CSE 451: Operating Systems
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Module 25
Virtual Machine Monitors

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What do VMMs enable?

- Running multiple operating systems (called “guest OS’s”) and their applications on a single physical computer, as if each were running on its own private virtual computer

- Efficient – mostly direct execution, rather than simulation

- Contemporary examples
  - VMware
  - Microsoft’s VirtualPC / VirtualServer
  - Parallels (Mac)
  - Xen
VMM structure

Virtual Machine = Guest OS + apps

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- applications
- Windows
- virtual machine monitor
- hardware

- applications
- Linux
Basic ideas

• Guest OS runs in user mode
• When any kind of interrupt / exception / trap occurs, we’ll end up in the VMM rather than the guest OS
• VMM simulates state changes that would have been made by the hardware, then restarts VM at the guest OS handler address
  – E.g., stuffs the saved PC where the architecture says it should be
• When the guest OS tries to execute a privileged instruction
  – VMM gets control, simulates effect of privileged instruction
    • VMM knows that guest OS was in virtual kernel mode so the attempted operation is OK
VMM History

• Conceived by IBM in the late 1960’s
  – CP-40, CP-67, VM/360
• Sold continuously since then
• Used first for OS development and debugging, then for time sharing (multiple single-user OS’s, plus a few single-job batch OS’s), eventually for server consolidation

![Diagram showing Batch processing OS, Time sharing OS, VM/370, System 370 Machine]
VMMs Today

- OS development and debugging
- Software compatibility testing
- Running software from another OS
  - Or, OS version
- Virtual infrastructure for Internet services (server consolidation)

Examples
- Run Windows on your Mac, or MacOS on your PC
- VMware in CSE 451
- Amazon’s Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2)
Comparing the Unix and VMM APIs

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Possible Implementation Strategy: Complete machine emulation

- The VMM implements the complete hardware architecture in software

```java
while(true) {
    Instruction instr = fetch();
    // emulate behavior in software
    instr.emulate();
}
```

Drawback: This is really slow
Practical alternative: VMM gets control on privileged instructions only

- Treat guest operating systems (and their apps) like an application
  - Guest OS (and its apps) run in user mode
  - Most instructions execute natively on the CPU
  - Privileged instructions are trapped and emulated

OS + apps

loads, stores, branches, ALU operations

VMM

machine halt, I/O instructions, MMU manipulation, disabling interrupts

Physical hardware
Virtualizing the User/Kernel Boundary

- Both the guest OS and applications run in (physical) user-mode
- For each virtual machine, the VMM keeps a software mode bit:
  - During a system call, switch to “kernel” mode
  - On system call return, switch to “user” mode
- What does the VMM do if a VM executes a privileged instruction while in virtual user mode?
- What does the VMM do if a VM executes a privileged instruction while in virtual kernel mode?
Tracing Through a File System Read

Application → Guest OS → VMM → Hardware

- **Application**: read() syscall
- **Guest OS**: trap detected
  - trap handler; change VM to “kernel” mode
  - trap handler
  - handle read syscall
  - read from disk()

- **VMM**: trap detected
  - trap handler; emulate I/O

- **Hardware**: priv insc. detected

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Questions, to clarify …

- What if the I/O could be handled from the buffer cache?
- Does the VMM handle a VM’s I/O request synchronously?
- There are a zillion different types of disks (and networks and …) … Do the device drivers for these reside in the guest OS or in the VMM?
A possible “gotcha”

- All instructions that modify hardware state must be privileged (so that VMM can get control, modify the virtual hardware state for that guest, and not modify the physical hardware state)

- Example: Suppose the ERET instruction (return to a user process after handling an exception) is not privileged
  - ERET sets the PC to the saved PC, and sets CPU mode to user
  - There doesn’t seem to be a reason to prevent user processes from doing this (even if there’s no reason for them to want to)

Why would this be a problem for a VMM?
x86

- Conditions for an architecture to be virtualizable were defined in 1974
- x86 architecture did not satisfy these conditions!
  - Many reasons, but most of them stem from instructions that have different behavior in user mode and kernel mode, and that don’t trap when executed in user mode
- Approach: binary re-writing
  - When a code page is loaded, scan it, looking for offending instructions
  - Patch these to cause a fault
  - Remember the instruction that used to be there
Other approaches

• Hardware: Both Intel (VT-x) and AMD (AMD-V) have developed virtualization extensions to the architecture (starting ~2006)
• Paravirtualization: Export a slight modification of the hardware; port the OS to this new hardware
Memory

• VMM’s also utilize memory protection (in addition to privileged instructions) to do their job
• Have not described how memory is virtualized by a VMM, creating “virtual physical memory” for the guest OS’s
• Approach involves the VMM futzing with the page tables in the guest OS’s
Trust Issues

Problem:

– Who can you trust?
– OS protects processes from each other
  • OS is “trusted” since you’re running it on your hardware
  • You don’t worry about OS snooping your data
– But in the cloud, Amazon (or Microsoft or Google) are running your operating systems in their VMM
  • VMs are ”just” user mode processes
  • VMM “naturally” isolates them
  • But, the VMM can look into the guest OS/process!
How You Can Trust The VMM

Solution:

– Tricky hardware!
– Keep all data encrypted
  • On disk, no problem.
  • In memory, sure… but...
  • How does the processor read/write/execute?
– Intel SGX/MEE processor / memory controller
  • RAM is encrypted!
  • Special instructions to tell processor where the encrypted regions are
  • Processor decrypts pages into hidden caches and executes from there