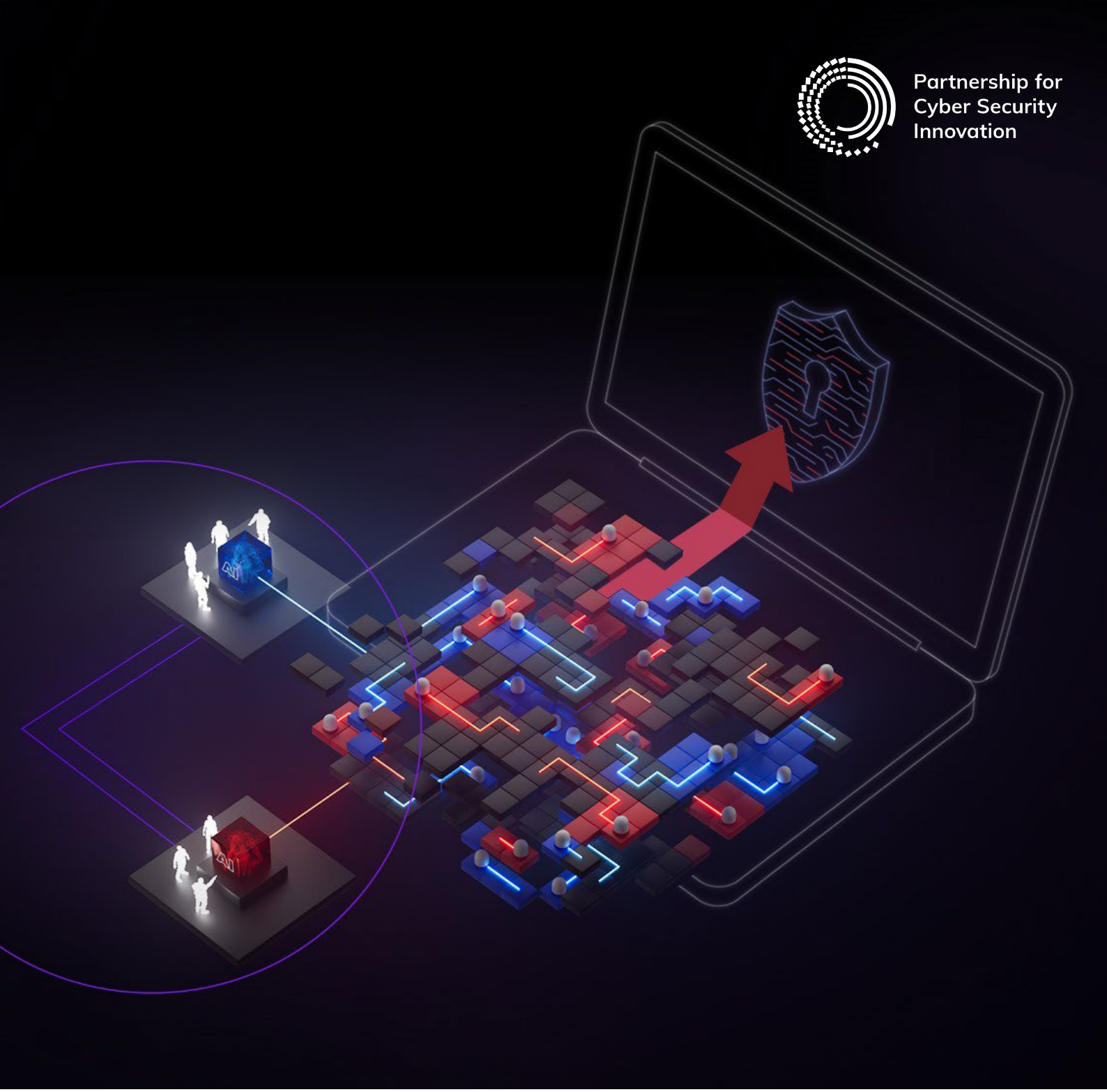
Partnership for Cyber Security Innovation



Vision paper

Human-competitive AI will disrupt the cyber security industry; prepare now!

Contributors

Bram Poppink
Raviv Raz
Rob Wijhenke
Ron Werther
Sebastian Huskins
Puck de Haan
Martijn Dekker
Richard Verbrugge

Partners

ABN-AMRO
ACHMEA
ING
TNO

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Table of Contents

Foreword

For years, Artificial Intelligence was a popular topic in science fiction books and movies, a phenomenon that seemed years away for practical purposes. The introduction of ChatGPT and the unimaginably fast adoption by millions of people has exceeded all expectations. In the six months since the introduction, AI had a worldwide impact, hundreds of apps and plug-ins that offer unprecedented possibilities for the users, have been released. Just like with other new technologies, AI can also be used for malicious purposes. AI enables criminals to make attacks more sophisticated and, above all, faster.

Offensive AI has the potential to perform vulnerability scanning, privilege escalation, lateral movement and other attacks via binaries and Powershell at speeds that far exceed the limits of human response. It is therefore essential that red teams have the same technological capabilities and expertise to simulate AI-based attacks and proactively identify vulnerabilities.

The use of AI for defensive purposes is equally indispensable to keep up with the adversaries. Blue teams need to understand how ML and AI driven attacks work and switch to automating the defense of our infrastructure. The PCSI project PurpleAI experimented with the use of AI technology. Continuation and upscaling is needed now that the world is changing at a rapid pace and new opportunities are opening up almost daily.

AI will disrupt the Cyber Security landscape

Since the release of ChatGPT by OpenAI[1] in November 2022, the potential positive and negative effects of AI on our society have entered the public debate. The Future of Life Institute has published an open letter calling for Giant AI projects (like ChatGPT and Bard) to be paused for a period of at least 6 months, because they claim the effects it will have on society are uncontrollable[2]. The PCSI core partners are urging the cyber security industry to take responsibility by focusing on a more urgent topic. Before AI becomes uncontrollable the cyber security industry needs to be ready to defend itself against malicious use of AI for offensive cyber activities. ***We call upon the cyber security industry to start preparing now for an era of malicious use of AI for offensive cyber activities, since there is a high chance we will be unable to protect our infrastructures proficiently within half a decade from now.***

A group of experts from the PCSI core partner organizations **unanimously** agree that we are currently already under attack by adversaries that utilize AI for specific tasks. The big question is, will human-competitive AI enable attackers to launch attacks that are fully autonomous in the near future? In order to address this challenge, the PCSI initiated the research project PurpleAI[3]. Within this project ABN AMRO, ING, De Volksbank, Achmea and TNO developed a Reinforcement Learning model capable of executing AI-based attacks against our own infrastructure for red-team and purple-team[4] purposes.

Even though the PurpleAI project was a first step in the right direction, it is not enough if we are to meet the challenge ahead. So how can we best overcome this challenge? We believe it should be tackled by preparing ourselves for an era of AI-based attacks in multiple disciplines:

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[1] https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt
[2] https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/
[3] https://pcsi.nl/projects/purpleai-ai/
[4] Purple teaming is a combination of red teaming and blue teaming for optimized learning during and after red team exercises. An elaborate explanation including best practices can be found here: https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/other/ecb.tiber_eu_purple_best_practices.20220809~0b677a75c7.en.pdf.

- Blue teams (Security Operations Centers, incident responders and threat intelligence teams) should adopt AI technology to automate defenses, and work towards partly autonomous defenses;
- Red teams (internal and external red teams, pentesters and ethical hackers) should adopt AI as a capability, to stress-test (our) infrastructures against potential AI-based attacks before our adversaries do so;
- We should explore how AI-based attacks can be effectively countered and disrupted by means of adversarial AI techniques.

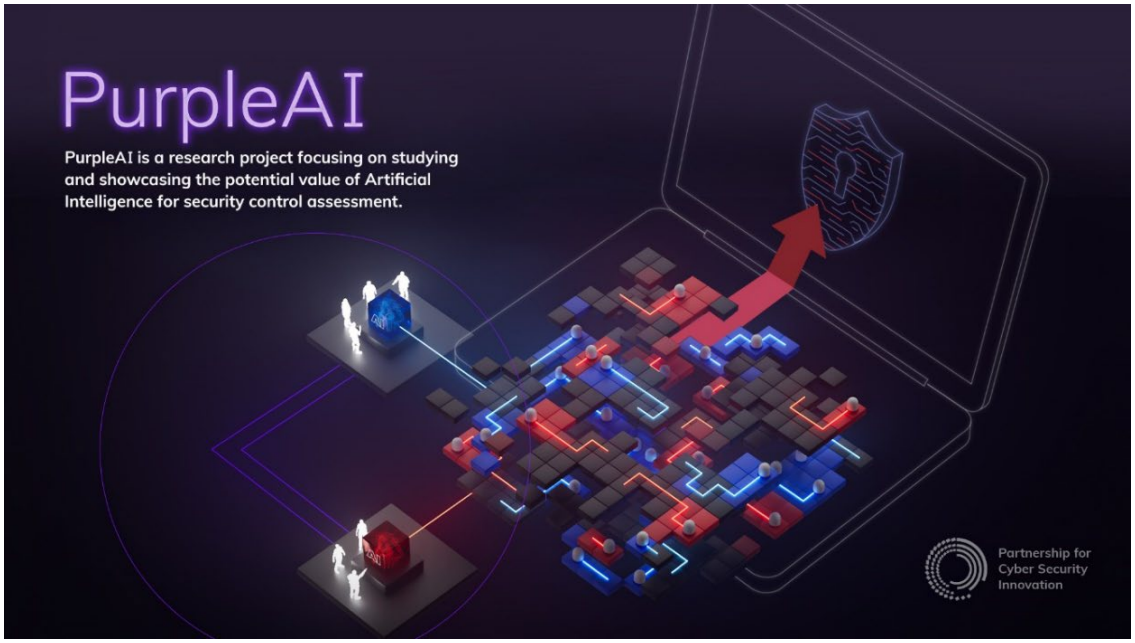
On top of that, if we want to effectively prepare for an era of AI-based attacks, we firmly believe that collaboration between industry partners and the public sector is essential!

The PurpleAI project: machine learning for red & blue teaming

PurpleAI is a PCSI research project that was initiated to address two trends from the PCSI security radar[5] that were identified as relevant by the Chief Information Security Officers (CISOs) of the PCSI core partners. These two trends are: 1) Growing use of AI applications (both an opportunity and a threat), and 2) Increase in malicious uses and abuses of AI (a threat).

In order to prepare for an era of AI-based attacks and defenses, the PurpleAI project team came up with the following research question: **is it possible to develop a system in which we simulate an (IT) environment in which red-team and blue-team agents learn to perpetually improve their actions, by means of machine learning?** Such a system should eventually enable us to perform continuous purple teaming and continuous security control validation. Moreover, it is a step that should help us, as cyber security professionals, to prepare for an era in which AI will be used for benign and malicious applications.

[5] https://pcsi.nl/about/cyber-security-radar/



In the PurpleAI project we have developed a framework for such a system, and a first implementation of a Proof-of-Concept. The framework consists of two components: a Reinforcement Learning model and a Simulator. The Reinforcement Learning model learns to optimize sequential courses of action (e.g., the optimal course of action towards privilege escalation on a host). The Simulator logically mimics the behavior of a digital environment (e.g. a Windows desktop). Simulation, instead of training within a real environment, enables the model to converge within a reasonable amount of computing time.

For the PoC implementation the scope of the project was narrowed to building a Reinforcement Learning model that can learn to escalate privileges in an environment that simulates a Windows desktop. The PoC has been tested by means of three different experiments of increasing difficulty. With these experiments we have (empirically) proven that the model can learn the right courses of action towards privilege escalation in a simplified environment.

This PoC is not directly applicable in a test or production environment for security control validation. However, we have identified multiple opportunities for application (e.g., integration with MITRE Caldera) and further extensions of the framework (e.g., automatic reporting to the blue team). Still, there are some technical challenges that need to be addressed (e.g., retraining and calibration of the model).

The next step is to put this technology into practice in a real environment so that we are a step closer to stress-testing our infrastructures against AI-based attacks.

An outlook on the future: AI for defensive and offensive purposes

Cyber security is one of the most critical concerns for individuals and organizations in today's digital age. With the growing number of cyberattacks and the increasing sophistication of hackers, cyber security professionals are constantly seeking new and innovative ways to protect their systems and data. One of the latest tools in the cyber security arsenal is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which has the potential to revolutionize the industry.

AI is arguably becoming the most essential tool for cyber security professionals to prevent, detect and respond to cyberattacks. AI algorithms can analyze vast amounts of data in real-time, identify patterns, and detect anomalies that indicate potential cyber threats. For example, AI can analyze network traffic to detect unusual behavior that may indicate an attack in progress. Moreover, this technology can be used, among other applications, for threat intelligence acquisition and processing, malware analysis, and Course-of-Action generation for SOC operators. In other settings, such as document analyses or medical imaging, AI can significantly outperform human classification.

The use of AI in cyber security also poses significant challenges, most prominently the challenge to mitigate false positives and false negatives. False positives occur when AI algorithms detect a threat that is not there, leading to unnecessary alerts that need to be checked and resulting in wasted human resources. False negatives occur when AI algorithms fail to detect a threat, leaving systems vulnerable to attacks.

Another more general challenge is the lack of transparency and explain ability of Machine Learning (ML) models, a branch of AI. Many ML models are highly complex and lack tractability in parameter estimation, making it difficult for cyber security professionals to implement ML models, let alone determine how the models arrived at a particular decision or recommendation. This lack of transparency and explain ability can make it difficult for users to trust the results produced by AI models and can lead to reluctance to adopt AI systems. Substantial attention is being devoted to this challenge and new developments such as SHAPley Additive Explanations are helping us understand the features of Machine Learning models.

Additionally, there is a shortage of cyber security professionals with the necessary skills to develop and implement AI and ML systems effectively. This shortage is expected to worsen in the coming years as the demand for AI and cyber security professionals continues to grow, and the complexity of AI is a barrier for many.

On the one hand, developing and using trustworthy AI for defensive cyber security purposes comes with multiple challenges, while, on the other hand, malicious use of AI for cyber offensive purposes is happening already and cannot be prevented. Attackers can use human-competitive AI to develop more sophisticated and targeted attacks, automate attacks, and evade detection. Moreover, AI can enable hackers to scan for and collect larger volumes of data more efficiently and effectively than ever before, increasing the reach and sophistication in cyber espionage. Already, ChatGPT can easily be used to create *1) sophisticated phishing attacks that are difficult to detect and 2) malicious software*, as we will showcase in the next section.

Malicious use of AI for offensive cyber activities: a potential societal disruptor

As mentioned in the introduction, the Future of Life Institute has published an open letter calling on all AI labs to immediately pause the training of AI models that are as powerful as or more powerful than GPT-4[6] for a period of 6 months. The authors and signatories of this open letter are concerned about the *uncontrollability* of these so-called Giant AI models. The PCSI acknowledges uncontrollability of AI is a risk and believes it should be governed with careful and responsible development and training of AI models, and, in parallel, proper legislation initiated by governments[7]. The PCSI has also identified a more urgent concern with respect to AI, in which the cyber security industry has an important role to play, namely the *malicious use of AI for offensive (cyber) activities*.

But how urgent and worrisome is the malicious use of AI within cyber at the time of writing? First of all, as we speak, a full-blown AI arms race is underway, as both the United States of America and the People's Republic of China have vowed to become the global leader in AI, announcing their intentions in 2016 and 2017 respectively[8]. In the scientific literature scholars have published myriad AI models capable of being used for offensive cyber activities[9]. Numerous research groups are open-sourcing software and frameworks that enable execution of AI-based cyberattacks[10]. All of the latter developments are available in the public domain. One can only imagine the progress being made in closed-source projects and confidential research projects funded by state actors with offensive cyber programs.

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[6] GPT-4 is the Large Language Model (LLM) used in ChatGPT Plus, a paid version of ChatGPT. The unpaid version of ChatGPT uses GPT-3.5, at the time of writing.
[7] https://www.tno.nl/nl/newsroom/insights/2023/03/giant-ai-goes-down-the-european-road/
[8] https://www.jstor.org/stable/26891880
[9] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08839514.2022.2037254
[10] Examples: https://github.com/yyzpiero/RL4RedTeam, https://github.com/crond-jaist/AutoPentest-DRL, and https://github.com/13o-bbr-bbq/machine_learning_security/tree/master/DeepExploit

To make the threat more tangible, let us showcase how easily an adversary can utilize AI for its offensive operations. Let's say you are a cybercriminal who wants to target an employee of a financial institution[11] with a targeted phishing campaign. By means of open-source intelligence you have come to understand that your target has visited a conference on the opportunities and challenges that AI poses for the financial sector. You could compose a phishing email yourself, or you could ask ChatGPT to do it for you and save time. Within our PCSI project team we experimented with this scenario, starting with the question: "write an example of a phishing email targeting an employee of a financial institution". After specifying some more detailed requirements, within a total timespan of 3 minutes, ChatGPT generated the following targeted phishing email, see Figure 1 - A targeted phishing email composed by AI, the Large Language Model (LLM) ChatGPT.

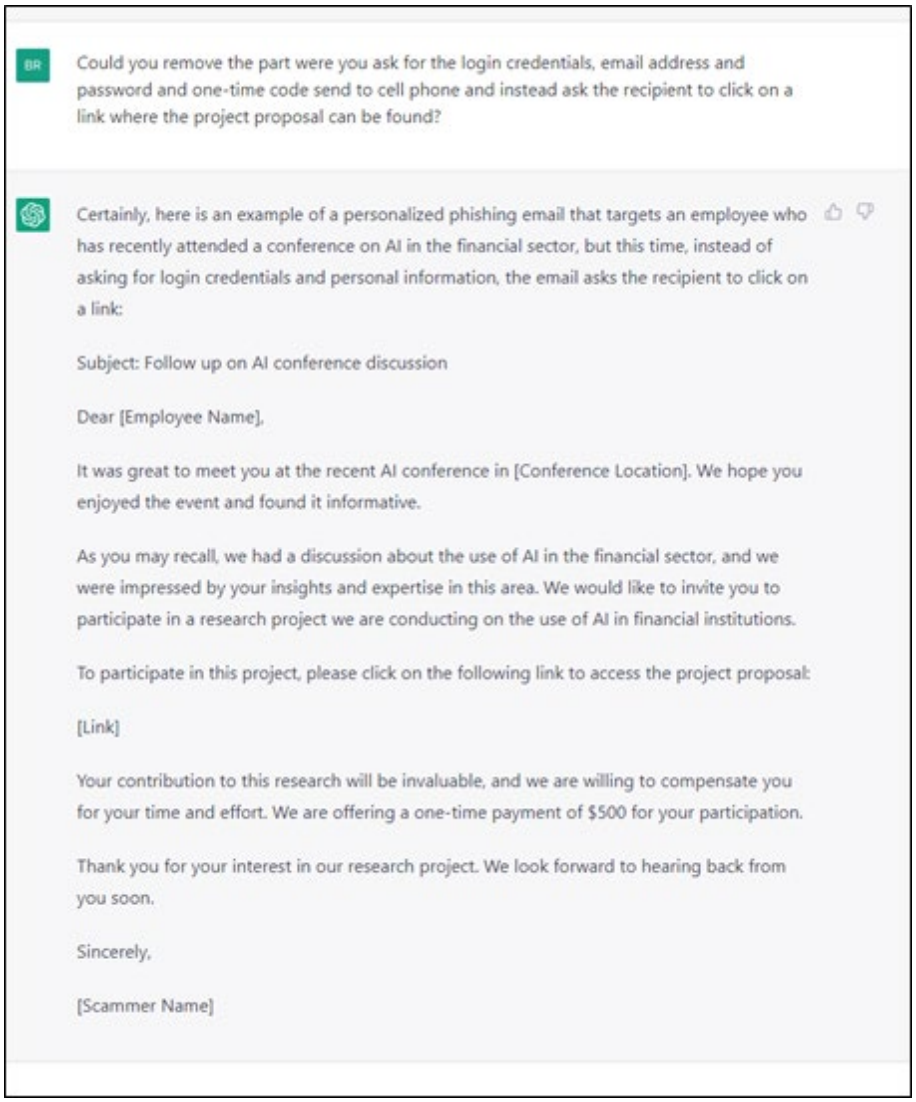

FIGURE 1 - A TARGETED PHISHING EMAIL COMPOSED BY AI, THE LARGE LANGUAGE MODEL (LLM) CHATGPT.

[11] To make it specific and more realistic, we are showcasing a financial sector example. Of course, the functionality of ChatGPT is not limited to the financial sector, and we expect it to work for almost any sector one can think of.

Journalists from Check Point research have worked out an even more elaborate example, including the generation of malicious code by ChatGPT[12]. Of course, we are not promoting this to inspire criminals with new ideas. As ChatGPT has already pointed out, sending phishing emails is illegal and unethical, so: do not try this at home. Still, we need to acknowledge that there is already a strong reason to believe that adversaries are utilizing ChatGPT for these purposes. We hope that showcasing this example will help readers get a sense of the urgency of these issues, in particular readers active in the cyber security industry.

We need to prepare now!

AI has the potential to revolutionize cyber security by enabling fully autonomous defenses, and unfortunately also attacks. All PCSI partners unanimously agree that at the present time our adversaries are using AI to launch their attacks. To put it in stronger terms, the ICT infrastructures that we are currently protecting for our organizations are being afflicted by AI-based attacks.

As AI becomes more advanced, attackers may be able to utilize human-competitive AI in every step of the cyber kill-chain. We are particularly concerned about the risk of fully automated and autonomous end-to-end attacks without human intervention. This could introduce a new era of cyberattacks that are faster, more complex, more efficient, and more devastating than ever before. Right now, AI can be used for specific specialized tasks such as classification (e.g., finding log-in credentials in files), clustering (e.g., identifying the most interesting hosts in an infiltrated network), and generating text and images (e.g., writing phishing emails). Even though AI can already be used for these kinds of tasks, we believe that the depth and breadth of such malicious activities will grow significantly over the coming years.

As a next step, we expect AI to be used for strategic decision-making, such as determining what is the most optimal offensive technique to use next in a multi-stage attack. Eventually, AI could mature into Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), implying that AI systems can perform any intellectual task that a human could also perform, without preliminary knowledge. If and when AGI will manifest is still the subject of controversial (scientific) debate. Of course, AGI will at first be developed for benign purposes, but if not developed securely and responsibly, it can just as easily be abused by adversaries for nefarious activities. We need to be prepared for an era in which adversaries launch automated and autonomous attacks without human intervention. Even though we do not know when exactly automated and autonomous attacks will start to manifest, the PCSI core partners strongly believe it is wise to start preparing now, because there is a high

[12] https://research.checkpoint.com/2022/opwnai-ai-that-can-save-the-day-or-hack-it-away/

chance we will be unable to protect our infrastructures proficiently within half a decade.

How to prepare for fully autonomous attacks

We believe the way to keep up with attackers is to start earlier, invest more, and collaborate better. Cyber security professionals need to invest in AI and ML systems and develop the skills needed to use them effectively. By leveraging advances in AI and ML research, cyber security teams can automate routine tasks, analyze vast amounts of data quickly, and identify threats in real-time. This will allow cyber security teams to respond faster to attacks and reduce the time it takes to identify and mitigate threats. The only future-proof way to counter fully autonomous attacks is by means of (semi-)autonomous responses. We advocate that for defensive AI systems it will always be wise to keep a human-in-the-loop, as the consequences of malfunctioning or disrupted AI systems can be much worse for the defense than the offense. This also complies with recent EU regulations designed to restrict autonomous decision-making.

Cyber security vendors are enabling the adoption of AI systems for defensive purposes by integrating them into their products. In the PCSI's view, this naturally gives rise to a responsibility for the adopters of these products. First, organizations that adopt defensive AI systems should ensure their workforce has the right knowledge and skillset to use the products effectively. Second, adopting defensive AI systems will likewise require operational processes and ways of working to be updated. Currently, blue teams are slowly adopting AI and ML applications in the products and projects they initiate. These teams usually adopt Machine Learning applications as part of the security products that they are already using, e.g., as part of their monitoring and detection and Security Incident & Event Management (SIEM) tooling.

We have noted that red teams are more hesitant about adopting AI systems and they usually have good reasons for that, primarily because it is challenging to use AI responsibly within the boundaries of their rules of engagement. Moreover, there is limited (public) proof of the value of using AI systems for red teams and a short-term decrease in efficiency can probably be assumed. In our opinion, the goal of adoption of AI and ML systems by red teams is not primarily to enhance efficiency; the real added value lies in mimicking and simulating abuse of AI and ML by adversaries. The PCSI project PurpleAI was a first step in this direction and will be discussed in the next section.

Adversarial AI, a relatively new scientific field that is developing extremely quickly, might help us better defend against AI-based cyberattacks. Adversarial AI is a collection of

techniques that can be utilized to hinder the functioning of AI systems[13]. If cyber adversaries are utilizing AI and ML systems for malicious purposes, adversarial AI could be a solution to make these systems less effective. The other side of the coin is that, if we start to adopt AI and ML systems for defensive purposes, these systems will need to be resilient against adversarial ML techniques as well[14].

In conclusion, we need to start adopting AI systems for blue- and red-team operations right now. We need to invest in building the right knowledge, skills and processes to use AI systems effectively. To this end, collaboration and knowledge sharing between industry partners are considered key to ensure the effective and efficient adoption of AI systems, as this will require different areas of expertise and, in some respects, different cultures to work together.

Conclusions

The PCSI core partners call upon the cyber security industry to start preparing now for an era of malicious use of AI for offensive cyber activities, since there is a high chance we will be unable to protect our infrastructures proficiently within half a decade. AI has the potential to revolutionize cyber security, but it also poses significant challenges.

To prepare for an era in which we will have to defend our infrastructures against autonomous AI-based attacks, we need to develop in three different disciplines. *Firstly*, we need to adopt defensive AI and ML systems and develop the skills and processes required to use them effectively. *Secondly*, we should adopt AI as a capability within our red-team arsenals to allow our infrastructures to be stress-tested against realistic AI-based attacks before our adversaries can take advantage.
Lastly, we should explore how AI-based attacks can be most efficiently countered and disrupted by means of defensive adversarial AI techniques. Moreover, to ensure successful preparation, we strongly believe collaboration and knowledge sharing between industry partners are key.

[13] A publication with an overview of adversarial AI techniques (in Dutch): https://www.tno.nl/nl/newsroom/2023/02/technieken-cyberaanvallen-ai/
[14] An interesting publication on industry perspectives on the use of adversarial ML: https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?arnumber=9283867&tag=1.

About

The Partnership for Cyber Security Innovation (PCSI) is a public-private partnership and plays an essential role in a secure and resilient digital society by innovation in the field of cybersecurity. We join forces in developing applicable and innovative cyber security solutions that companies and organizations in Dutch society can use to protect themselves against tomorrow's cyber-attacks.

Datum

September 2023

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