VB6 P-Code Disassembly

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May 5, 2021

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by David ZimmerMay 5, 202118 min read

In this article we are going to discuss the inner depths of VB6 P-Code disassembly and the VB6 runtime.

As a malware analyst, VB6 in general, and P-Code in particular, has always been a problem area. It is not well documented and the publicly available tooling did not give me the clarity I really desired.

In several places throughout this paper there may be VB runtime offsets presented. All offsets are to a reference copy with md5: **EEBEB73979D0AD3C74B248EBF1B6E770** [1]. Microsoft has been kind enough to provide debug symbols with this version for the **.ENGINE** P-Code handlers.

To really delve into this topic we are going to have to cover several areas.

The general layout will cover:

- how the runtime executes a P-Code stream
- how P-Code handlers are written
- primer on the P-Code instruction set
- instruction groupings
- internal runtime conventions
- how to debug handlers

Native Opcode Handlers & Code Flow

Let's start with how a runtime handler interprets the P-Code stream.

While in future articles we will detail how the transition is made from native code to P-Code. For our purposes here, we will look at individual opcode handlers once the P-Code interpretation has already begun.

For our first example, consider the following P-Code disassembly:

401932 F4 FF LitI2_Byte 255

Here we can see two byte codes at virtual address 0×401932 . These have been decoded to the instruction LitI2_Byte 255. $0 \times F4$ is the opcode byte. $0 \times FF$ is the hardcoded argument passed in the byte stream.

The opcode handler for this instruction is the following:

ENGINE:66105CAB	_lblEX_LitI2_Byte	
ENGINE:66105CAB	movsx eax, byte ptr [esi]	; load argument byte
ENGINE:66105CAE	push eax	; push value onto stack
ENGINE:66105CAF	xor eax, eax	; clear eax
ENGINE:66105CB1	mov al, [esi+1]	; load next byte
ENGINE:66105CB4	add esi , 2	; move past arg+next opcode
ENGINE:66105CB7	jmp ds:_tblByteDisp[eax*4]	; see below

While in a handler, the **ESI** register will always start as the virtual address of the next byte to interpret. In the case above, it would be 0×401933 since the $0\timesF4$ byte has already been processed to get us into this handler.

The first instruction at 0×66105 cab will load a single byte from the P-Code byte stream into the EAX register. This value is then pushed onto the stack. This is the functional operation of this opcode.

EAX is then cleared and the next value from the byte stream is loaded into the lower part of EAX (AL). This will be the opcode byte that takes us to the next native handler.

The byte stream pointer is then incremented by two. This will set **ESI** past the one byte argument, and past the next opcode which has already been consumed.

Finally, the jmp instruction will transfer execution to the next handler by using the opcode as an array index into a function pointer table.

Now that last sentence is a bit of a mouth full, so lets include an example. Below is the first few entries from the <u>_tblByteDisp</u> table. This table is an array of 4 byte function pointers.

ENGINE:66106D14 _tblByteDisp	dd offset _lblEX_Bos	; index 0
ENGINE:66106D18	dd offset InvalidExCode	; index 1
ENGINE:66106D1C	dd offset _lblEX_Bos	; index 2
ENGINE:66106D20	dd offset InvalidExCode	
ENGINE:66106D24	dd offset _lblEX_FLdRf	
ENGINE:66106D28	dd offset _lblEX_ImpAdLdRf	fVar

Each opcode is an index into this table. The *4 in the jump statement is because each function pointer is 4 bytes (32 bit code).

The only way we know the names of each of these P-Code instructions is because Microsoft included the handler names in the debug symbols for a precious few versions of the runtime.

The snippet above also reveals several characteristics of the opcode layout to be aware of. First note, there are invalid slots such as opcode 0×01 -InvalidExCode. The reason for this is unknown, but it also means we can have some fun with the runtime such as introducing our own opcodes [5].

The second thing to notice is that multiple opcodes can point to the same handlers such as the case with libiex_Bos. Here we see that opcode 0 leads to the same place as opcode 2. There are actually 5 opcode sequences which point to the Bos (Beginning of Statement) handler.

The next thing to notice is that the opcode names are abbreviated and will require some deciphering to learn how to read them.

Finally from the LitI2_Byte handler we already analyzed, we can recognize that all of the stubs were hand written in assembler.

From here, the next question is how many handlers are there? If each opcode is a single byte, there can only be a maximum of 256 handlers right? That would make sense, but is incorrect.

If we look at the last 5 entries in the <u>_tblByteDisp</u> table we find this:

ENGINE:66107100	dd offset _lblBEX_Lead0	;index FB
ENGINE:66107104	dd offset _lblBEX_Lead1	;index FC
ENGINE:66107108	dd offset _lblBEX_Lead2	;index FD
ENGINE:6610710C	dd offset _lblBEX_Lead3	;index FE
ENGINE:66107110	dd offset _lblBEX_Lead4	;index FF

The handler for each of these looks similar to the following:

ENGINE:66106C05 _]	blBEX_Lead0	
ENGINE:66106C05	xor	eax, eax
ENGINE:66106C07	mov	al, [esi]
ENGINE:66106C09	inc	esi
ENGINE:66106C0A	jmp	<pre>ds:_tblDispatch[eax*4]</pre>

Here we see EAX zeroed out, the next opcode byte loaded into AL and the byte code pointer (ESI) incremented. Finally it uses that new opcode to jump into an entirely different function pointer table.

This would give us a maximum opcode count of (6*256)-5 or 1531 opcodes.

Now luckily, not all of these opcodes are defined. Remember some slots are invalid, and some are duplicate entries. If we go through and eliminate the noise, we are left with around unique handlers. Still nothing to sneeze at.

So what the above tells us is that not all instructions can be represented as a single opcode. Many instructions will be prefixed with a lead byte that then makes the actual opcode reference a different function pointer table.

Here is a clip from the second tblDispatch pointer table:

ENGINE:66107114 _tblDispatch dd offset InvalidExCode ; index 0 ENGINE:66107118 dd offset _lblEX_ImpUI1 ; index 1

To reach <u>lblex_ImpUI1</u> we would need to encode $0 \times FB$ as the lead byte and 0×01 as the opcode byte.

This would first send execution into the <u>lblBEX_Lead0</u> handler, which then loads the <u>0x01</u> opcode and uses <u>tblDispatch</u> table to execute <u>lblEX_ImpUI1</u>.

A little bit confusing, but once you see it in action it becomes quite clear. You can watch it run live for yourself by loading a P-Code executable into a native debugger and setting a breakpoint on the lead* handlers.

Byte stream argument length

Before we can disassemble a byte stream, we also need to know how many byte code arguments each and every instruction takes. With 822 instructions this can be a big job! Luckily other reversers have already done much of the work for us. The first place I saw this table published was from Mr Silver and Mr Snow in the WKTVBDE help file.

A codified version of this can be found in the Semi-VbDecompiler source [2] which I have used as a reference implementation. The opcode sizes are largely correct in this table, however some errors are still present. As with any reversing task, refinement is a process of

trial and error.

Some instructions, 18 known to date, have variable length byte stream arguments. The actual size of the byte stream to consume before the next opcode is embedded as the two bytes after the opcode. An example of this is the **FFreeVar** instruction.

```
      4019C9
      36
      08
      00
      [8 bytes]
      FFreeVar var_98 var_A8 var_F8 var_118

      4019D4
      FF 2F 14
      00
      02
      00
      ExitProcCbHresult
```

In this example we see the first two bytes decode as 0×0008 (little endian format), which here represents 4 stack variables to free.

Opcode Naming Conventions

Before we continue on to opcode arguments, I will give a brief word on naming conventions and opcode groupings.

In the opcode names you will often see a combination of the following abbreviations. The below is my current interpretation of the less intuitive specifiers:

Opcode abbreviation	Description		
Imp	Import		
Address			
St / Ld	Store / Load		
12	Integer/Boolean		
14	Long		
UI1	Byte		
Lit	Literal(ie "Hi",2,8)		
Су	Currency		
R4	Single		
R8	Double		
Str	String		
Fn	Calls a VBA export function		
FPR	Floating point register		
PR	Uses ebp-4C as a general register		

Var	Variant
Rf	Reference
VCall	VTable call
LateID	Late bound COM object call by method ID
LateNamed	Late bound COM Object call by method name

Specifiers are often combined to denote meaning and opcodes often come in groups such as the following:

<u>copy</u>	2 Lit		Op Like Search	
Lead In	ndex Nai	ne	Offset	^
0 11	B Li	tStr	66106D80	
0 23	7 Li	tVar_Missing	66106DB0	
0 28	8 Li	tVarI2	66106DB4	
0 37	A Li	tVarStr	66106DFC	
0 63	3 Li [.]	tVar_TRUE	66106EA0	
0 F3	3 Li [.]	tI2	661070E0	
0 F4	4 Li [.]	tI2_Byte	661070E4	
0 F	5 Li	tI4	661070E8	
0 F6	6 Li	tCy	661070EC	
0 F:	7 Li [.]	tCy4	661070FO	
0 F8	8 Li	tI2FP	661070F4	
0 F9	9 Li [.]	tR4FP	661070F8	
0 F#	A Li	tDate	661070FC	
2 - FC 63	3 Li [.]	tNothing	661076A0	
2 - FC 64	4 Li [.]	tVar_Null	661076A4	
2 - FC 65	5 Li	tVar_TRUE	661076A8	
2 - FC 60	6 Li	tVar_FALSE	661076AC	
2 - FC 63	7 Li [.]	tVar_Empty	661076BO	
2 - FC 68	8 Li	tVar_Missing	661076B4	
4 - FE 3I	D Li	tVarUI1	66107E08	
4 - FE BS	5 Li	tI2	66107FE8	
4 - FE B6	6 Li	tI2FP	66107FEC	
4 - FE B3	7 Li	tCy4	66107FFO	
4 - FE B8	8 Li	tI4	66107FF4	¥

An opcode search interface such as this is very handy while learning the VB6 instruction set.

Opcode Groups

The following shows an example grouping:

Opcode abbreviation	Description		
ForUI1	Start For loop with byte as counter type		
Forl2	With integer counter, default step = 1		
Forl4	Long type as counter		
ForR4			

ForR8	
ForCy	
ForVar	
ForStepUI1	For loop with byte counter, user specified step
ForStepI2	
ForStepI4	
ForStepR4	
ForStepR8	
ForStepCy	
ForStepVar	
ForEachCollVar	For each loop over collection using variant
ForEachAryVar	For each loop over array using variant
ForEachCollObj	For each loop over collection using object type
ForEachCollAd	
ForEachVar	
ForFoob) /orFroo	

ForEachVarFree

A two part series on the intricacies of how For loops were implemented is available [3] for the curious.

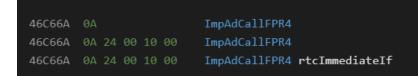
As you can see, the opcode set can collapse down fairly well once you take into account the various groupings. While I have grouped the instructions in the source, I do not have an exact number as the lines between them can still be a bit fuzzy. It is probably around 100 distinct operations once grouped.

Now onto the task of argument decodings. I am not sure why, but most P-Code tools only show you the lead byte, opcode byte, mnemonic. Resolved arguments are only displayed if it is fully handled.

Everything except Semi-VBDecompiler [6] skips the display of the argument bytes.

The problem arises from the fact no tool decodes all of the arguments correctly for all of the opcodes yet. If you do not see the argument byte stream, there is no indication other than a subtle jump in virtual address that anything has been hidden from you.

Consider the following displays:



The first version shows you opcode and mnemonic only. You don't even realize anything is missing. The second version gives you a bigger hint and at least shows you no argument resolution is occurring. The third version decodes the byte stream arguments, and resolves the function call to a usable name.

Obviously the third version is the gold standard we should expect from a disassembler. The second version can be acceptable and shows something is missing. The first version leaves you clueless. If you are not already intimately familiar with the instruction set, you will never know you are missing anything.

Common opcode argument types

In the Semi-VbDecompiler source many opcodes are handled with custom printf type specifiers [4]. Common specifiers include:

Format specifier	Description			
%a	Local argument			
%I	Jump location			
%с	Proc / global var address stored in constant pool			
%e	Pool index as P-Code proc to call			
%x	Pool index to locate external API call			
%s	Pool index of string address			
%1/2/4	Literal byte, int, or long value			
%t	Code object from its base offset			
%v	VTable call			
%}	End of procedure			

Many opcodes only take one or more simple arguments, <u>%a</u> and <u>%s</u> being the most common.

Consider "LitVarStr %a %s" which loads a variant with a literal BSTR string, and then pushes that address to the top of the stack:

4014F5 3A 68 FF 00 00 LitVarStr var_98 str_40122C='never hit'

The **%a** decoder will read the first two bytes from the stream and decode it as follows:

```
Private Function MakeArg(ByVal t As Long) As String
    If t < 0 Then
        MakeArg = "var_" + Hex$(-t)
    Else
        MakeArg = "arg_" + Hex$(t)
    End If
End Function</pre>
```

Interpreting $0 \times FF68$ as a signed 2 byte number is -0×98 . Since it is a negative value, it is a local function variable at <u>ebp-0 \times 98</u>. Positive values denote function arguments.

Next the %s handler will read the next two bytes which it interprets as a pool index. The value at pool index 0 is the constant 0x40122C. This address contains an embedded BSTR where the address points to the unicode part of the string, and the preceding 4 bytes denoting its length.

A closer look at run time data for this instruction is included in the debugging section later on.

Another common specifier is the <u>%1</u> handler used for jump calculations. It can be seen in the following examples:



In the first unconditional jump the byte stream argument is $0 \times 002C$. Jump locations are all referenced from the function start address, not the current instruction address as may be expected.

0x4014E4 + 0x2C = 0x401510 0x4014E4 + 0x3A = 0x40151E

Since all jumps are calculated from the beginning of a function, the offsets in the byte stream must be interpreted as unsigned values. Jumps to addresses before the function start are not possible and represent a disassembly error.

46C66A 0A 24 00 10 00 ImpAdCallFPR4 rtcImmediateIf

The native handler for this is:

ENGINE:6610664E	public	_lblEX_ImpAdCallFPR4		
ENGINE:6610664E	_lblEX_ImpA	dCallFPR4:		CODE XREF: ENGINE:66104F52?j
ENGINE:6610664E				_lblEX_Bos+B?j
ENGINE:6610664E	movzx	ecx, word ptr [esi]		pool index
ENGINE:66106651	movzx	edi, word ptr [esi+2]		stack check arg
ENGINE:66106655	add	esi, 4		
ENGINE:66106658	add	edi, esp		expected stack value on function return
ENGINE:6610665A	mov	edx, [ebp-54h]		const pool
ENGINE:6610665D	mov	eax, [edx+ecx*4]		get value from pool
ENGINE:66106660	or	eax, eax		
ENGINE:66106662	nop			
ENGINE:66106663	jz	errorVal		null check on pool value
ENGINE:66106669				
ENGINE:66106669	??0002100:			CODE XREF: ENGINE:6610BA06?j
ENGINE:66106669	cmp	_g_EventMonitorsEnable	d,	0
ENGINE:66106670	jnz	??0002200		
ENGINE:66106676	call	eax		call our embedded stub to look up api
ENGINE:66106676				or used cached addr
ENGINE:66106678				
ENGINE:66106678	??0002300:			CODE XREF: ??0002200+16?j
ENGINE:66106678	cmp	edi, esp		is the stack what we expected or corrupt?
ENGINE:6610667A	jnz	StackErr_0		
ENGINE:66106680	xor	eax, eax		
ENGINE:66106682	mov	al, [esi]		get next pcode index
ENGINE:66106684	inc	esi		inc pcode to next byte
ENGINE:66106685	jmp	<pre>ds:_tblByteDisp[eax*4]</pre>		now jump to next pcode handler from table

Looking at the P-Code disassembly we can see the byte stream of 24001000 is actually two integer values. The first 0×0024 is a constant pool index, and the second 0×0010 is the expected stack adjustment to verify after the call.

Now we haven't yet talked about the constant pool or the house keeping area of the stack that VB6 reserves for state storage. For an abbreviated description, at runtime VB uses the area between **ebp** and **ebp-94h** as kind of a scratch pad. The meaning of all of these fields are not yet fully known however several of the key entries are as follows:

Stack position Description

ebp-30 Current function start address	ebp-58	Current function start address
---------------------------------------	--------	--------------------------------

ebp-54	Constant pool
ebp-50	Current function raw address (RTMI structure)
ebp-4C	PR (Pointer Register) used for Object references

In the above disassembly we can see entry 0×24 from the constant pool would be loaded.

A constant pool viewer is a very instructive tool to help decipher these argument byte codes.

It has been found that smart decoding routines can reliably decipher constant pool data independent of analysis of the actual disassembly.

One such implementation is shown below:

Index	Value	AutoDetect *	Data 🔨
22	423EE8	UniStr	lines copied to clipboard
23	40117A	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcJoin
24	4011CE	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcImmediatelf
25	4011D4	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcRightCharVar
26	4011B0	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcMidCharVar
27	41BBEC	IID/CLSID Struct	{00905A4D-0003-0000-0400-0000FFFF0000}{00905A4D-0
28	401204	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcTrimVar
29	40121C	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcLeftCharVar
2A	423F24	UniStr	}
2B	4011C8	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcDoEvents
2C	47C1A4	IID/CLSID Struct	{00905A4D-0003-0000-0400-0000FFFF0000}{00905A4D-0
2D	40B6B8	CodeObj	frmEvalSelection
2E	423F28	GUID	frmEvalSelection ;{1A28C08D-946E-46D2-B57D-372D8983
2F	41BC00	UniStr	.txt
30	41E664	UniStr	temp
31	40119E	ExtApi.ImportAtVA	rtcEnvironVar
32	407808	ExtApi.MakeAddrToVB	fso.Proc_447C58
33	40782C	ExtApi.MakeAddrToVB	fso.Proc_446394
34	423C80	UniStr	notepad.exe
35	401168	ExtAni ImnortAtVA	rtcShell Y
<			>

If we look at entry 0×0024 we see it holds the value 0×4011 CE. If we look at this address in IDA we find the following native disassembly:

```
4011CE FF 25 0C 11 40 00 jmp ds:__imp_rtcImmediateIf
```

0x40110C is the IAT address of msvbvm60.rtcImmediateIf import. This opcode is how VB runtime imports are called.

While beyond the scope of this paper, it is of interest to note that VB6 embeds a series of small native stubs in P-Code executables to splice together the native and P-Code executions. This is done for API calls, call backs, inter-modular calls etc.

The Constant Pool

The constant pool itself is worth a bit of discussion. Each compilation unit such as a module, class, form etc gets its own constant pool which is shared for all of the functions in that file.

Pool entries are built up on demand as the file is processed by the compiler from top to bottom.

The constant pool can contain several types of entries such as:

- string values (BSTRs specifically)
- VB method native call stubs
- API import native call stubs
- COM GUIDs
- COM CLSID / IID pairs held in COMDEF structures
- CodeObject base offsets
- blank slots which represent internal COM objects filled out at startup by the runtime (ex: App.)

More advanced opcode processors

More complex argument resolutions require a series of opcode post processors. In the disassembly engine I am working on there are currently 13 post processors which handle around 30 more involved opcodes.

Things start to get much more complex when we deal with COM object calls. Here we have to resolve the COM class ID, interface ID, and discern its complete VTable layout to determine which method is going to be called. This requires access to the COM objects type library if its an external type, and the ability to recreate its function prototype from that information.

For internal types such as user classes, forms and user controls, we also need to understand their VTable layout. For internal types however we do not receive the aid of tlb files. Public methods will have their names embedded in the VB file format structures which can be of help.

Resolution of these types of calls is beyond the scope of what we can cover in an introductory paper, but it is absolutely critical to get right if you are writing a disassembler that people are going to rely upon for business needs.

More on opcode handler inputs

Back to opcode arguments. It is also important to understand that opcodes can take dynamic runtime stack arguments in addition to the hard coded byte stream arguments. This is not something that a disassembler necessarily needs to understand though. This level of knowledge is mainly required to write P-Code assembly or a P-Code decompiler.

Some special cases however do require the context of the previous disassembly in order to resolve properly. Consider the following multistep operation:

```
      464557
      0F 90 04
      VCallAd Form1.lvDebug ;MSComctlLib.ListView

      46455A
      19 68 FF
      FStAdFunc var_98

      46455D
      08 68 FF
      FLdPr var_98

      464560
      61 54 FF 07 00 00 00
      LateIdLdVar MSCOMCTL.IListView.ListItems()
```

Here the LateIdLdVar resolver needs to know which object is being accessed. Scanning back and locating the VCallAd instruction is required to find the active object stored in PR.

Debugging handlers

When trying to figure out complex opcode handlers, it is often helpful to watch the code run live in a debugger. There are numerous techniques available here. Watching the handler itself run requires a native debugger.

Typically you will figure out how to generate the opcode with some VB6 source which you compile. You then put the executable in the same directory as your reference copy of the vb runtime and start debugging.

Some handlers are best viewed in a native debugger, however many can be figured out just by watching it run through a P-Code debugger.

A P-Code debugger simplifies operations showing you its execution at a higher level. In one step of the debugger you can watch multiple stack arguments disappear, and the stack diff light up with changes to other portions. Higher level tools also allow you to view complex data types on the stack as well as examine TLS memory and keep annotated offsets.

In some scenarios you may actually find yourself running both a P-Code debugger and a native debugger on the target process at the same time.

One important thing to keep in mind is that VB6 makes heavy use of COM types.

Going back to our LitVarStr example:

4014F5 3A 68 FF 00 00 LitVarStr var_98 str_40122C='never hit'

You would see the following after it executes:

```
0019FC28 ebp-120 0x0019FCB0 ; ebp-98 - top of stack
...
0019FCB0 ebp-98 0x00000008
0019FCB4 ebp-94 0x00000000
0019FCB8 ebp-90 0x0040122C
```

A data viewer would reveal the following when decoding ebp-98 as a variant:

```
Variant 19FCB0
VT: 0x8( Bstr )
Res1: 0
Res2: 0
Res3: 0
Data: 40122C
String len: 9 -> never hit
```

Debugging VB6 apps is a whole other ball of wax. I mention it here only in passing to give you a brief introduction to what may be required when deciphering what opcodes are doing. In particular recognizing Variants and SafeArrays in stack data will serve you well when working with VB6 reversing.

Conclusion

In this paper we have laid the necessary ground work in order to understand the basics of a VB6 P-Code disassembly engine. The Semi-VbDecompiler source is a good starting point to understand its inner workings.

We have briefly discussed how to find and read native opcode handlers along with some of the conventions necessary for understanding them. We introduced you to how opcodes flow from one to the next, along with how to determine the number of byte stream arguments each one takes, and how to figure out what they represent.

There is still much work to be done in terms of documenting the instruction set. I have started a project where I catalog:

- VB6 source code required to generate an opcode
- byte stream arguments size and meaning
- stack arguments consumed
- function outputs

Unfortunately it is still vastly incomplete. This level of documentation is foundational and quite necessary for writing any P-Code analysis tools.

Still to be discussed, is how to find the actual P-Code function blobs within the VB6 compiled executable. This is actually a very involved task that requires understanding a series of complex and nested file structures. Again the Semi-VbDecompiler source can guide you through this maze.

While VB6 is an old technology, it is still commonly used for malware. This research is aimed at reducing gaps in understanding around it and is also quite interesting from a language design standpoint.

- [1] <u>VB6 runtime with symbols</u>
- [2] <u>Semi-VbDecompiler opcode table Source</u>
- [3] <u>A closer look at the VB6 For Loop implementation</u>
- [4] <u>Semi-VBDecompiler opcode argument decodings</u>
- [5] <u>Introducing a one byte NOP opcode</u>
- [6] <u>Semi-VBDecompiler</u>

Tagged as<u>disassembly</u>, P-Code, Research, series, VB