xmx - a firmware-oriented block cipher based on modular multiplications

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Abstract. This paper presents xmx, a new symmetric block cipher optimized for public-key libraries and microcontrollers with arithmetic co-processors. xmx has no S-boxes and uses only modular multiplications and xors. The complete scheme can be described by a couple of compact formulae that offer several interesting time-space trade-offs (number of rounds/key-size for constant security).

In practice, xmx appears to be tiny and fast : 136 code bytes and a 121 kilo-bits/second throughput on a Siemens SLE44CR80s smart-card (5 MHz oscillator).

1 Introduction

Since efficiency and flexibility are probably the most appreciated design criteria, block ciphers were traditionally optimized for either software (typically SAFER [4]) or hardware (DES [2]) implementation. More recently, autonomous agents and object-oriented technologies motivated the design of particularly tiny codes (such as TEA [9], 189 bytes on a 68HC05) and algorithms adapted to particular programming languages such as PERL.

Surprisingly, although an ever-increasing number of applications gain access to arithmetic co-processors [5] and public-key libraries such as BSAFE, MIRACL, BIGNUM [8] or ZEN [1], no block cipher was specifically designed to take advantage of such facilities.

This paper presents xmx (xor-multiply-xor), a new symmetric cipher which uses public-key-like operations as confusion and diffusion means. The scheme does not require S-boxes or permutation tables, there is virtually no key-schedule and the code itself (when relying on a co-processor or a library) is extremely compact and easy to describe.

xmx is firmware-suitable and, as such, was specifically designed to take a (carefully balanced) advantage of hardware and software resources.

2 The algorithm

2.1 Basic operations

xmx is an iterated cipher, where a keyed primitive f is applied r times to an ℓ-bit cleartext m and a key k to produce a ciphertext c.

Definition 1. Let $f_{a,b}(m) = (m \circ a) \cdot b \bmod n$ where :

$$x \circ y = \begin{cases} x \oplus y & \text{if } x \oplus y < n \\ x & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

and n is an odd modulus.

Property 2. $a \circ b$ is equivalent to $a \oplus b$ in most cases (when $n \leq 2^{\ell}$, and $\{a, b\}$ is uniformly distributed, $\Pr[a \circ b = a \oplus b] = n/2^{\ell}$).

Property 3. For all a and b, $a \circ b \circ b = a$.

f can therefore be used as a simply invertible building-block ($a < n$ implies $a \circ b < n$) in iterated ciphers :

Definition 4. Let n be an ℓ-bit odd modulus, $m \in \mathbb{Z}_n$ and k be the key-array $k = \{a_1, b_1, \ldots, a_r, b_r, a_{r+1}\}$ where $a_i, b_i \in \mathbb{Z}_n^*$ and $\gcd(b_i, n) = 1$.

The block-cipher xmx is defined by :

$$\mathsf{xmx}(k, m) = (f_{a_r,b_r}(f_{a_{r-1},b_{r-1}}(\ldots(f_{a_1,b_1}(m))\ldots))) \circ (a_{r+1})$$

and :

$$\mathsf{xmx}^{-1}(k, c) = (f^{-1}_{a_1,b_1}(f^{-1}_{a_2,b_2}(\ldots(f^{-1}_{a_r,b_r}(c \circ a_{r+1}))\ldots)))$$

2.2 Symmetry

A crucially practical feature of xmx is the symmetry of encryption and decryption. Using this property, xmx and xmx^{-1} can be computed by the same procedure :

Lemma 5.

$$k^{-1} = \{a_{r+1}, b_r^{-1} \bmod n, a_r, \ldots, b_1^{-1} \bmod n, a_1\} \Rightarrow \mathsf{xmx}^{-1}(k, x) = \mathsf{xmx}(k^{-1}, x) \ .$$

Since the storage of k requires $(2r + 1)\ell$ bits, xmx schedules the encryption and decryption arrays k and k^{-1} from a single ℓ-bit key s :

$$k(s) = \{s, s, \ldots, s, s, s \oplus s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}, \ldots, s, s^{-1}\}$$

where $k^{-1}(s) = k(s^{-1})$.

For a couple of security reasons (explicited *infra*) s must be generated by the following procedure (where $w(s)$ denotes the Hamming weight of s) :

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1. Pick a random s ∈ Z_n^* such that ℓ/2 − log_2 ℓ < w(s) < ℓ/2 + log_2 ℓ
2. If gcd(s, n) ≠ 1 or ℓ − log_2 s ≥ 2 go to 1.
3. output the key-array k(s) = {s, s, ..., s, s, s ⊕ s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}, ..., s, s^{-1}}
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Although equally important, the choice of n is much less restrictive and can be conducted along three engineering criteria : prime moduli will greatly simplify key generation ($\gcd(b_i, n) = 1$ for all i), RSA moduli used by existing applications may appear attractive for memory management reasons and dense moduli will increase the probability $\Pr[a \circ b = a \oplus b]$.

As a general guideline, we recommend to keep n secret in all real-life applications but assume its knowledge for the sake of academic research.

3 Security

xmx's security was evaluated by targeting a weaker scheme (wxmx) where $\circ \cong \oplus$ and $k = (s, s, s, \ldots, s, s, \ldots, s, s, s)$.

Using the trick $u \oplus v = u + v - 2\,(u \wedge v)$ for eliminating xors and defining :

$$h_i(x) = ((\ldots(x \oplus a_1) \cdot b_1 \bmod n \ldots) \oplus a_{i-1}) \cdot b_{i-1} \bmod n$$

we get by induction :

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = b'_1 \cdot x + a_1 \cdot b'_1 \ldots + a_{r+1} - 2\,(g_1(x) \cdot b'_1 + \ldots + g_{r+1}(x)) \bmod n$$

where $b'_i = b_i \cdots b_r \bmod n$ and $g_i(x) = h_i(x) \wedge a_i$.

Consequently,

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = b'_1 \cdot x + b - 2\,g(x) \bmod n \quad \text{where} \quad b = a_1 \cdot b'_1 + a_2 \cdot b'_2 \ldots + a_{r+1}$$

$$\text{and } g(x) = g_1(x) \cdot b'_1 + g_2(x) \cdot b'_2 + \ldots + g_{r+1}(x) \bmod n \ .$$

3.1 The number of rounds

When $r = 1$, the previous formulae become $g_2(x) = h_2(x) \wedge s$ and

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = ((x \oplus s) \cdot s \bmod n) \oplus s = x\,s + s^2 + s - 2\,(g_1(x)\,s + g_2(x)) \bmod n$$

Assuming that $w(\delta)$ is low, we have (with a significantly high probability) :

$$g_1(x + \delta) = (x + \delta) \wedge s = g_1(x) \bmod n \ .$$

Therefore, selecting δ such that $s \wedge \delta = 0 \quad \Rightarrow \quad g_1(x \oplus \delta) = g_1(x)$, we get

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x \oplus \delta) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = (x \oplus \delta - x) \cdot s - 2\,(s \wedge h_2(x \oplus \delta) - s \wedge h_2(x)) \bmod n \ .$$

Plugging $\delta = 2$ and an x such that $x \wedge \delta = 0$ into this equation, we get :

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x \oplus \delta) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = 2\,(s - s \wedge h_2(x+2) + s \wedge h_2(x)) \bmod n\ .$$

Since $h_2(x) = s \cdot x + s^2 - 2\,g_1(x) \bmod n$ (where $g_1(x) = x \wedge s$), it follows that $h_2(x)$ and $h_2(x+2)$ differ only by a few bits. Consequently, information about s leaks out and, in particular, long sequences of zeros or ones (with possibly the first and last bits altered) can be inferred from the difference $\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x \oplus \delta) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x)$.

In the more general setting ($r > 1$), we have

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x \oplus \delta) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = (x \oplus \delta - x)s^r + 2\,e(x, \delta, s) \bmod n$$

where $e(x, \delta, s)$ is a linear form with coefficients of the form $\alpha \wedge s - \beta \wedge s$.

Defining $\Delta = \{\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x \oplus \delta) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x)\}$, we get $\|\Delta\| < 2^{rw(s)}$ since Δ is completely characterized by s.

The difference will therefore leak again whenever :

$$2^{rw(s)} < 2^{\ell} \quad \Rightarrow \quad r < \frac{\ell}{w(s)}\ . \tag{1}$$

3.2 Key-generation

The weight of s : Since $g(x)$ is a polynomial which coefficients (b'_i) are all bitwise smaller than s, the variety of $g(x)$ is small when $w(s)$ is small. In particular, when $w(s) < \frac{80}{r+1}$, less than 2^{80} such polynomials exist.

A 2^{40}-pair known plaintext attack would therefore extract s^r from :

$$\mathsf{wxmx}(k, y) - \mathsf{wxmx}(k, x) = (y - x) \cdot s^r \bmod n$$

using the birthday paradox (the same $g(x)$ should have been used twice). One can even obtain collisions on g with higher probability by simply choosing pairs of similar plaintexts. Using [7] (refined in [6]), these attacks require almost no memory.

Since a similar attack holds for $\overline{s}$ when $w(s)$ is big ($x \oplus y = x + 2\,(\overline{x} \wedge y) - y$), $w(s)$ must be rather close to $\ell/2$ and (1) implies that r must at least equal three to avoid the attack described in section 3.1.

The size of s : Chosen plaintext attacks on wxmx are also possible when s is too short : if $s\,m < n$ after r iterations, s can be recovered by encrypting $m = 0_\ell$ since $\mathsf{wxmx}(k, 0_\ell) = b - 2\,g(x)$ and g's coefficients are all bounded by s.

Observing that $0 \le \mathsf{wxmx}(k, 0_\ell) - s^{r+1} \le s \cdot 2^r$, we have :

$$0 \le s - \sqrt[r+1]{\mathsf{wxmx}(k, 0_\ell)} < \frac{1}{r+1} \quad \Rightarrow \quad s = \left\lceil \sqrt[r+1]{\mathsf{wxmx}(k, 0_\ell)} \right\rceil\ .$$

More generally, encrypting short messages with short keys may also reveal s. As an example, let $\ell = 256$, $r = 4$, $s = 0_{176}|s'$ and $m = 0_{176}|m'$ where s' and m' are both 80-bit long. Since $\Pr[x \oplus s = x + s] = (3/4)^{80} \cong 2^{-33}$ when s is 80-bit long, a gcd between ciphertexts will recover s faster than exhaustive search.

3.3 Register size

Since the complexity of section 3.1's attack must be at least 2^{80}, we have :

$$\sqrt{2^{r \cdot w(s)}} > 2^{80}$$

and considering that $w(s) \cong \ell/2$, the product $r\ell$ must be at least 320.

$r = 4$ typically requires $\ell > 80$ (brute force resistance implies $\ell > 80$ anyway) but an inherent $2^{\ell/2}$-complexity attack is still possible since wxmx is a (keyed) permutation over ℓ-bit numbers, which average cycle length is $2^{\ell/2}$ (given an iteration to the order $2^{\ell/2}$ of $\mathsf{wxmx}(k, x)$, one can find x with significant probability).

$\ell = 160$ is enough to thwart these attacks.

4 Implementation

Standard implementations should use xmx with $r = 8$, $\ell = 512$, $n = 2^{512} - 1$ and

$$k = \{s, s, s, s, s, s, s, s, s \oplus s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}, s, s^{-1}\}$$

while high and very-high security applications should use $\{r = 12, \ell = 768, n = 2^{786} - 1\}$ and $\{r = 16, \ell = 1024, n = 2^{1024} - 1\}$.

A recent prototype on a Siemens SLE44CR80s results in a tiny (136 bytes) and performant code (121 kilo-bits/second throughput with a 5 MHz oscillator) and uses only a couple of 64-byte buffers.

The algorithm is patent-pending and readers interested in test-patterns or a copy of the patent application should contact the authors.

5 Further research

As most block-ciphers xmx can be adapted, modified or improved in a variety of ways : the round output can be subjected to a constant permutation such as a circular rotation or the chunk permutation $\pi(\text{ABCD}) \rightarrow \text{BADC}$ where each chunk is 128-bit long (since $\pi(\pi(x)) = x$, xmx's symmetry will still be preserved). Other variants replace modular multiplications by point additions on an elliptic curve (ecxmx) or implement protections against [3] (taxmx).

It is also possible to define f on two ℓ-bit registers L and R such that :

$$f(L_1, R_1) = \{L_2, R_2\}$$

where

$$L_2 = R_1 \text{ and } R_2 = L_1 \oplus ((R_1 \oplus k_2) \cdot k_1 \bmod n).$$

and the inverse function is :

$$R_1 = L_2, L_1 = R_2 \oplus ((R_1 \oplus k_2) \cdot k_1 \bmod n) = R_2 \oplus ((L_2 \oplus k_2) \cdot k_1 \bmod n)$$

Since such designs modify only one register per round we recommend to increase r to at least twelve and keep generating s with xmx's original key-generation procedure.

6 Challenge

It is a tradition in the cryptographic community to offer cash rewards for successful cryptanalysis. More than a simple motivation means, such rewards also express the designers' confidence in their own schemes. As an incentive to the analysis of the new scheme, we therefore offer (as a souvenir from FSE'97...) 256 Israeli *Shkalim* and 80 *Agorot* (n is the smallest 256-bit prime starting with 80 ones) to the first person who will degrade s's entropy by at least 56 bits in the instance :

$$r = 8, \ell = 256 \text{ and } n = (2^{80} - 1) \cdot 2^{176} + 157$$

but the authors are ready to carefully evaluate and learn from any feedback they get.

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