication protocol, described in Section 2.5 below, Mifare Classic tags possess a pseudo-random generator. In [NP07] it was revealed that the 32-bit tag nonces are generated by a 16-bit LFSR with generating polynomial $x^{16} + x^{14} + x^{13} + x^{11} + 1.$ Every clock tick the LFSR shifts to the left and the feedback bit is computed using $L_{16}.$

Definition 2.4. The feedback function $L_{16}: F_2^{16} \rightarrow F_2$ of the pseudo-random generator is defined by

$$L_{16}(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{15}) := x_0 \oplus x_2 \oplus x_3 \oplus x_5.$$

Let us define the function $suc$ that computes the next 32-bit LFSR sequence of the 16-bit LFSR. This function is used later on in Section 2.5 in the authentication protocol.

Definition 2.5. The successor function $suc: F_2^{32} \rightarrow F_2^{32}$ is defined by

$$suc(x_0x_1 \ldots x_{31}) := x_1x_2 \ldots x_{31} L_{16}(x_{16}x_{17} \ldots x_{31}).$$

Because the period of the pseudo-random generator is only 65535 and it shifts every 9.44 $\mu$s, it cycles in 618 ms.

Under similar physical conditions (i.e., do not move the tag or the reader), the challenge nonce that the tag generates only depends on the time between the moment the reader switches on the electromagnetic field and the moment it sends the authentication request. In practice, this means that an attacker who has physical control of the tag, can get the tag to send the same nonce every time. To do so, the attacker just has to drop the field (for approximately 30 $\mu$s) to discharge all capacitors in the tag, switch the field back on, and wait for a constant amount of time before authenticating.

Alternatively, by waiting exactly the right amount of time before authenticating again, the attacker can control the challenge nonce that the tag will send. This works whenever the tag does not leave the electromagnetic field in the mean time. On average, this takes $618 \mu s/2 = 309 \mu s.$
2.5. Authentication protocol and initialization

The authentication protocol was reverse engineered in [GKM+08]. During the anti-collision phase, the tag sends its uid $u$ to the reader. The reader then asks to authenticate for a specific sector. The tag sends a challenge $n_T$. From this point on, communication is encrypted, i.e., XOR-ed with the keystream. The reader responds with its own challenge $n_R$ and the answer $a_R := \text{succ}(n_T)$ to the challenge of the tag; the tag finishes with its answer $a_T := \text{succ}(n_T)$ to the challenge of the reader. See Figure 2.3. Note that later on we will send messages $a_R$ that deviate from this protocol; this will be explained in Section 4.

\[ \begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Tag} & \longrightarrow & \text{Reader} \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
\{n_R\} & & \{a_R, a_T\} \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
u & & n_T \\
\end{array} \]

Figure 2.3. Authentication protocol

During the authentication protocol, the internal state of the stream cipher is initialized. It starts out as the sector key $k$, then $n_T \oplus u$ is shifted in, then $n_R$ is shifted in. Because communication is encrypted from $n_R$ onwards, the encryption of the later bits of $n_R$ is influenced by the earlier bits of $n_R$. Authentication is achieved by reaching the same internal state of the cipher after shifting in $n_R$.

The following precisely defines the initialization of the cipher and the generation of the LFSR-stream $a_0a_1\ldots$ and the keystream $b_0b_1\ldots$.

**Definition 2.6.** Given a key $k = k_0k_1\ldots k_47 \in \mathbb{F}_2^{48}$, a tag nonce $n_T = n_{T,0}n_{T,1}\ldots n_{T,31} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{32}$, a uid $u = u_0u_1\ldots u_{31} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{32}$, and a reader nonce $n_R = n_{R,0}n_{R,1}\ldots n_{R,31} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{32}$, the internal state of the cipher at time $i$ is $a_i := a_i a_{i+1}\ldots a_{i+47} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{48}$.

Here the $a_i \in \mathbb{F}_2$ are given by

\[
\begin{align*}
a_i & := k_i & \forall i \in [0, 47] \\
a_{48+i} & := L(a_i, \ldots , a_{47+i}) \oplus n_{T,i} + u_i & \forall i \in [0, 31] \\
a_{80+i} & := L(a_{32+i}, \ldots , a_{79+i}) \oplus n_{R,i} & \forall i \in [0, 31] \\
a_{112+i} & := L(a_{64+i}, \ldots , a_{111+i}) & \forall i \in \mathbb{N}.
\end{align*}
\]

Furthermore, we define the keystream bit $b_i \in \mathbb{F}_2$ at time $i$ by

\[
b_i := f(a_i a_{i+1}, \ldots , a_{47+i}) & \forall i \in \mathbb{N}.
\]

We denote encryptions by $\{-\}$ and define \{\{n_{R,i}\}, \{a_{R,i}\}\} \in \mathbb{F}_2$ by

\[
\begin{align*}
\{n_{R,i}\} & := n_{R,i} \oplus b_{32+i} & \forall i \in [0, 31] \\
\{a_{R,i}\} & := a_{R,i} \oplus b_{64+i} & \forall i \in [0, 31].
\end{align*}
\]

Note that the $a_i$, $\alpha_i$, $b_i$, $\{n_{R,i}\}$, and $\{a_{R,i}\}$ are formally functions of $k$, $n_T$, $u$, and $n_R$. Instead of making this explicit by writing, e.g., $a_i(k,n_T,u,n_R)$, we just write $a_i$ where $k$, $n_T$, $u$, and $n_R$ are clear from the context.

2.6. Rollback

For our attacks it is important to realize that to recover the key, it is sufficient to learn the internal state of the cipher $\alpha_i$ at any point $i$ in time. Since an attacker knows $u$, $n_T$, and $\{n_R\}$, the LFSR can then be rolled back to time zero. This is explained in Section 6.2 of [GKM+08]. Below we show their method translated into our notation.

**Definition 2.7.** The rollback function $R: \mathbb{F}_2^{48} \to \mathbb{F}_2$ is defined by $R(x_1x_2\ldots x_{48}) := x_5 \oplus x_9 \oplus x_{10} \oplus x_{12} \oplus x_{14} \oplus x_{15} \oplus x_{17} \oplus x_{19} \oplus x_{24} \oplus x_{25} \oplus x_{27} \oplus x_{29} \oplus x_{35} \oplus x_9 \oplus x_{41} \oplus x_{42} \oplus x_{43} \oplus x_{48}$.

If one first shifts the LFSR left using $L$ to generate a new bit on the right, then $R$ recovers the bit that dropped out on the left, i.e.,

\[
R(x_1x_2\ldots x_{47} \mathop{L}(x_0x_1\ldots x_{47})) = x_0. \tag{1}
\]
Theorem 2.8. In the situation from Definition 2.6 we have
\[ a_{64+i} = R(a_{65+i} \ldots a_{112+i}) \quad \forall i \in \mathbb{N} \]
\[ a_{32+i} = R(a_{33+i} \ldots a_{80+i}) \oplus \{n_{R,i}\} \oplus \]
\[ f(0 \ a_{33+i} \ldots a_{79+i}) \quad \forall i \in [0,31] \]
\[ a_i = R(a_{1+i} \ldots a_{48+i}) \oplus n_{T,i} \oplus u_i \quad \forall i \in [0,31]. \]

Proof. Straightforward, using Definition 2.6 and Equation (1). For the second equation, note that \( f \) does not depend on its leftmost input. Therefore \( f(0 \ a_{33+i} \ldots a_{79+i}) = f(a_{32+i} \ldots a_{79+i}) = b_{32+i} \) and hence \( \{n_{R,i}\} \oplus f(0 \ a_{33+i} \ldots a_{79+i}) = n_{R,i} \). \( \square \)

Consequently, if an attacker somehow recovers the internal state of the LFSR \( \alpha_i = a_i + a_{i+1} \ldots + a_{i+47} \) at some time \( i \), then she can repeatedly apply Theorem 2.8 to recover \( a_0 = a_0 a_1 \ldots a_{47} \), which is the sector key.

3. Weaknesses

This section describes weaknesses in the design of the Mifare Classic. We first treat weaknesses in the way the Mifare Classic handles parity bits and then the ones concerning nested authentications. These weaknesses will be exploited in Section 4.

3.1. Parity weaknesses

The ISO standard 14443-A [ISO01] specifies that every byte sent is followed by a parity bit. The Mifare Classic computes parity bits over the plaintext instead of over the ciphertext. Additionally, the bit of keystream used to encrypt the parity bits is reused to encrypt the next bit of plaintext.

This already breaks the confidentiality of the encryption scheme. In this paper we shall only be concerned with the four parity bits of \( n_R \) and \( a_R \). The ISO standard specifies odd parity, hence the “\( \oplus 1 \)” in the definition below.

Definition 3.1. In the situation from Definition 2.6 we define the parity bits \( p_j \in \mathbb{F}_2 \) by
\[ p_j := n_{T,8j} \oplus n_{T,8j+1} \oplus \cdots \oplus n_{T,8j+7} \oplus 1 \]
\[ p_{j+4} := n_{R,8j} \oplus n_{R,8j+1} \oplus \cdots \oplus n_{R,8j+7} \oplus 1 \]
\[ p_{j+8} := a_{R,8j} \oplus a_{R,8j+1} \oplus \cdots \oplus a_{R,8j+7} \oplus 1 \quad \forall j \in [0,3] \]
and the encryptions \( \{p_j\} \) of these by
\[ \{p_j\} := p_j \oplus b_{8+j} \quad \forall j \in [0,11]. \]

There is a further weakness concerning the parity bits. During the authentication protocol, when the reader sends \( \{n_R\} \) and \( \{a_R\} \), the tag checks the parity bits before the answer of the reader. If at least one of the eight parity bits is wrong, the tag does not respond. If all eight parity bits are correct, but the answer \( a_R \) is wrong, the tag responds with the 4-bit error code \( 0\times5 \) signifying failed authentication, called ‘transmission error’ in [KHG08]. If all eight parity bits are correct and the answer \( a_R \) is also correct, the tag responds, of course, with its answer \( a_T \). Furthermore, in case the reader sends the correct parity, but the wrong answer, the 4-bit error code \( 0\times5 \) is sent encrypted. This happens even though the reader has not authenticated itself and hence cannot be assumed to be able to decrypt.

Figure 3.1 shows an authentication trace where the attacker sends incorrect authentication data but correct parity bits. The exclamation marks represent parity bits that deviate from what is specified in the standard. The final message of this trace is the encrypted error message \( 0\times5 \).

3.2. Nested authentications

Once an attacker knows a single sector key of a Mifare Classic, there is a vulnerability that allows an adversary to recover more keys. When a reader is already communicating (encrypted) with a tag, a subsequent authentication command for a new sector also has to be sent encrypted. After this authentication command, the internal state of the cipher is set to the key for the new sector and the authentication protocol from Section 2.5 starts again. This time, however, the challenge of the tag is also sent encrypted. Because there are only \( 2^{16} \) possible nonces, an attacker can simply try to guess a nonce to recover 32 bits of keystream.

Also here, the information that leaks through the parity bits can be used to speed up the attack. Although there are \( 2^{16} \) tag nonces, we show below that the parity bits sent with the encrypted tag nonce leak three bits of information, so that there are only \( 2^{13} \) tag nonces possible.

Definition 3.2. In the situation from Definition 2.6 we define \( \{n_{T,i}\} \in \mathbb{F}_2 \) by
\[ \{n_{T,i}\} := n_{T,i} \oplus b_i \quad \forall i \in [0,31]. \]

Theorem 3.3. For every \( j \in \{0,1,2\} \) we have
\[ n_{T,8j} \oplus n_{T,8j+1} \oplus \cdots \oplus n_{T,8j+7} \oplus n_{T,8j+8} \]
\[ = \{p_j\} \oplus \{n_{T,8j+8}\} \oplus 1 \]
We first give the idea of the attack. The attacker runs the same procedure sufficiently many times (in practice, six is enough). Each run gives an attacker three bits of information about the tag nonce. We give an estimate based on the performance of COPACOBANA [KPP+06]; this is a code-cracker built from off-the-shelf hardware costing approximately 10000 USD. Based on the fact that COPACOBANA finds a 56-bit DES key in on average 6.4 days, pessimistically assuming that one can fit the same number of CRYPTO I checks on an FPGA as DES-decryptions, and realizing that the search space is a factor of 256 smaller, we estimate that this takes on average 6.4 days/256 = 36 min.

In Sections 4.2 and 4.3, the same idea is exploited in a different way, trading online communication for computation time.

4.2. Varying the reader nonce

This section shows how an attacker can mount a chosen ciphertext attack by adaptively varying the encryption of \( n_R \). We assume that the attacker can control the power up timing of the tag, thereby causing the tag to produce the same \( n_T \) every time.

We first give the idea of the attack. The attacker runs authentication sessions until she guesses the correct parity bits. The internal state of the stream cipher just after feeding in \( n_R \) is \( \alpha_{64} \). She then runs another authentication session, keeping the first 31 bits of \( n_R \) (and the three parity bits) the same, flipping the last parity bit.

Repeating the above procedure sufficiently many times (in practice six is enough) uniquely determines the key. Since the key length is only 48 bits, the attacker can now brute force the key: she can just check which of the \( 2^{48} \) keys produces all six times the correct parity bits and received response. In practice, gathering those six authentication sessions with correct parity bits only takes on average \( 6 \cdot 256 = 1536 \) authentication attempts which can be done in less than one second. The time it takes to perform the offline brute-force attack of course is strongly dependent on the resources the attacker has at her disposal. We give an estimate based on the performance of COPACOBANA [KPP+06]; this is a code-cracker built from off-the-shelf hardware costing approximately 10000 USD. Based on the fact that COPACOBANA finds a 56-bit DES key in on average 6.4 days, pessimistically assuming that one can fit the same number of CRYPTO I checks on an FPGA as DES-decryptions, and realizing that the search space is a factor of 256 smaller, we estimate that this takes on average 6.4 days/256 = 36 min.

In Sections 4.2 and 4.3, the same idea is exploited in a different way, trading online communication for computation time.
restrictions on bit of {8R}. Therefore, the attacker modifies the ciphertext of the last bit of the (j + 1)th byte of the reader nonce changes the encryption of the next bit.

Definition 4.1. Let j ∈ {0, 1, 2, 3} and let nR and n′R be reader nonces with the property that n′R,8j+7 = nR,8j+7 and n′R,i = nR,i for all i < 8j + 7 (and no restrictions on nR,i and n′R,i for i > 8j + 7). We say that nR has property Fj if b8j+40 ̸= b′8j+40.

Formally this is not just a property of nR, but also of k, nT, and u. Now k and u of course do not vary, so we ignore that here. Furthermore, when deciding whether or not nR has property Fj in Protocol 4.2 below, the attacker also keeps nT constant.

The attacker does change the reader nonce. We use a′i to refer to the bits of the LFSR-stream where the reader nonce n′R is used and similarly for b′i, etc. i.e., a′i denotes a′i(k, nT, n′R).

Note that α8j+40 (resp. a′8j+40) is the internal state of the cipher just after feeding in (j + 1)th byte of nR (resp. n′R) and b8j+40 = f(α8j+40) (resp. b′8j+40 = f(a′8j+40)), so that Fj does not depend on nR,i and n′R,i for i > 8j + 7. Also observe that α′8j+40 = α8j+40 + α8j+40δ8j+787. i.e., α8j+40 and α′8j+40 differ only in the last position.

The crucial idea is that an attacker can decide whether or not nR has property Fj, only knowing {nR}. (In practice, the attacker of course chooses {nR}.)

Protocol 4.2. Given {nR}, an attacker can decide as follows whether or not nR has property Fj. She first chooses {aR} arbitrary. She then starts, consecutively, several authentication sessions with the tag. After the tags sends its challenge nT, the attacker answers {nR}, {aR}. Inside this answer, the attacker also has to send the (encryptions of) the parity bits: {p1}, . . . , {p11}. For these, she tries all 256 possibilities. After on average 128 authentication sessions, and after at most 256, with different choices for the {p1}, the parity bits are correct and the attacker recognizes this because the tag responds with an error code.

Now the attacker defines n′R,8j+7 := nR,8j+7, i.e., she changes the last bit of the jth byte of {nR}. The earlier bits of {nR} she chooses the same as those of {nR}; the later bits of {nR} and {aR} the attacker chooses arbitrarily. Again, the attacker repeatedly tries to authenticate to find the correct parity bits {p′} to send. Note that necessarily {p′} = {p} for i ∈ {4, . . . , j + 3}, so this takes on average 27−j authentication attempts and at most 28−j.

Now nR has property Fj if and only if {pj+4} ̸= {p′j+4}.

Proof. Because the attacker modifies the ciphertext of the last bit of the jth byte of nR, the last bit of the plaintext of this byte also changes: n′R,8j+7 = nR,8j+7 ⊕ b′8j+39 = nR,8j+7 ⊕ b8j+39 = nR,8j+7 ⊕ nR,8j+7 ⊕ b8j+39 = nR,8j+7 ⊕ b8j+39. Hence, the parity of this byte changes: p′j+4 = nR,8j+7⊕...⊕nR,8j+6⊕nR,8j+7+1 = nR,8j+7⊕...⊕nR,8j+6⊕nR,8j+7+1. Therefore {pj+4} ̸= {p′j+4} if and only if b8j+39 = b′8j+39, i.e., {p′j+4} if and only if nR has property Fj.

The theorem below shows that the probability that nR has the property Fj is approximately 9.4%.

Lemma 4.3. Let Y0, . . . , Y4 be independent uniformly distributed random variables over F2. Then

P[f(0, Y0, Y1, Y2, Y3) ̸= f(0, Y0, Y1, Y2, Y3)] = 1/4
P[f(16, Y0, Y1, Y2, Y3) ̸= f(16, Y0, Y1, Y2, Y3)] = 1/2.

Proof. By inspection.

Theorem 4.4. Let Y0, Y1, . . . , Y18, Y19 be independent uniformly distributed random variables over F2. Then

P[f(Y0, . . . , Y18, Y19) ̸= f(Y0, . . . , Y18, Y19)] = 3/32.

Proof. Write Z0 := fα(Y0, . . . , Y3), Z1 := fα(Y4, . . . , Y7), Z2 := fα(Y8, . . . , Y11), Z3 := fα(Y12, . . . , Y15), and Z4 := fα(Y16, . . . , Y19). Furthermore, write Z′4 := fα(Y16, . . . , Y18, Y19). Note that Z0, . . . , Z4 are independent and, by Theorem 2.4.
uniformly distributed over $\mathbb{F}_2$. Then

$$P[f(\{Y_0, Y_1, \ldots, Y_{18}, Y_{19}\}) \neq f(\{Y_0, Y_1, \ldots, Y_{18}, Y_{19}\})] = P[f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_4) \neq f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_3, Z_4)]$$

$$= P[f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_3) \neq f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_3, Z_4)] \cdot P[Z_4 \neq Z_4]$$

$$= P[f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_3, 0) \neq f_c(Z_0, \ldots, Z_3, 1)]$$

$$\leq \frac{3}{8} \cdot \frac{1}{4} \quad \text{(by Lemma 4.3)}$$

Alternatively, one can also obtain this result by simply checking all $2^{20}$ possibilities.

We now describe how an attacker can find an $\{n_R\}$ such that $n_R$ has all four properties $F_j$. Recall that these properties also depend on $n_T$ and it is possible that for a fixed $n_T$, no $n_R$ has all four properties. In that case, as is explained in the protocol below, the attacker makes the tag generate a different $n_T$ and starts the search again.

**Protocol 4.5.** An attacker can find $\{n_R\}$ such that $n_R$ has properties $F_0, F_1, F_2, F_3$ in a backtracking fashion. She first loops over all possibilities for the first byte of $\{n_R\}$ (taking the other bytes of $\{n_R\}$ arbitrary). Using Protocol 4.2, the attacker decides if $n_R$ has property $F_0$ (which only depends on the first byte). If it fails, she continues with the second byte of $\{n_R\}$, looping over all possibilities for the second byte of $\{n_R\}$ while keeping the first byte fixed, trying to find $\{n_R\}$ such that $n_R$ also has property $F_1$. She repeats this for the third and fourth byte of $\{n_R\}$. If at some stage no possible byte has property $F_j$, the search backtracks to the previous stage. It fails at the first stage, the attacker has to try a different tag nonce.

By simulating this protocol (for a random key and random uid, and a random tag nonce in every outer loop of the search), we can estimate the number of authentication attempts needed to find a reader nonce having all four properties $F_j$.

**Observation 4.6.** The expected number of authentication attempts needed to find an $n_R$ which has all four properties $F_j$ is approximately 28500.

Once the attacker has found an $n_R$ having all four properties $F_j$, the number of possibilities for the internal state of the cipher after feeding in this particular $n_R$ is seriously restricted. The following theorem states how many possibilities there still are.

**Theorem 4.7.** Suppose that $n_R$ has properties $F_0, F_1, F_2$, and $F_3$. Then there are only 436 possibilities for the odd-numbered bits of $\alpha_{04}$, Table 4 lists (in hexadecimal, with zeros on the places of the even-numbered bits) the 218 of those possibilities that have the last bit $a_{111}$ equal to 0; the other 218 are the same except that they have $a_{111}$ equal to 1.

**Proof.** By explicit computation. For each of the $2^{24}$ elements $y_0 y_1 \ldots y_{23}$ of $\mathbb{F}_2^{24}$, one checks if $f(y_4, y_5, \ldots, y_{23}) \neq f(y_4, y_5, \ldots, y_{23})$, $f(y_0, y_1, \ldots, y_{19}) \neq f(y_0, y_1, \ldots, y_{19})$, and there exist $\~y_{9}, \~y_{9}, \ldots, \~y_{1} \in \mathbb{F}_2$ such that $f(y_4, y_3, \ldots, y_{15}) \neq f(y_4, f_3, \ldots, y_{15})$ and $f(y_8, y_7, \ldots, y_{11}) \neq f(y_8, f_7, \ldots, y_{11})$.

Consequently, when the attacker has found a reader nonce $n_R$ that has properties $F_0, F_1, F_2$, and $F_3$, there are only $436 \cdot 2^{24} \approx 2^{32.8} \approx 7.3 \cdot 10^9$ possibilities for the internal state $\alpha_{04}$ of the cipher just after shifting in the reader nonce. Using Theorem 2.8 these can be used to compute $7.3 \cdot 10^9$ candidate keys. The attacker can then check these candidate keys by trying to decrypt the received 4-bit error messages.

**4.3. Varying the tag nonce**

In the previous approach, the attacker kept $n_T$ constant and tried to find a special $\{n_R\}$ such that...
and this time she tries all possibilities for the encrypted tag, every time with the tag nonce check each of these keys against a few other attempted elements; in fact, it contains \(0\) computed; one would expect it to contain \(2^{36}\) entries; in fact, it contains 0.82% fewer elements due to a small bias in the cipher. In principle, the attacker could now use Theorem 4.9 to roll back each of the LFSRs in the table to find candidate keys and check them against a few other authentication sessions. Table 4.2 shows, as an example, the first part of \(T\), for \(\gamma = 0\xa004 = 1010 \ 0000 \ 0100\).

### 4.4. Nested authentication attack

We now assume that the attacker already knows at least one sector key; let us call this sector the exploit sector.

The time between two consecutive authentication attempts might vary from card to card, although it is quite constant for a specific card. Therefore, an attacker can first estimate this time by authenticating two times for the exploit sector. In this way the attacker can estimate the distance \(\delta\) between the first and the second tag nonce.

As explained in Section 3.2 the attacker can now authenticate for the exploit sector and subsequently for another sector. In the authentication for the exploit sector the tag nonce \(n_T^0\) is sent in the clear; during the second authentication the tag nonce \(n_T\) is sent encrypted as \(\{n_T\}\). By computing \(\text{succ}(n_T^i)\) for \(i\) close to \(\delta\), the adversary has a small number of guesses for \(n_T\). The adversary can further narrow the possibilities for \(n_T\) using the three bits of information from the parity bits (Theorem 3.3). In this way the adversary can accurately guess \(n_T\) and hence recover the first 32 bits of keystream, \(b_{31}\).
approximately $2^{16}$ possible candidate keys. By doing this procedure two or three times, the attacker can recover the key for the second sector as well by taking the intersection of the two or three sets of candidate keys.

The crucial ingredient in the attack is the fact that the inputs to the filter function are only on odd-numbered places of the LFSR. This makes it possible to compute separately all possibilities for the odd-numbered bits of the LFSR-stream and the even-numbered bits of the LFSR-stream that are compatible with the keystream.

**Definition 4.12.** We define the odd tables $T^O_i$ by
\[
T^O_i := \{ x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{45} x_{47} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{20} \mid f(x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{45} x_{47}) = b_0 \}
\]
and for $i \in \{1, \ldots, 15\}$
\[
T^O_i := \{ x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{45+2i} x_{47+2i} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{20+i} \mid x_{9} x_{11} \ldots x_{45+2i} \in T^O_{i-1} \land f(x_9 + 2i x_{11+2i} \ldots x_{45+2i} x_{47+2i}) = b_{2i} \}\.
\]
Symmetrically, we define the even tables $T^E_i$ by
\[
T^E_i := \{ x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{46} x_{48} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{20} \mid f(x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{46} x_{48}) = b_1 \}
\]
and for $i \in \{1, \ldots, 15\}$
\[
T^E_i := \{ x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{46+2i} x_{48+2i} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{20+i} \mid x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{46+2i} \in T^E_{i-1} \land f(x_{10} + 2i x_{12+2i} \ldots x_{46+2i} x_{48+2i}) = b_{2i+1} \}\.
\]
We write $T^O := T^O_{15}$ and $T^E := T^E_{15}$.

Because of the structure of the filter function $f$, $T^O_0$ and $T^E_0$ are exactly of size $2^{19}$ (Theorem 2.3). The other tables are approximately of this size as well. An entry $x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{45+2i}$ of $T^O_{i-1}$ leads to four different possibilities in $T^O_i$: it can appear in $T^O_i$ extended with 0 and with 1; it can appear extended only with 0; it can appear extended only with 1; or it can not appear at all. Overall, these possibilities are equally likely, and hence $T^O_i$ has, on average, the same size as $T^O_{i-1}$ (and similarly for $T^E_i$).

The feedback function $L$ can also be split in an even and an odd part.

**Definition 4.13.** We define the odd part of the feedback function, $L^O: \mathbb{F}_2^{24} \to \mathbb{F}_2$, by $L^O(x_1 x_3 \ldots x_{47}) := x_9 \oplus x_9 \oplus x_{13} \oplus x_{17} \oplus x_{19} \oplus x_{25} \oplus x_{27} \oplus x_{29} \oplus x_{35} \oplus x_{39} \oplus x_{41} \oplus x_{43}$ and the even part of the feedback function, $L^E: \mathbb{F}_2^{24} \to \mathbb{F}_2$, by $L^E(x_0 x_2 \ldots x_{46}) := x_0 \oplus x_{10} \oplus x_{12} \oplus x_{14} \oplus x_{24} \oplus x_{26}$.

Note that $L^E$ and $L^O$ combine to give $L$, in the sense that
\[
L(x_0 x_1 x_2 \ldots x_{47}) = L^E(x_0 x_2 \ldots x_{46}) \oplus L^O(x_1 x_2 \ldots x_{47}).
\]

As the $a_0 a_1 \ldots a_7 a_7$ are being shifted through the LFSR, the udf $u$ and the tag nonce $n_T$ are shifted in as well. In the following definition we compute the 22 bits of feedback from the LFSR from time 9 to time 31, taking care of the shifting in of $u \oplus n_T$, and also splitting the contribution from the odd- and even-numbered bits of the LFSR. At this point, the situation in [GKM08] is slightly simpler. There, the attacker tries to find the state of the LFSR after initialization, so nothing is being shifted in.

**Definition 4.14.** We define the contribution of the entries of the odd table to the feedback, $\psi^O: T^O \to \mathbb{F}_2^{22}$, by
\[
\psi^O(x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{77}) :=
(L^E(x_9 + 2i x_{11+2i} \ldots x_{55+2i}) \oplus n_T + 2i \oplus u_9 + 2i,
L^O(x_{11+2i} x_{13+2i} \ldots x_{57+2i}) \oplus u_{10+2i} + 2i
\oplus u_{10+2i} \vert_{i \in [0,10]}\right)
\]
and we define the contribution of the entries of the even table to the feedback, $\psi^E: T^E \to \mathbb{F}_2^{22}$, by
\[
\psi^E(x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{78}) :=
(L^O(x_{10} + 2i x_{12+2i} \ldots x_{56+2i}) \oplus x_{57+2i},
L^E(x_{10} + 2i x_{12+2i} \ldots x_{56+2i}) \oplus x_{58+2i} \vert_{i \in [0,10]}\right)
\]

**Definition 4.15.** We define the combined table $T^C$ as follows.
\[
T^C := \{ x_9 x_{10} x_{11} \ldots x_{78} \in \mathbb{F}_2^{70} \mid x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{77} \in T^O \land x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{78} \in T^E \land \psi^O(x_9 x_{11} \ldots x_{77}) = \psi^E(x_{10} x_{12} \ldots x_{78})\}.
\]

Note that $T^C$ can easily be computed by first sorting $T^O$ by $\psi^O$ and $T^E$ by $\psi^E$.

The crucial point is the following theorem; it shows that the actual LFSR-stream of the tag under attack is in the table $T^C$.

**Theorem 4.16.** $a_0 a_1 a_2 \ldots a_7 \in T^C$.

**Proof.** By definition of $T^O$ and $T^E$, $a_0 a_1 \ldots a_7 \in T^O$ and $a_1 a_2 \ldots a_7 \in T^E$. We only have to check that the sequence $a_0 a_1 a_2 \ldots a_7$ satisfies the con-
straint defining $T^C$. For this, we have

$$\psi^O(a_9a_1 \ldots a_{77}) \oplus \psi^E(a_{10}a_{12} \ldots a_{78})$$

$$= (L^E(x_{9+2i}x_{11+2i} \ldots x_{55+2i}) \oplus n_{T,9+2i} \oplus u_{9+2i} \oplus L^O(x_{10+2i}x_{12+2i} \ldots x_{56+2i} \oplus x_{57+2i}),$$

$$L^O(x_{11+2i}x_{13+2i} \ldots x_{57+2i}) \oplus n_{T,10+2i} \oplus u_{10+2i} \oplus L^E(x_{10+2i}x_{12+2i} \ldots x_{56+2i} \oplus x_{58+2i}) \iota \in [0,10]$$

(by Dfn. 4.14)

$$= (L(x_{9+2i}x_{10+2i} \ldots x_{56+2i})$$

$$+ n_{T,9+2i} \oplus u_{9+2i} \oplus x_{57+2i},$$

$$L(x_{10+2i}x_{11+2i} \ldots x_{57+2i})$$

$$+ n_{T,10+2i} \oplus u_{10+2i} \oplus x_{58+2i}) \iota \in [0,10]$$

(by Eqn. (2))

$$= (0, 0) \iota \in [0,10],$$

(by Dfn. 2.6)

as required.

Taking the first 48 bits of every entry of $T^C$, the attacker can apply Theorem 2.8 nine times for every entry, obtaining one candidate key for every entry of $T^C$. Because we have used 32 bits of keystream and the key is 48 bits, on average there will be $2^{16}$ candidate keys. Doing this procedure once more gives another set of approximately $2^{16}$ candidate keys; the actual key must be in the intersection. In practice, most of the time the intersection only contains a single key; occasionally it contains two keys and then a third run of this whole procedure can be used to determine the key (or both candidate keys can just be tested online, of course).

5. Conclusions

We have found serious "textbook" vulnerabilities in the Mifare Classic tag. In particular, the Mifare Classic mixes two layers of the protocol stack and reuses a one-time pad for the encryption of the parity bits. It also sends encrypted error messages before a successful authentication. These weaknesses allow an adversary to recover a secret key within seconds. Moreover, tag nonces are predictable which, besides allowing replays, provides known plaintext for our nested authentication attack. We have executed these attacks in practice and retrieved all secret keys from a number of cards, including cards used in large access control and public transport ticketing systems.

To slightly hamper an adversary, system integrators could consider the following countermeasures:

- diversify all keys in the card;
- cryptographically bind the contents of the card to the uid, for instance by including a MAC;
- perform regular integrity checks in the back office.

For the time being, the second countermeasure prevents an attacker from cloning a card onto a blank one. However, this does not stop an attacker from emulating that card with an emulator like the Proxmark.

Early on we have notified the manufacturer NXP of these vulnerabilities. Since the protocol is implemented in hardware, we do not foresee any definitive countermeasure to these attacks that does not require replacing the entire infrastructure. However, NXP is currently developing a backwards compatible successor to the Mifare Classic, the Mifare Plus. We are collaborating with NXP, providing feedback to help them improving the security of their new prototypes, given the limitations of the backwards compatibility mode.

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References


