

UNIT-4

IMPLEMENTATION LEVELS OF VIRTUALIZATION

Virtualization is a computer architecture technology by which multiple virtual machines (VMs) are multiplexed in the same hardware machine. The idea of VMs can be dated back to the 1960s. The purpose of a VM is to enhance resource sharing by many users and improve computer performance in terms of resource utilization and application flexibility. Hardware resources (CPU, memory, I/O devices, etc.) or software resources (operating system and software libraries) can be virtualized in various functional layers. This virtualization technology has been revitalized as the demand for distributed and cloud computing increased sharply in recent years.

The idea is to separate the hardware from the software to yield better system efficiency. For example, computer users gained access to much enlarged memory space when the concept of virtual memory was introduced. Similarly, virtualization techniques can be applied to enhance the use of compute engines, networks, and storage. In this chapter we will discuss VMs and their applications for building distributed systems. According to a 2009 Gartner Report, virtualization was the top strategic technology poised to change the computer industry. With sufficient storage, any computer platform can be installed in another host computer, even if they use processors with different instruction sets and run with distinct operating systems on the same hardware.

1. Levels of Virtualization Implementation

A traditional computer runs with a host operating system specially tailored for its hardware architecture, as shown in Figure 3.1(a). After virtualization, different user applications managed by their own operating systems (guest OS) can run on the same hardware, independent of the host OS. This is often done by adding additional software, called a virtualization layer as shown in Figure 3.1(b). This virtualization layer is known as hypervisor or virtual machine monitor (VMM). The VMs are shown in the upper boxes, where applications run with their own guest OS over the virtualized CPU, memory, and I/O resources.

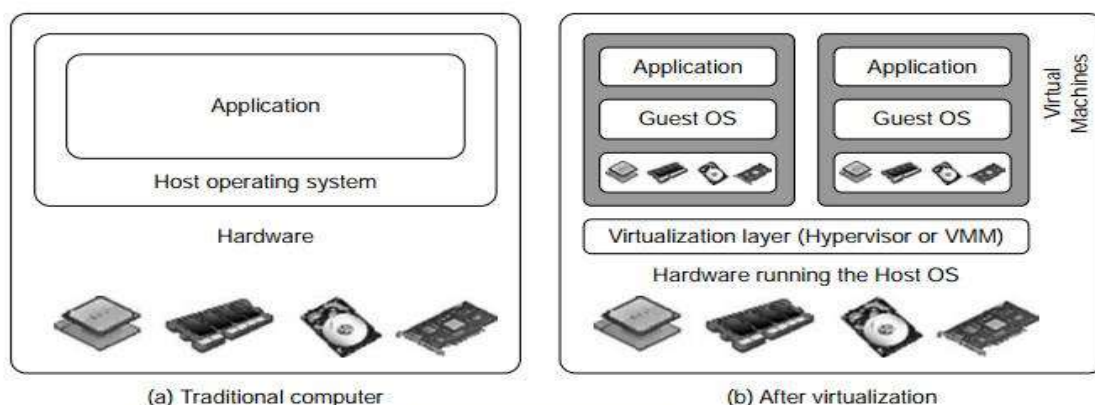


FIGURE 3.1

The architecture of a computer system before and after virtualization, where VMM stands for virtual machine monitor.

The main function of the software layer for virtualization is to virtualize the physical hardware of a host machine into virtual resources to be used by the VMs, exclusively. The virtualization software creates the abstraction of VMs by interposing a virtualization layer at various levels of a computer system. Common virtualization layers include the instruction set architecture (ISA) level, hardware level, operating system level, library support level, and application level (see Figure 3.2).

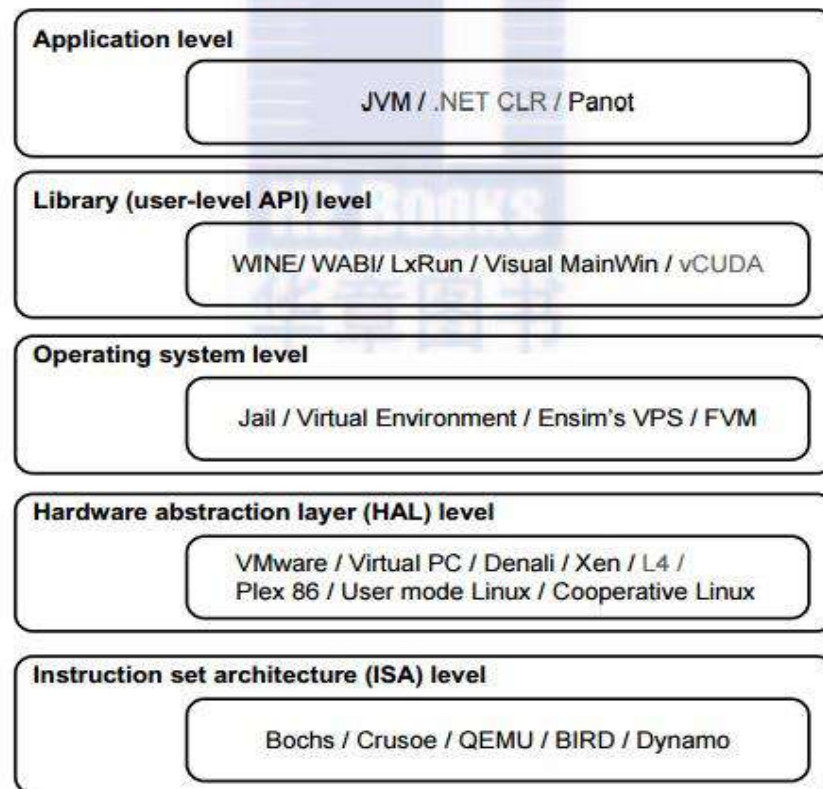


FIGURE 3.2

Virtualization ranging from hardware to applications in five abstraction levels.

1.1 Instruction Set Architecture Level

At the ISA level, virtualization is performed by emulating a given ISA by the ISA of the host machine. For example, MIPS (Microprocessor without Interlocked Pipe Stages) binary code can run on an x86-based host machine with the help of ISA emulation. With this approach, it is possible to run a large amount of legacy binary code written for various processors on any given new hardware host machine. Instruction set emulation leads to virtual ISAs created on any hardware machine.

The basic emulation method is through code interpretation. An interpreter program interprets the source instructions to target instructions one by one. One source instruction may require tens or hundreds of native target instructions to perform its function. Obviously, this process is relatively slow. For better performance, dynamic binary translation is desired. This approach translates basic blocks of dynamic source instructions to target instructions. The basic blocks can also be extended to program traces or super blocks to increase translation efficiency. Instruction set emulation requires binary translation and optimization. A virtual instruction set architecture (V-ISA) thus requires adding a processor-specific software translation layer to the compiler.

1.2 Hardware Abstraction Level

Hardware-level virtualization is performed right on top of the bare hardware. On the one hand, this approach generates a virtual hardware environment for a VM. On the other hand, the process manages the underlying hardware through virtualization. The idea is to virtualize a computer's resources, such as its processors, memory, and I/O devices. The intention is to upgrade the hardware utilization rate by multiple users concurrently. The idea was implemented in the IBM VM/370 in the 1960s. More recently, the Xen hypervisor has been applied to virtualize x86-based machines to run Linux or other guest OS applications.

1.3 Operating System Level

This refers to an abstraction layer between traditional OS and user applications. OS-level virtualization creates isolated **containers** on a single physical server and the OS instances to utilize the hardware and software in data centers. The containers behave like real servers. OS-level virtualization is commonly used in creating virtual hosting environments to allocate hardware resources among a large number of mutually distrusting users. It is also used, to a lesser extent, in consolidating server hardware by moving services on separate hosts into containers or VMs on one server.

1.4 Library Support Level

Most applications use APIs exported by user-level libraries rather than using lengthy system calls by the OS. Since most systems provide well-documented APIs, such an interface becomes another candidate for virtualization. Virtualization with library interfaces is possible by controlling the communication link between applications and the rest of a system through API hooks. The software tool WINE has implemented this approach to support Windows applications on top of UNIX hosts. Another example is the vCUDA which allows applications executing within VMs to leverage GPU hardware acceleration.

1.5 User-Application Level

Virtualization at the application level virtualizes an application as a VM. On a traditional OS, an application often runs as a process. Therefore, **application-level** virtualization is also known as **process-level** virtualization. The most popular approach is to deploy high level language (HLL)

VMs. In this scenario, the virtualization layer sits as an application program on top of the operating system, and the layer exports an abstraction of a VM that can run programs written and compiled to a particular abstract machine definition. Any program written in the HLL and compiled for this VM will be able to run on it. The Microsoft .NET CLR and Java Virtual Machine (JVM) are two good examples of this class of VM.

Other forms of application-level virtualization are known as **application isolation**, **application sandboxing**, or **application streaming**. The process involves wrapping the application in a layer that is isolated from the host OS and other applications. The result is an application that is much easier to distribute and remove from user workstations. An example is the LANDesk application virtualization platform which deploys software applications as self-contained, executable

files in an isolated environment without requiring installation, system modifications, or elevated security privileges.

1.6 Relative Merits of Different Approaches

Table 3.1 compares the relative merits of implementing virtualization at various levels. The column headings correspond to four technical merits. “Higher Performance” and “Application Flexibility” are self-explanatory. “Implementation Complexity” implies the cost to implement that particular virtualization level. “Application Isolation” refers to the effort required to isolate resources committed to different VMs. Each row corresponds to a particular level of virtualization.

The number of X’s in the table cells reflects the advantage points of each implementation level. Five X’s implies the best case and one X implies the worst case. Overall, hardware and OS support will yield the highest performance. However, the hardware and application levels are also the most expensive to implement. User isolation is the most difficult to achieve. ISA implementation offers the best application flexibility.

2. VMM Design Requirements and Providers

As mentioned earlier, hardware-level virtualization inserts a layer between real hardware and traditional operating systems. This layer is commonly called the Virtual Machine Monitor (VMM) and it manages the hardware resources of a computing system.

Table 3.1 Relative Merits of Virtualization at Various Levels (More “X”’s Means Higher Merit, with a Maximum of 5 X’s)

Level of Implementation	Higher Performance	Application Flexibility	Implementation Complexity	Application Isolation
ISA	X	XXXXX	XXX	XXX
Hardware-level virtualization	XXXXX	XXX	XXXXX	XXXX
OS-level virtualization	XXXXX	XX	XXX	XX
Runtime library support	XXX	XX	XX	XX
User application level	XX	XX	XXXXX	XXXXX

Each time programs access the hardware the VMM captures the process. In this sense, the VMM acts as a traditional OS. One hardware component, such as the CPU, can be virtualized as several virtual copies. Therefore, several traditional operating systems which are the same or different can sit on the same set of hardware simultaneously.

There are three requirements for a VMM. First, a VMM should provide an environment for programs which is essentially identical to the original machine. Second, programs run in this environment should show, at worst, only minor decreases in speed. Third, a VMM should be in complete control of the system resources. Any program run under a VMM should exhibit a function identical to that which it runs on the original machine directly. Two possible exceptions in terms of differences are permitted with this requirement: differences caused by the availability of system resources and differences caused by timing dependencies. The former arises when more than one VM is running on the same machine.

The hardware resource requirements, such as memory, of each VM are reduced, but the sum of them is greater than that of the real machine installed. The latter qualification is required because of the

intervening level of software and the effect of any other VMs concurrently existing on the same hardware. Obviously, these two differences pertain to performance, while the function a VMM provides stays the same as that of a real machine. However, the identical environment requirement excludes the behavior of the usual time-sharing operating system from being classed as a VMM.

A VMM should demonstrate efficiency in using the VMs. Compared with a physical machine, no one prefers a VMM if its efficiency is too low. Traditional emulators and complete software interpreters (simulators) emulate each instruction by means of functions or macros. Such a method provides the most flexible solutions for VMMs. However, emulators or simulators are too slow to be used as real machines. To guarantee the efficiency of a VMM, a statistically dominant subset of the virtual processor's instructions needs to be executed directly by the real processor, with no software intervention by the VMM. Table 3.2 compares four hypervisors and VMMs that are in use today.

Complete control of these resources by a VMM includes the following aspects: (1) The VMM is responsible for allocating hardware resources for programs; (2) it is not possible for a program to access any resource not explicitly allocated to it; and (3) it is possible under certain circumstances for a VMM to regain control of resources already allocated. Not all processors satisfy these requirements for a VMM. A VMM is tightly related to the architectures of processors. It is difficult to

Provider and References	Host CPU	Host OS	Guest OS	Architecture
VMware Workstation [71]	x86, x86-64	Windows, Linux	Windows, Linux, Solaris, FreeBSD, Netware, OS/2, SCO, BeOS, Darwin	Full Virtualization
VMware ESX Server [71]	x86, x86-64	No host OS	The same as VMware Workstation	Para-Virtualization
Xen [7,13,42]	x86, x86-64, IA-64	NetBSD, Linux, Solaris	FreeBSD, NetBSD, Linux, Solaris, Windows XP and 2003 Server	Hypervisor
KVM [31]	x86, x86-64, IA-64, S390, PowerPC	Linux	Linux, Windows, FreeBSD, Solaris	Para-Virtualization

implement a VMM for some types of processors, such as the x86. Specific limitations include the inability to trap on some privileged instructions. If a processor is not designed to support virtualization primarily, it is necessary to modify the hardware to satisfy the three requirements for a VMM. This is known as hardware-assisted virtualization.

3. Virtualization Support at the OS Level

With the help of VM technology, a new computing mode known as cloud computing is emerging. Cloud computing is transforming the computing landscape by shifting the hardware and staffing costs of managing a computational center to third parties, just like banks. However, cloud computing has at least two challenges. The first is the ability to use a variable number of physical machines and VM instances depending on the needs of a problem. For example, a task may need only a single CPU during some

phases of execution but may need hundreds of CPUs at other times. The second challenge concerns the slow operation of instantiating new VMs. Currently, new VMs originate either as fresh boots or as replicates of a template VM, unaware of the current application state. Therefore, to better support cloud computing, a large amount of research and development should be done.

3.1 Why OS-Level Virtualization?

As mentioned earlier, it is slow to initialize a hardware-level VM because each VM creates its own image from scratch. In a cloud computing environment, perhaps thousands of VMs need to be initialized simultaneously. Besides slow operation, storing the VM images also becomes an issue. As a matter of fact, there is considerable repeated content among VM images. Moreover, full virtualization at the hardware level also has the disadvantages of slow performance and low density, and the need for para-virtualization to modify the guest OS. To reduce the performance overhead of hardware-level virtualization, even hardware modification is needed. OS-level virtualization provides a feasible solution for these hardware-level virtualization issues.

Operating system virtualization inserts a virtualization layer inside an operating system to partition a machine's physical resources. It enables multiple isolated VMs within a single operating system kernel. This kind of VM is often called a virtual execution environment (VE), Virtual Private System (VPS), or simply container. From the user's point of view, VEs look like real servers. This means a VE has its own set of processes, file system, user accounts, network interfaces with IP addresses, routing tables, firewall rules, and other personal settings. Although VEs can be customized for different people, they share the same operating system kernel. Therefore, OS-level virtualization is also called single-OS image virtualization. Figure 3.3 illustrates operating system virtualization from the point of view of a machine stack.

3.2 Advantages of OS Extensions

Compared to hardware-level virtualization, the benefits of OS extensions are twofold: (1) VMs at the operating system level have minimal startup/shutdown costs, low resource requirements, and high scalability; and (2) for an OS-level VM, it is possible for a VM and its host environment to synchronize state changes when necessary. These benefits can be achieved via two mechanisms of OS-level virtualization: (1) All OS-level VMs on the same physical machine share a single operating system kernel; and (2) the virtualization layer can be designed in a way that allows processes in VMs to access as many resources of the host machine as possible, but never to modify them. In cloud computing, the first and second benefits can be used to overcome the defects of slow initialization of VMs at the hardware level, and being unaware of the current application state, respectively.

3.3 Disadvantages of OS Extensions

The main disadvantage of OS extensions is that all the VMs at operating system level on a single container must have the same kind of guest operating system. That is, although different OS-level VMs may have different operating system distributions, they must pertain to the same operating system family. For example, a Windows distribution such as Windows XP cannot run on a Linux-based

container. However, users of cloud computing have various preferences. Some prefer Windows and others prefer Linux or other operating systems. Therefore, there is a challenge for OS-level virtualization in such cases.

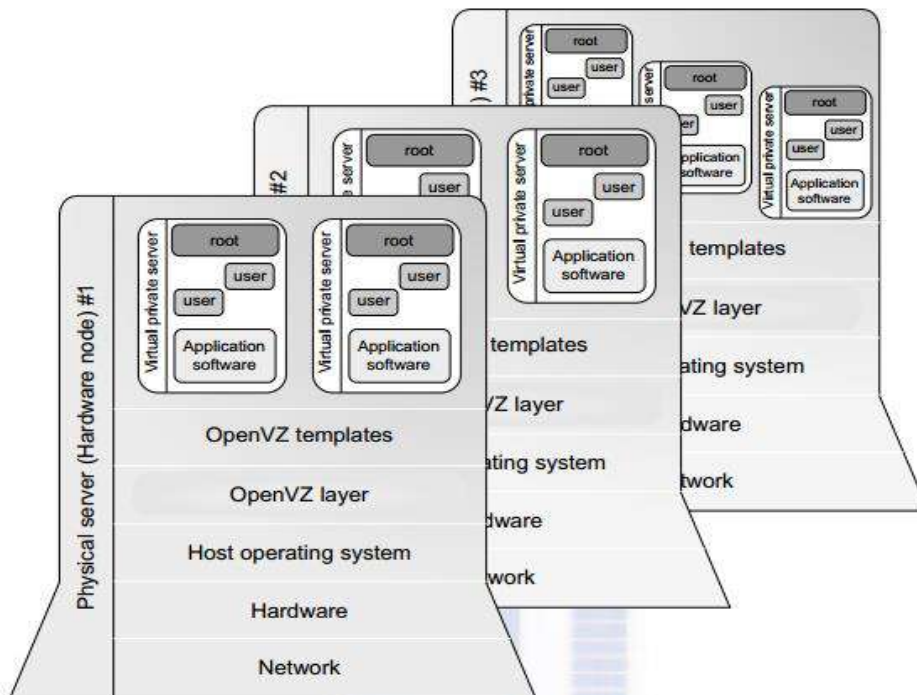


FIGURE 3.3

The OpenVZ virtualization layer inside the host OS, which provides some OS images to create VMs quickly.

Figure 3.3 illustrates the concept of OS-level virtualization. The virtualization layer is inserted inside the OS to partition the hardware resources for multiple VMs to run their applications in multiple virtual environments. To implement OS-level virtualization, isolated execution environments (VMs) should be created based on a single OS kernel. Furthermore, the access requests from a VM need to be redirected to the VM's local resource partition on the physical machine. For example, the `chroot` command in a UNIX system can create several virtual root directories within a host OS. These virtual root directories are the root directories of all VMs created.

There are two ways to implement virtual root directories: duplicating common resources to each VM partition; or sharing most resources with the host environment and only creating private resource copies on the VM on demand. The first way incurs significant resource costs and overhead on a physical machine. This issue neutralizes the benefits of OS-level virtualization, compared with hardware-assisted virtualization. Therefore, OS-level virtualization is often a second choice.

3.4 Virtualization on Linux or Windows Platforms

By far, most reported OS-level virtualization systems are Linux-based. Virtualization support on the Windows-based platform is still in the research stage. The Linux kernel offers an abstraction layer to allow software processes to work with and operate on resources without knowing the hardware details. New hardware may need a new Linux kernel to support. Therefore, different Linux platforms use patched kernels to provide special support for extended functionality.

However, most Linux platforms are not tied to a special kernel. In such a case, a host can run several VMs simultaneously on the same hardware. Table 3.3 summarizes several examples of OS-level virtualization tools that have been developed in recent years. Two OS tools (Linux vServer and OpenVZ) support Linux platforms to run other platform-based applications through virtualization. These two OS-level tools are illustrated in Example 3.1. The third tool, FVM, is an attempt specifically developed for virtualization on the Windows NT platform.

Example 3.1 Virtualization Support for the Linux Platform

OpenVZ is an OS-level tool designed to support Linux platforms to create virtual environments for running VMs under different guest OSes. OpenVZ is an open source container-based virtualization solution built on Linux. To support virtualization and isolation of various subsystems, limited resource management, and checkpointing, OpenVZ modifies the Linux kernel. The overall picture of the OpenVZ system is illustrated in Figure 3.3. Several VPSes can run simultaneously on a physical machine. These VPSes look like normal

Table 3.3 Virtualization Support for Linux and Windows NT Platforms

Table 3.3 Virtualization Support for Linux and Windows NT Platforms	
Virtualization Support and Source of Information	Brief Introduction on Functionality and Application Platforms
Linux vServer for Linux platforms (http://linux-vserver.org/)	Extends Linux kernels to implement a security mechanism to help build VMs by setting resource limits and file attributes and changing the root environment for VM isolation
OpenVZ for Linux platforms [65]; http://ftp.openvz.org/doc/OpenVZ-Users-Guide.pdf	Supports virtualization by creating <i>virtual private servers</i> (VPSes); the VPS has its own files, users, process tree, and virtual devices, which can be isolated from other VPSes, and checkpointing and live migration are supported
FVM (Feather-Weight Virtual Machines) for virtualizing the Windows NT platforms [78])	Uses system call interfaces to create VMs at the NT kernel space; multiple VMs are supported by virtualized namespace and copy-on-write

Linux servers. Each VPS has its own files, users and groups, process tree, virtual network, virtual devices, and IPC through semaphores and messages.

The resource management subsystem of OpenVZ consists of three components: two-level disk allocation, a two-level CPU scheduler, and a resource controller. The amount of disk space a VM can use is set by the OpenVZ server administrator. This is the first level of disk allocation. Each VM acts as a standard Linux system. Hence, the VM administrator is responsible for allocating disk space for each user and group. This is the second-level disk quota. The first-level CPU scheduler of OpenVZ decides which VM to give the time slice to, taking into account the virtual CPU priority and limit settings.

The second-level CPU scheduler is the same as that of Linux. OpenVZ has a set of about 20 parameters which are carefully chosen to cover all aspects of VM operation. Therefore, the resources that a VM can use are well controlled. OpenVZ also supports checkpointing and live migration. The complete state of a VM can quickly be saved to a disk file. This file can then be transferred to another physical machine and the VM can be restored there. It only takes a few seconds to complete the whole process. However, there is still a delay in processing because the established network connections are also migrated.

4. Middleware Support for Virtualization

Library-level virtualization is also known as user-level Application Binary Interface (ABI) or API emulation. This type of virtualization can create execution environments for running alien programs on a platform rather than creating a VM to run the entire operating system. API call interception and remapping are the key functions performed. This section provides an overview of several library-level virtualization systems: namely the Windows Application Binary Interface (WABI), lxrun, WINE, Visual MainWin, and vCUDA, which are summarized in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Middleware and Library Support for Virtualization	
Middleware or Runtime Library and References or Web Link	Brief Introduction and Application Platforms
WABI (http://docs.sun.com/app/docs/doc/802-6306)	Middleware that converts Windows system calls running on x86 PCs to Solaris system calls running on SPARC workstations
Lxrun (Linux Run) (http://www.ugcs.caltech.edu/~steven/lsxrun/)	A system call emulator that enables Linux applications written for x86 hosts to run on UNIX systems such as the SCO OpenServer
WINE (http://www.winehq.org/)	A library support system for virtualizing x86 processors to run Windows applications under Linux, FreeBSD, and Solaris
Visual MainWin (http://www.mainsoft.com/)	A compiler support system to develop Windows applications using Visual Studio to run on Solaris, Linux, and AIX hosts
vCUDA (Example 3.2) (IEEE IPDPS 2009 [57])	Virtualization support for using general-purpose GPUs to run data-intensive applications under a special guest OS

The WABI offers middleware to convert Windows system calls to Solaris system calls. Lxrun is really a system call emulator that enables Linux applications written for x86 hosts to run on UNIX systems. Similarly, Wine offers library support for virtualizing x86 processors to run Windows applications on UNIX hosts. Visual MainWin offers a compiler support system to develop Windows applications using Visual Studio to run on some UNIX hosts. The vCUDA is explained in Example 3.2 with a graphical illustration in Figure 3.4.

Example 3.2 The vCUDA for Virtualization of General-Purpose GPUs

CUDA is a programming model and library for general-purpose GPUs. It leverages the high performance of GPUs to run compute-intensive applications on host operating systems. However, it is difficult to run CUDA applications on hardware-level VMs directly. vCUDA virtualizes the CUDA library and can be installed on guest OSes. When CUDA applications run on a guest OS and issue a call to the CUDA API, vCUDA intercepts the call and redirects

it to the CUDA API running on the host OS. Figure 3.4 shows the basic concept of the vCUDA architecture [57].

The vCUDA employs a client-server model to implement CUDA virtualization. It consists of three user space components: the vCUDA library, a virtual GPU in the guest OS (which acts as a client), and the vCUDA stub in the host OS (which acts as a server). The vCUDA library resides in the guest OS as a substitute for the standard CUDA library. It is responsible for intercepting and redirecting API calls from the client to the stub. Besides these tasks, vCUDA also creates vGPUs and manages them.

The functionality of a vGPU is threefold: It abstracts the GPU structure and gives applications a uni-form view of the underlying hardware; when a CUDA application in the guest OS allocates a device's mem-ory the vGPU can return a local virtual address to the application and notify the remote stub to allocate the real device memory, and the vGPU is responsible for storing the CUDA API flow. The vCUDA stub receives

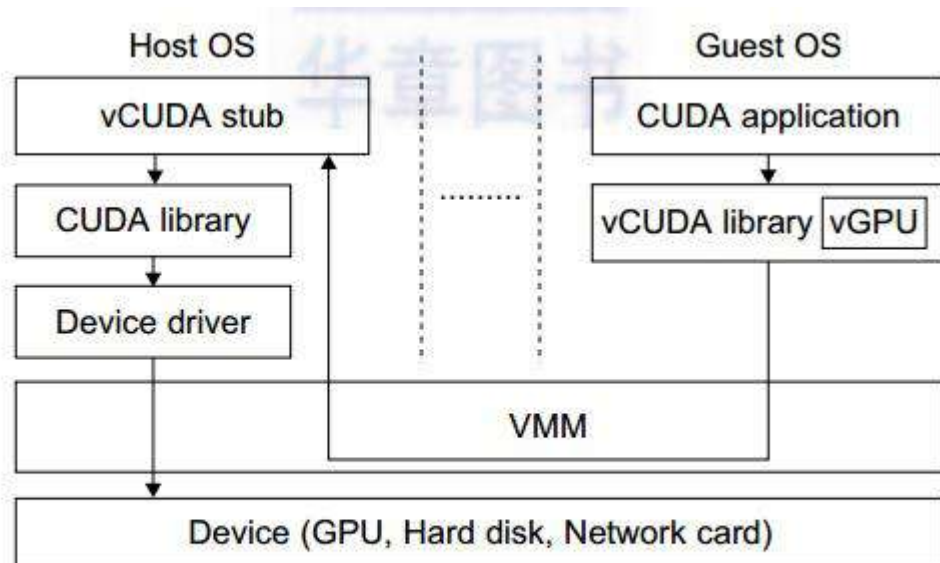


FIGURE 3.4

Basic concept of the vCUDA architecture.

and interprets remote requests and creates a corresponding execution context for the API calls from the guest OS, then returns the results to the guest OS. The vCUDA stub also manages actual physical resource allocation.

VIRTUALIZATION STRUCTURES/TOOLS AND MECHANISMS

In general, there are three typical classes of VM architecture. Figure 3.1 showed the architectures of a machine before and after virtualization. Before virtualization, the operating system manages the hardware. After virtualization, a virtualization layer is inserted between the hardware and the operating system. In such a case, the virtualization layer is responsible for converting portions of the real hardware into virtual hardware. Therefore, different operating systems such as Linux and Windows can run on the same physical machine, simultaneously. Depending on the position of the virtualization layer, there

are several classes of VM architectures, namely the hypervisor architecture, para virtualization, and host-based virtualization. The hypervisor is also known as the VMM (Virtual Machine Monitor). They both perform the same virtualization operations.

1. Hypervisor and Xen Architecture

The hypervisor supports hardware-level virtualization (see Figure 3.1(b)) on bare metal devices like CPU, memory, disk and network interfaces. The hypervisor software sits directly between the physical hardware and its OS. This virtualization layer is referred to as either the VMM or the hypervisor. The hypervisor provides hypercalls for the guest OSes and applications. Depending on the functionality, a hypervisor can assume a micro-kernel architecture like the Microsoft Hyper-V. Or it can assume a monolithic hypervisor architecture like the VMware ESX for server virtualization.

A micro-kernel hypervisor includes only the basic and unchanging functions (such as physical memory management and processor scheduling). The device drivers and other changeable components are outside the hypervisor. A monolithic hypervisor implements all the aforementioned functions, including those of the device drivers. Therefore, the size of the hypervisor code of a micro-kernel hypervisor is smaller than that of a monolithic hypervisor. Essentially, a hypervisor must be able to convert physical devices into virtual resources dedicated for the deployed VM to use.

1.1 The Xen Architecture

Xen is an open source hypervisor program developed by Cambridge University. Xen is a micro-kernel hypervisor, which separates the policy from the mechanism. The Xen hypervisor implements all the mechanisms, leaving the policy to be handled by Domain 0, as shown in Figure 3.5. Xen does not include any device drivers natively [7]. It just provides a mechanism by which a guest OS can have direct access to the physical devices. As a result, the size of the Xen hypervisor is kept rather small. Xen provides a virtual environment located between the hardware and the OS. A number of vendors are in the process of developing commercial Xen hypervisors, among them are Citrix XenServer [62] and Oracle VM [42].

The core components of a Xen system are the hypervisor, kernel, and applications. The organization of the three components is important. Like other virtualization systems, many guest OSes can run on top of the hypervisor. However, not all guest OSes are created equal, and one in particular controls the others.

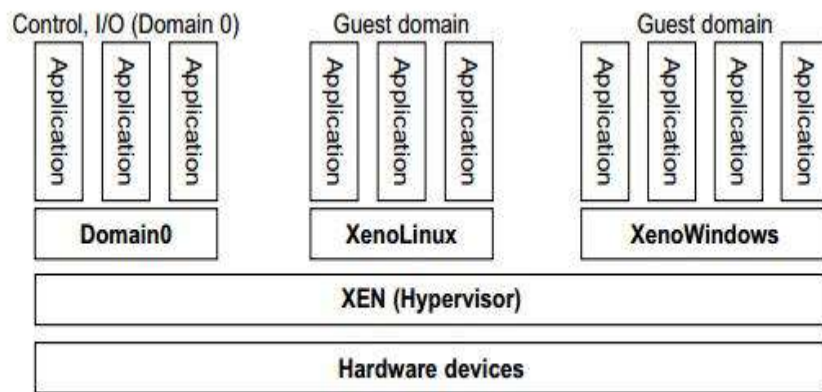


FIGURE 3.5

The Xen architecture's special domain 0 for control and I/O, and several guest domains for user applications.

The guest OS, which has control ability, is called Domain 0, and the others are called Domain U. Domain 0 is a privileged guest OS of Xen. It is first loaded when Xen boots without any file system drivers being available. Domain 0 is designed to access hardware directly and manage devices. Therefore, one of the responsibilities of Domain 0 is to allocate and map hardware resources for the guest domains (the Domain U domains).

For example, Xen is based on Linux and its security level is C2. Its management VM is named Domain 0, which has the privilege to manage other VMs implemented on the same host. If Domain 0 is compromised, the hacker can control the entire system. So, in the VM system, security policies are needed to improve the security of Domain 0. Domain 0, behaving as a VMM, allows users to create, copy, save, read, modify, share, migrate, and roll back VMs as easily as manipulating a file, which flexibly provides tremendous benefits for users. Unfortunately, it also brings a series of security problems during the software life cycle and data lifetime.

Traditionally, a machine's lifetime can be envisioned as a straight line where the current state of the machine is a point that progresses monotonically as the software executes. During this time, configuration changes are made, software is installed, and patches are applied. In such an environment, the VM state is akin to a tree: At any point, execution can go into N different branches where multiple instances of a VM can exist at any point in this tree at any given time. VMs are allowed to roll back to previous states in their execution (e.g., to fix configuration errors) or rerun from the same point many times (e.g., as a means of distributing dynamic content or circulating a "live" system image).

2. Binary Translation with Full Virtualization

Depending on implementation technologies, hardware virtualization can be classified into two categories: full virtualization and host-based virtualization. Full virtualization does not need to modify the host OS. It relies on binary translation to trap and to virtualize the execution of certain sensitive, nonvirtualizable instructions. The guest OSes and their applications consist of noncritical and critical instructions. In a host-based system, both a host OS and a guest OS are used. A virtualization software layer is built between the host OS and guest OS. These two classes of VM architecture are introduced next.

2.1 Full Virtualization

With full virtualization, noncritical instructions run on the hardware directly while critical instructions are discovered and replaced with traps into the VMM to be emulated by software. Both the hypervisor and VMM approaches are considered full virtualization. Why are only critical instructions trapped into the VMM? This is because binary translation can incur a large performance overhead. Noncritical instructions do not control hardware or threaten the security of the system, but critical instructions do. Therefore, running noncritical instructions on hardware not only can promote efficiency, but also can ensure system security.

2.2 Binary Translation of Guest OS Requests Using a VMM

This approach was implemented by VMware and many other software companies. As shown in Figure 3.6, VMware puts the VMM at Ring 0 and the guest OS at Ring 1. The VMM scans the instruction stream and identifies the privileged, control- and behavior-sensitive instructions. When these instructions are identified, they are trapped into the VMM, which emulates the behavior of these instructions. The method used in this emulation is called binary translation. Therefore, full virtualization combines binary translation and direct execution. The guest OS is completely decoupled from the underlying hardware. Consequently, the guest OS is unaware that it is being virtualized.

The performance of full virtualization may not be ideal, because it involves binary translation which is rather time-consuming. In particular, the full virtualization of I/O-intensive applications is a really a big challenge. Binary translation employs a code cache to store translated hot instructions to improve performance, but it increases the cost of memory usage. At the time of this writing, the performance of full virtualization on the x86 architecture is typically 80 percent to 97 percent that of the host machine.

2.3 Host-Based Virtualization

An alternative VM architecture is to install a virtualization layer on top of the host OS. This host OS is still responsible for managing the hardware. The guest OSes are installed and run on top of the virtualization layer. Dedicated applications may run on the VMs. Certainly, some other applications

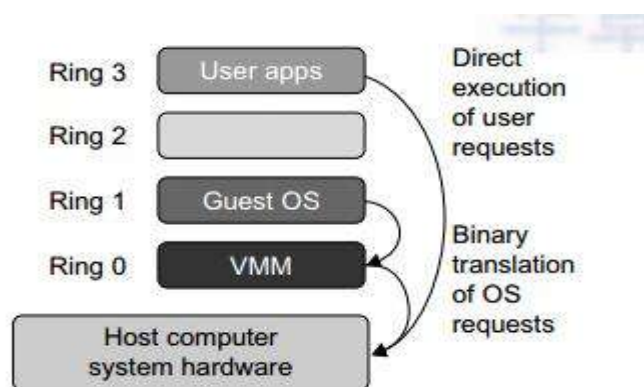


FIGURE 3.6

Indirect execution of complex instructions via binary translation of guest OS requests using the VMM plus direct execution of simple instructions on the same host.

can also run with the host OS directly. This host-based architecture has some distinct advantages, as enumerated next. First, the user can install this VM architecture without modifying the host OS. The virtualizing software can rely on the host OS to provide device drivers and other low-level services. This will simplify the VM design and ease its deployment.

Second, the host-based approach appeals to many host machine configurations. Compared to the hypervisor/VMM architecture, the performance of the host-based architecture may also be low. When an application requests hardware access, it involves four layers of mapping which downgrades performance significantly. When the ISA of a guest OS is different from the ISA of the underlying hardware, binary translation must be adopted. Although the host-based architecture has flexibility, the performance is too low to be useful in practice.

3. Para-Virtualization with Compiler Support

Para-virtualization needs to modify the guest operating systems. A para-virtualized VM provides special APIs requiring substantial OS modifications in user applications. Performance degradation is a critical issue of a virtualized system. No one wants to use a VM if it is much slower than using a physical machine. The virtualization layer can be inserted at different positions in a machine software stack. However, para-virtualization attempts to reduce the virtualization overhead, and thus improve performance by modifying only the guest OS kernel.

Figure 3.7 illustrates the concept of a paravirtualized VM architecture. The guest operating systems are para-virtualized. They are assisted by an intelligent compiler to replace the nonvirtualizable OS instructions by hypercalls as illustrated in Figure 3.8. The traditional x86 processor offers four instruction execution rings: Rings 0, 1, 2, and 3. the lower the ring number, the higher the privilege of instruction being executed. The OS is responsible for managing the hardware and the privileged instructions to execute at Ring 0, while user-level applications run at Ring 3. The best example of para-virtualization is the KVM to be described below.

3.1 Para-Virtualization Architecture

When the x86 processor is virtualized, a virtualization layer is inserted between the hardware and the OS. According to the x86 ring definition, the virtualization layer should also be installed at Ring 0. Different instructions at Ring 0 may cause some problems. In Figure 3.8, we show that para-virtualization replaces nonvirtualizable instructions with hypercalls that communicate directly with the hypervisor or VMM. However, when the guest OS kernel is modified for virtualization, it can no longer run on the hardware directly.

Although para-virtualization reduces the overhead, it has incurred other problems. First, its compatibility and portability may be in doubt, because it must support the unmodified OS as well. Second, the cost of maintaining para-virtualized OSes is high, because they may require deep OS kernel modifications. Finally, the performance advantage of para-virtualization varies greatly due to workload variations. Compared with full virtualization, para-virtualization is relatively easy and more practical. The main problem in full virtualization is its low performance in binary translation. To speed up binary translation is difficult. Therefore, many virtualization products employ the para-virtualization architecture. The popular Xen, KVM, and VMware ESX are good examples.

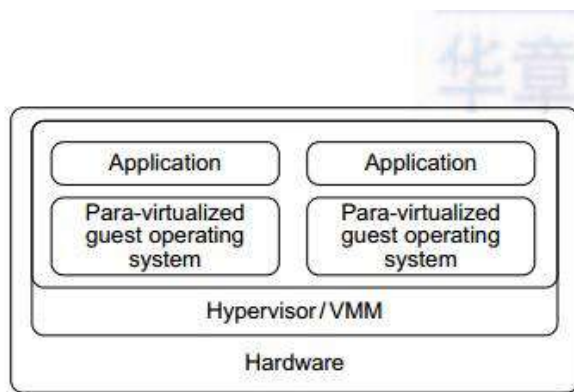


FIGURE 3.7

Para-virtualized VM architecture, which involves modifying the guest OS kernel to replace nonvirtualizable instructions with hypercalls for the hypervisor or the VMM to carry out the virtualization process (See Figure 3.8 for more details.)

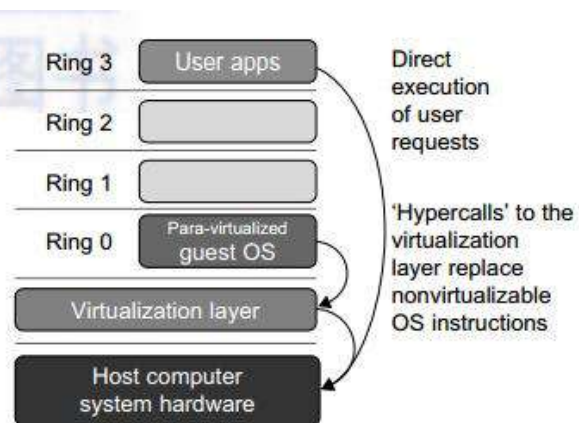


FIGURE 3.8

The use of a para-virtualized guest OS assisted by an intelligent compiler to replace nonvirtualizable OS instructions by hypercalls.

(Courtesy of VMWare [71])

3.2 KVM (Kernel-Based VM)

This is a Linux para-virtualization system—a part of the Linux version 2.6.20 kernel. Memory management and scheduling activities are carried out by the existing Linux kernel. The KVM does the rest, which makes it simpler than the hypervisor that controls the entire machine. KVM is a hardware-assisted para-virtualization tool, which improves performance and supports unmodified guest OSes such as Windows, Linux, Solaris, and other UNIX variants.

3.3 Para-Virtualization with Compiler Support

Unlike the full virtualization architecture which intercepts and emulates privileged and sensitive instructions at runtime, para-virtualization handles these instructions at compile time. The guest OS kernel is modified to replace the privileged and sensitive instructions with hypercalls to the hypervisor or VMM. Xen assumes such a para-virtualization architecture.

The guest OS running in a guest domain may run at Ring 1 instead of at Ring 0. This implies that the guest OS may not be able to execute some privileged and sensitive instructions. The privileged instructions are implemented by hypercalls to the hypervisor. After replacing the instructions with hypercalls, the modified guest OS emulates the behavior of the original guest OS. On an UNIX system, a system call involves an interrupt or service routine. The hypercalls apply a dedicated service routine in Xen.

Example 3.3 VMware ESX Server for Para-Virtualization

VMware pioneered the software market for virtualization. The company has developed virtualization tools for desktop systems and servers as well as virtual infrastructure for large data centers. ESX is a VMM or a hypervisor for bare-metal x86 symmetric multiprocessing (SMP) servers. It accesses hardware resources such as I/O directly and has complete resource management control. An ESX-enabled server consists of four components: a virtualization layer, a resource manager, hardware interface components, and a service console, as shown in Figure 3.9. To improve performance, the ESX server employs a para-

virtualization architecture in which the VM kernel interacts directly with the hardware without involving the host OS.

The VMM layer virtualizes the physical hardware resources such as CPU, memory, network and disk controllers, and human interface devices. Every VM has its own set of virtual hardware resources. The resource manager allocates CPU, memory disk, and network bandwidth and maps them to the virtual hardware resource set of each VM created. Hardware interface components are the device drivers and the

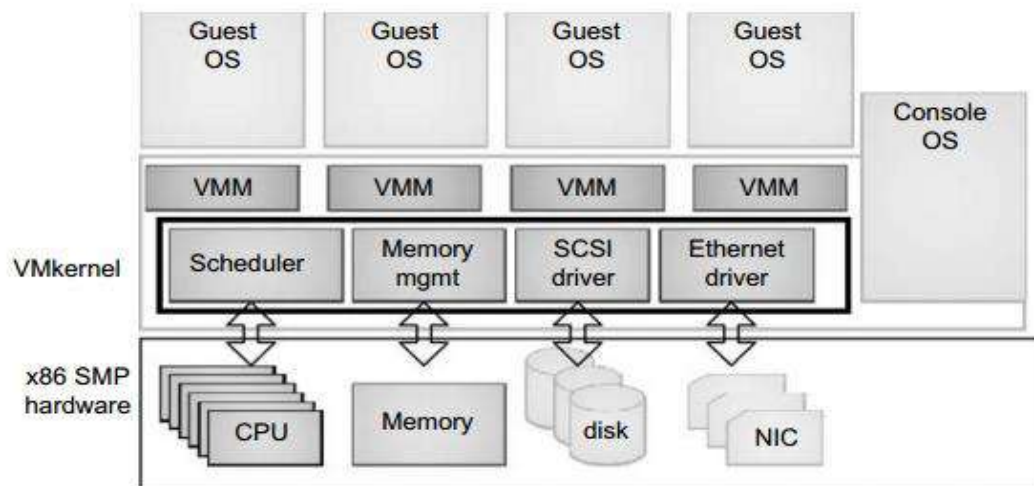


FIGURE 3.9

The VMware ESX server architecture using para-virtualization.

VMware ESX Server File System. The service console is responsible for booting the system, initiating the execution of the VMM and resource manager, and relinquishing control to those layers. It also facilitates the process for system administrators.

Hypervisor and Xen Architecture

The hypervisor supports hardware-level virtualization (see Figure 3.1(b)) on bare metal devices like CPU, memory, disk and network interfaces. The hypervisor software sits directly between the physical hardware and its OS. This virtualization layer is referred to as either the VMM or the hypervisor. The hypervisor provides hypercalls for the guest OSes and applications. Depending on the functionality, a hypervisor can assume a micro-kernel architecture like the Microsoft Hyper-V. Or it can assume a monolithic hypervisor architecture like the VMware ESX for server virtualization.

A micro-kernel hypervisor includes only the basic and unchanging functions (such as physical memory management and processor scheduling). The device drivers and other changeable components are outside the hypervisor. A monolithic hypervisor implements all the aforementioned functions, including those of the device drivers. Therefore, the size of the hypervisor code of a micro-kernel hypervisor is smaller than that of a monolithic hypervisor. Essentially, a hypervisor must be able to convert physical devices into virtual resources dedicated for the deployed VM to use.

The Xen Architecture

Xen is an open source hypervisor program developed by Cambridge University. Xen is a micro-kernel hypervisor, which separates the policy from the mechanism. The Xen hypervisor implements all the

mechanisms, leaving the policy to be handled by Domain 0, as shown in Figure 3.5. Xen does not include any device drivers natively. It just provides a mechanism by which a guest OS can have direct access to the physical devices. As a result, the size of the Xen hypervisor is kept rather small. Xen provides a virtual environment located between the hardware and the OS. A number of vendors are in the process of developing commercial Xen hypervisors, among them are Citrix XenServer and Oracle VM.

The core components of a Xen system are the hypervisor, kernel, and applications. The organization of the three components is important. Like other virtualization systems, many guest OSes can run on top of the hypervisor. However, not all guest OSes are created equal, and one in particular controls the others. The guest OS, which has control ability, is called Domain 0, and the others are called Domain U. Domain 0 is a privileged guest OS of Xen. It is first loaded when Xen boots without any file system drivers being available. Domain 0 is designed to access hardware directly and manage devices. Therefore, one of the responsibilities of Domain 0 is to allocate and map hardware resources for the guest domains (the Domain U domains).

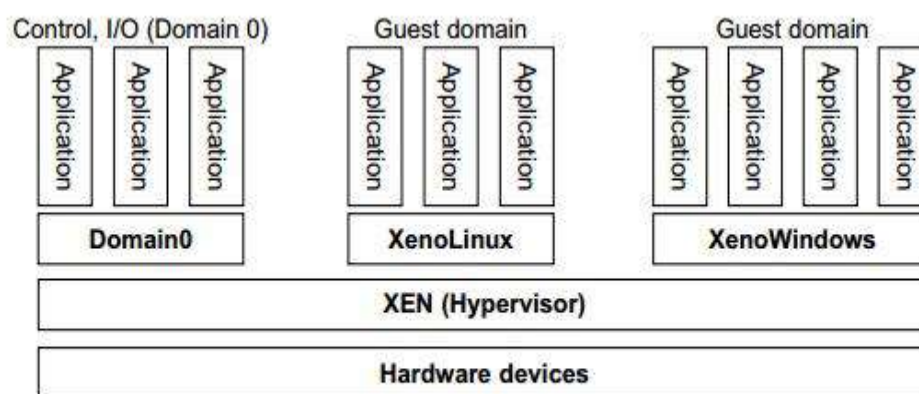


FIGURE 3.5

The Xen architecture's special domain 0 for control and I/O, and several guest domains for user applications.

For example, Xen is based on Linux and its security level is C2. Its management VM is named Domain 0, which has the privilege to manage other VMs implemented on the same host. If Domain 0 is compromised, the hacker can control the entire system. So, in the VM system, security policies are needed to improve the security of Domain 0. Domain 0, behaving as a VMM, allows users to create, copy, save, read, modify, share, migrate, and roll back VMs as easily as manipulating a file, which flexibly provides tremendous benefits for users. Unfortunately, it also brings a series of security problems during the software life cycle and data lifetime.

Traditionally, a machine's lifetime can be envisioned as a straight line where the current state of the machine is a point that progresses monotonically as the software executes. During this time, configuration changes are made, software is installed, and patches are applied. In such an environment, the VM state is akin to a tree: At any point, execution can go into N different branches where multiple instances of a VM can exist at any point in this tree at any given time. VMs are allowed to roll back to previous states in their execution (e.g., to fix configuration errors) or rerun from the same point many times (e.g., as a means of distributing dynamic content or circulating a "live" system image).

Binary Translation with Full Virtualization

Depending on implementation technologies, hardware virtualization can be classified into two categories: full virtualization and host-based virtualization. Full virtualization does not need to modify the host OS. It relies on binary translation to trap and to virtualize the execution of certain

sensitive, nonvirtualizable instructions. The guest OSes and their applications consist of noncritical and critical instructions. In a host-based system, both a host OS and a guest OS are used. A virtualization software layer is built between the host OS and guest OS. These two classes of VM architecture are introduced next.

1. Full Virtualization

With full virtualization, noncritical instructions run on the hardware directly while critical instructions are discovered and replaced with traps into the VMM to be emulated by software. Both the hypervisor and VMM approaches are considered full virtualization. Why are only critical instructions trapped into the VMM? This is because binary translation can incur a large performance overhead. Noncritical instructions do not control hardware or threaten the security of the system, but critical instructions do. Therefore, running noncritical instructions on hardware not only can promote efficiency, but also can ensure system security.

2. Binary Translation of Guest OS Requests Using a VMM

This approach was implemented by VMware and many other software companies. As shown in Figure 3.6, VMware puts the VMM at Ring 0 and the guest OS at Ring 1. The VMM scans the instruction stream and identifies the privileged, control- and behavior-sensitive instructions. When these instructions are identified, they are trapped into the VMM, which emulates the behavior of these instructions. The method used in this emulation is called binary translation. Therefore, full virtualization combines binary translation and direct execution. The guest OS is completely decoupled from the underlying hardware. Consequently, the guest OS is unaware that it is being virtualized.

The performance of full virtualization may not be ideal, because it involves binary translation which is rather time-consuming. In particular, the full virtualization of I/O-intensive applications is a really a big challenge. Binary translation employs a code cache to store translated hot instructions to improve performance, but it increases the cost of memory usage. At the time of this writing, the performance of full virtualization on the x86 architecture is typically 80 percent to 97 percent that of the host machine.

3. Host-Based Virtualization

An alternative VM architecture is to install a virtualization layer on top of the host OS. This host OS is still responsible for managing the hardware. The guest OSes are installed and run on top of the virtualization layer. Dedicated applications may run on the VMs. Certainly, some other applications can also run with the host OS directly. This host-based architecture has some distinct advantages, as enumerated next. First, the user can install this VM architecture without modifying the host OS. The virtualizing software can rely on the host OS to provide device drivers and other low-level services. This will simplify the VM design and ease its deployment.

Second, the host-based approach appeals to many host machine configurations. Compared to the hypervisor/VMM architecture, the performance of the host-based architecture may also be low. When an application requests hardware access, it involves four layers of mapping which downgrades performance significantly. When the ISA of a guest OS is different from the ISA of the underlying hardware, binary translation must be adopted. Although the host-based architecture has flexibility, the performance is too low to be useful in practice.

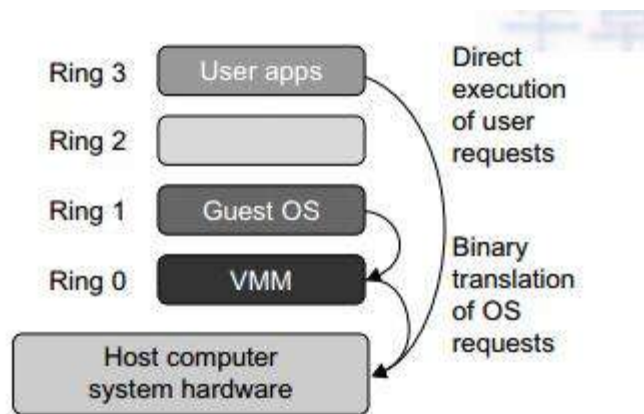


FIGURE 3.6

Indirect execution of complex instructions via binary translation of guest OS requests using the VMM plus direct execution of simple instructions on the same host.

Para-Virtualization with Compiler Support

Para-virtualization needs to modify the guest operating systems. A para-virtualized VM provides special APIs requiring substantial OS modifications in user applications. Performance degradation is a critical issue of a virtualized system. No one wants to use a VM if it is much slower than using a physical machine. The virtualization layer can be inserted at different positions in a machine software stack. However, para-virtualization attempts to reduce the virtualization overhead, and thus improve performance by modifying only the guest OS kernel.

Figure 3.7 illustrates the concept of a paravirtualized VM architecture. The guest operating systems are para-virtualized. They are assisted by an intelligent compiler to replace the nonvirtualizable OS instructions by hypercalls as illustrated in Figure 3.8. The traditional x86 processor offers four instruction execution rings: Rings 0, 1, 2, and 3. The lower the ring number, the higher the privilege of instruction being executed. The OS is responsible for managing the hardware and the privileged instructions to execute at Ring 0, while user-level applications run at Ring 3. The best example of para-virtualization is the KVM to be described below.

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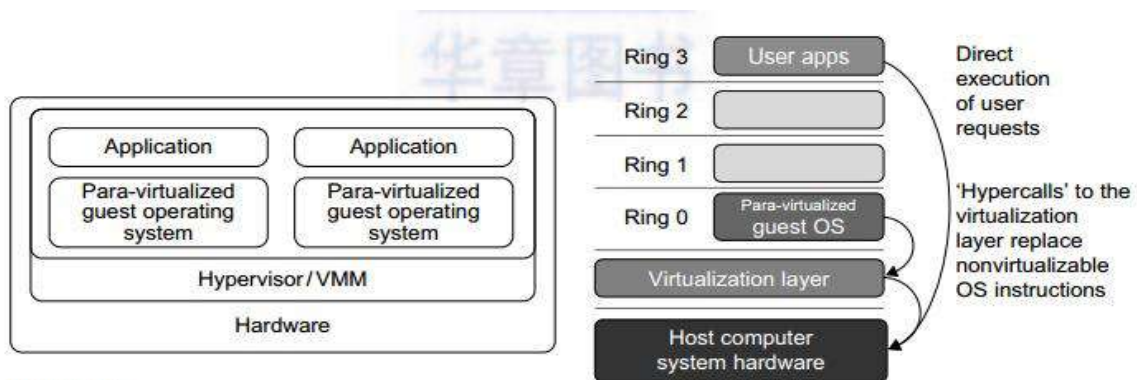


FIGURE 3.7

Para-virtualized VM architecture, which involves modifying the guest OS kernel to replace nonvirtualizable instructions with hypercalls for the hypervisor or the VMM to carry out the virtualization process (See Figure 3.8 for more details.)

FIGURE 3.8

The use of a para-virtualized guest OS assisted by an intelligent compiler to replace nonvirtualizable OS instructions by hypercalls.

(Courtesy of VMware [71])

2. KVM (Kernel-Based VM)

This is a Linux para-virtualization system—a part of the Linux version 2.6.20 kernel. Memory management and scheduling activities are carried out by the existing Linux kernel. The KVM does the rest, which makes it simpler than the hypervisor that controls the entire machine. KVM is a hardware-assisted para-virtualization tool, which improves performance and supports unmodified guest OSes such as Windows, Linux, Solaris, and other UNIX variants.

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VIRTUALIZATION OF CPU, MEMORY, AND I/O DEVICES

To support virtualization, processors such as the x86 employ a special running mode and instructions, known as hardware-assisted virtualization. In this way, the VMM and guest OS run in different modes and all sensitive instructions of the guest OS and its applications are trapped in the VMM. To save processor states, mode switching is completed by hardware. For the x86 architecture, Intel and AMD have proprietary technologies for hardware-assisted virtualization.

1. Hardware Support for Virtualization

Modern operating systems and processors permit multiple processes to run simultaneously. If there is no protection mechanism in a processor, all instructions from different processes will access the hardware directly and cause a system crash. Therefore, all processors have at least two modes, user mode and supervisor mode, to ensure controlled access of critical hardware. Instructions running in supervisor mode are called privileged instructions. Other instructions are unprivileged instructions. In a virtualized environment, it is more difficult to make OSES and applications run correctly because there are more layers in the machine stack. Example 3.4 discusses Intel's hardware support approach.

At the time of this writing, many hardware virtualization products were available. The VMware Workstation is a VM software suite for x86 and x86-64 computers. This software suite allows users to set up multiple x86 and x86-64 virtual computers and to use one or more of these VMs simultaneously with the host operating system. The VMware Workstation assumes the host-based virtualization. Xen is a hypervisor for use in IA-32, x86-64, Itanium, and PowerPC 970 hosts. Actually, Xen modifies Linux as the lowest and most privileged layer, or a hypervisor.

One or more guest OS can run on top of the hypervisor. KVM (Kernel-based Virtual Machine) is a Linux kernel virtualization infrastructure. KVM can support hardware-assisted virtualization and paravirtualization by using the Intel VT-x or AMD-v and VirtIO framework, respectively. The VirtIO framework includes a paravirtual Ethernet card, a disk I/O controller, a balloon device for adjusting guest memory usage, and a VGA graphics interface using VMware drivers.

Example 3.4 Hardware Support for Virtualization in the Intel x86 Processor

Since software-based virtualization techniques are complicated and incur performance overhead, Intel provides a hardware-assist technique to make virtualization easy and improve performance. Figure 3.10 provides an overview of Intel's full virtualization techniques. For processor virtualization, Intel offers the VT-x or VT-i technique. VT-x adds a privileged mode (VMX Root Mode) and some instructions to processors.

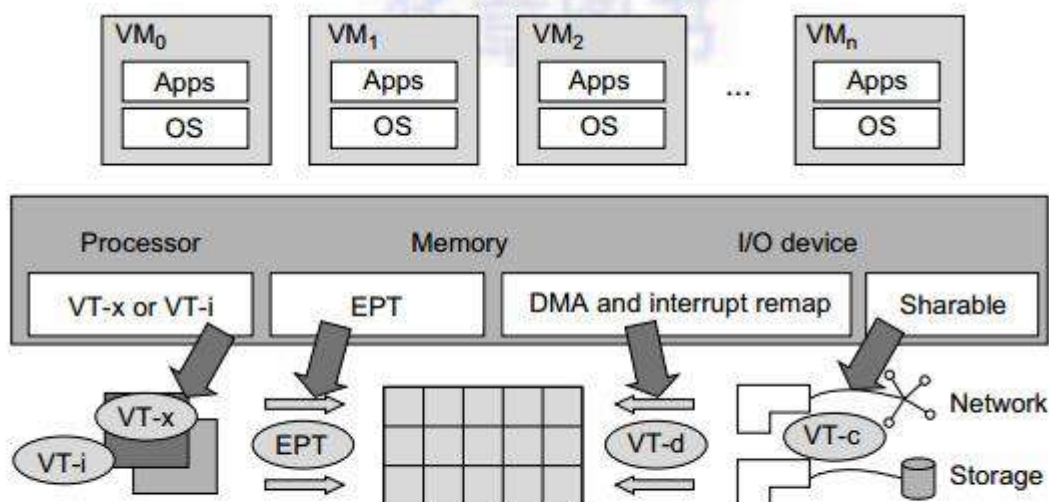


FIGURE 3.10

Intel hardware support for virtualization of processor, memory, and I/O devices.

This enhancement traps all sensitive instructions in the VMM automatically. For memory virtualization, Intel offers the EPT, which translates the virtual address to the machine's physical addresses to improve performance. For I/O virtualization, Intel implements VT-d and VT-c to support this.

2. CPU Virtualization

A VM is a duplicate of an existing computer system in which a majority of the VM instructions are executed on the host processor in native mode. Thus, unprivileged instructions of VMs run directly on the host machine for higher efficiency. Other critical instructions should be handled carefully for correctness and stability. The critical instructions are divided into three categories: **privileged instructions**, **control-sensitive instructions**, and **behavior-sensitive instructions**. Privileged instructions execute in a privileged mode and will be trapped if executed outside this mode. Control-sensitive instructions attempt to change the configuration of resources used. Behavior-sensitive instructions have different behaviors depending on the configuration of resources, including the load and store operations over the virtual memory.

A CPU architecture is virtualizable if it supports the ability to run the VM's privileged and unprivileged instructions in the CPU's user mode while the VMM runs in supervisor mode. When the privileged instructions including control- and behavior-sensitive instructions of a VM are executed, they are trapped in the VMM. In this case, the VMM acts as a unified mediator for hardware access from different VMs to guarantee the correctness and stability of the whole system. However, not all CPU architectures are virtualizable. RISC CPU architectures can be naturally virtualized because all control- and behavior-sensitive instructions are privileged instructions. On the contrary, x86 CPU architectures are not primarily designed to support virtualization. This is because about 10 sensitive instructions, such as **SGDT** and **SMSW**, are not privileged instructions. When these instructions execute in virtualization, they cannot be trapped in the VMM.

On a native UNIX-like system, a system call triggers the 80h interrupt and passes control to the OS kernel. The interrupt handler in the kernel is then invoked to process the system call. On a paravirtualization system such as Xen, a system call in the guest OS first triggers the 80h interrupt normally. Almost at the same time, the 82h interrupt in the hypervisor is triggered. Incidentally, control is passed on to the hypervisor as well. When the hypervisor completes its task for the guest OS system call, it passes control back to the guest OS kernel. Certainly, the guest OS kernel may also invoke the hypercall while it's running. Although paravirtualization of a CPU lets unmodified applications run in the VM, it causes a small performance penalty.

2.1 Hardware-Assisted CPU Virtualization

This technique attempts to simplify virtualization because full or paravirtualization is complicated. Intel and AMD add an additional mode called privilege mode level (some people call it Ring-1) to x86 processors. Therefore, operating systems can still run at Ring 0 and the hypervisor can run at Ring -1. All the privileged and sensitive instructions are trapped in the hypervisor automatically. This technique removes the difficulty of implementing binary translation of full virtualization. It also lets the operating system run in VMs without modification.

Example 3.5 Intel Hardware-Assisted CPU Virtualization

Although x86 processors are not virtualizable primarily, great effort is taken to virtualize them. They are used widely in comparing RISC processors that the bulk of x86-based legacy systems cannot discard easily.

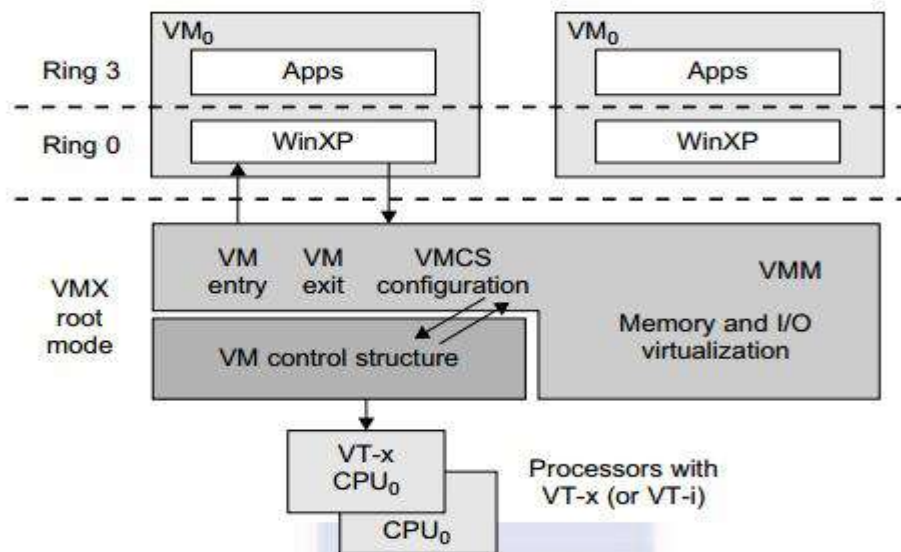


FIGURE 3.11

Intel hardware-assisted CPU virtualization.

Virtualization of x86 processors is detailed in the following sections. Intel's VT-x technology is an example of hardware-assisted virtualization, as shown in Figure 3.11. Intel calls the privilege level of x86 processors the VMX Root Mode. In order to control the start and stop of a VM and allocate a memory page to maintain the CPU state for VMs, a set of additional instructions is added. At the time of this writing, Xen, VMware, and the Microsoft Virtual PC all implement their hypervisors by using the VT-x technology.

Generally, hardware-assisted virtualization should have high efficiency. However, since the transition from the hypervisor to the guest OS incurs high overhead switches between processor modes, it sometimes cannot outperform binary translation. Hence, virtualization systems such as VMware now use a hybrid approach, in which a few tasks are offloaded to the hardware but the rest is still done in software. In addition, para-virtualization and hardware-assisted virtualization can be combined to improve the performance further.

3. Memory Virtualization

Virtual memory virtualization is similar to the virtual memory support provided by modern operating systems. In a traditional execution environment, the operating system maintains mappings of virtual memory to machine memory using page tables, which is a one-stage mapping from virtual memory to machine memory. All modern x86 CPUs include a memory management unit (MMU) and a translation lookaside buffer (TLB) to optimize virtual memory performance. However, in a virtual execution environment, virtual memory virtualization involves sharing the physical system memory in RAM and dynamically allocating it to the physical memory of the VMs.

That means a two-stage mapping process should be maintained by the guest OS and the VMM, respectively: virtual memory to physical memory and physical memory to machine memory.

Furthermore, MMU virtualization should be supported, which is transparent to the guest OS. The guest OS continues to control the mapping of virtual addresses to the physical memory addresses of VMs. But the guest OS cannot directly access the actual machine memory. The VMM is responsible for mapping the guest physical memory to the actual machine memory. Figure 3.12 shows the two-level memory mapping procedure.

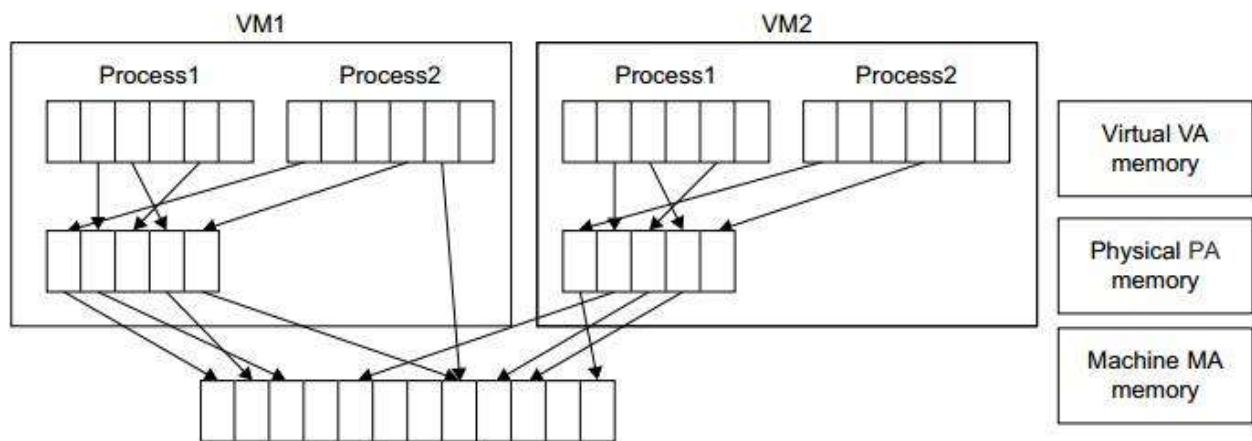


FIGURE 3.12

Two-level memory mapping procedure.

Since each page table of the guest OSes has a separate page table in the VMM corresponding to it, the VMM page table is called the shadow page table. Nested page tables add another layer of indirection to virtual memory. The MMU already handles virtual-to-physical translations as defined by the OS. Then the physical memory addresses are translated to machine addresses using another set of page tables defined by the hypervisor. Since modern operating systems maintain a set of page tables for every process, the shadow page tables will get flooded. Consequently, the performance overhead and cost of memory will be very high.

VMware uses shadow page tables to perform virtual-memory-to-machine-memory address translation. Processors use TLB hardware to map the virtual memory directly to the machine memory to avoid the two levels of translation on every access. When the guest OS changes the virtual memory to a physical memory mapping, the VMM updates the shadow page tables to enable a direct lookup. The AMD Barcelona processor has featured hardware-assisted memory virtualization since 2007. It provides hardware assistance to the two-stage address translation in a virtual execution environment by using a technology called nested paging.

Example 3.6 Extended Page Table by Intel for Memory Virtualization

Since the efficiency of the software shadow page table technique was too low, Intel developed a hardware-based EPT technique to improve it, as illustrated in Figure 3.13. In addition, Intel offers a Virtual Processor ID (VPID) to improve use of the TLB. Therefore, the performance of memory virtualization is greatly improved. In Figure 3.13, the page tables of the guest OS and EPT are all four-level.

When a virtual address needs to be translated, the CPU will first look for the L4 page table pointed to by Guest CR3. Since the address in Guest CR3 is a physical address in the guest OS, the CPU needs to convert the Guest CR3 GPA to the host physical address (HPA) using EPT. In this procedure, the CPU

will check the EPT TLB to see if the translation is there. If there is no required translation in the EPT TLB, the CPU will look for it in the EPT. If the CPU cannot find the translation in the EPT, an EPT violation exception will be raised.

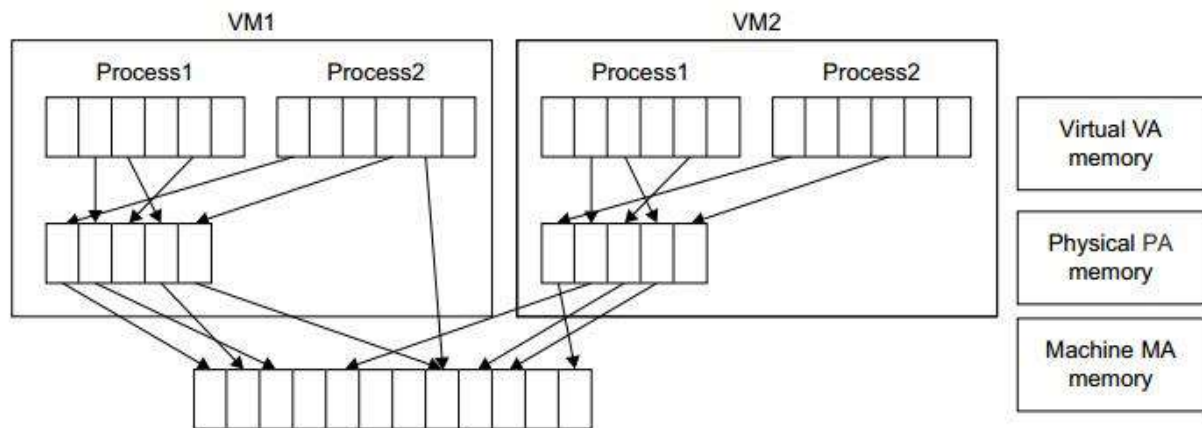


FIGURE 3.12

Two-level memory mapping procedure.

When the GPA of the L4 page table is obtained, the CPU will calculate the GPA of the L3 page table by using the GVA and the content of the L4 page table. If the entry corresponding to the GVA in the L4 page table is a page fault, the CPU will generate a page fault interrupt and will let the guest OS kernel handle the interrupt. When the PGA of the L3 page table is obtained, the CPU will look for the EPT to get the HPA of the L3 page table, as described earlier. To get the HPA corresponding to a GVA, the CPU needs to look for the EPT five times, and each time, the memory needs to be accessed four times. Therefore, there are 20 memory accesses in the worst case, which is still very slow. To overcome this short-coming, Intel increased the size of the EPT TLB to decrease the number of memory accesses.

4. I/O Virtualization

I/O virtualization involves managing the routing of I/O requests between virtual devices and the shared physical hardware. At the time of this writing, there are three ways to implement I/O virtualization: full device emulation, para-virtualization, and direct I/O. Full device emulation is the first approach for I/O virtualization. Generally, this approach emulates well-known, real-world devices.

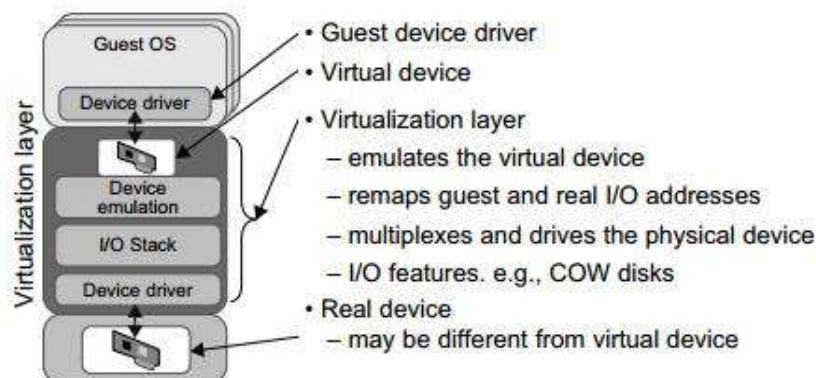


FIGURE 3.14

Device emulation for I/O virtualization implemented inside the middle layer that maps real I/O devices into the virtual devices for the guest device driver to use.

All the functions of a device or bus infrastructure, such as device enumeration, identification, interrupts, and DMA, are replicated in software. This software is located in the VMM and acts as a virtual device. The I/O access requests of the guest OS are trapped in the VMM which interacts with the I/O devices. The full device emulation approach is shown in Figure 3.14.

A single hardware device can be shared by multiple VMs that run concurrently. However, software emulation runs much slower than the hardware it emulates. The para-virtualization method of I/O virtualization is typically used in Xen. It is also known as the split driver model consisting of a frontend driver and a backend driver. The frontend driver is running in Domain U and the backend driver is running in Domain 0. They interact with each other via a block of shared memory. The frontend driver manages the I/O requests of the guest OSes and the backend driver is responsible for managing the real I/O devices and multiplexing the I/O data of different VMs. Although para-I/O-virtualization achieves better device performance than full device emulation, it comes with a higher CPU overhead.

Direct I/O virtualization lets the VM access devices directly. It can achieve close-to-native performance without high CPU costs. However, current direct I/O virtualization implementations focus on networking for mainframes. There are a lot of challenges for commodity hardware devices. For example, when a physical device is reclaimed (required by workload migration) for later reassignment, it may have been set to an arbitrary state (e.g., DMA to some arbitrary memory locations) that can function incorrectly or even crash the whole system. Since software-based I/O virtualization requires a very high overhead of device emulation, hardware-assisted I/O virtualization is critical. Intel VT-d supports the remapping of I/O DMA transfers and device-generated interrupts. The architecture of VT-d provides the flexibility to support multiple usage models that may run unmodified, special-purpose, or “virtualization-aware” guest OSes.

Another way to help I/O virtualization is via self-virtualized I/O (SV-IO) [47]. The key idea of SV-IO is to harness the rich resources of a multicore processor. All tasks associated with virtualizing an I/O device are encapsulated in SV-IO. It provides virtual devices and an associated access API to VMs and a management API to the VMM. SV-IO defines one virtual interface (VIF) for every kind of virtualized I/O device, such as virtual network interfaces, virtual block devices (disk), virtual camera devices, and others. The guest OS interacts with the VIFs via VIF device drivers. Each VIF consists of two message queues. One is for outgoing messages to the devices and the other is for incoming messages from the devices. In addition, each VIF has a unique ID for identifying it in SV-IO.

Example 3.7 VMware Workstation for I/O Virtualization

The VMware Workstation runs as an application. It leverages the I/O device support in guest OSes, host OSes, and VMM to implement I/O virtualization. The application portion (VMAp) The VMware Workstation runs as an application. It leverages the I/O device support in guest OSes, host OSes, and VMM to implement I/O virtualization. The application portion (VMAp) uses a driver loaded into the host operating system (VMDriver) to establish the privileged VMM, which runs directly on the hardware. A given physical processor is executed in either the host world or the VMM world, with the VMDriver facilitating the transfer of control between the two worlds. The VMware Workstation employs full device emulation to implement I/O virtualization. Figure 3.15 shows the functional blocks used in sending and receiving packets via the emulated virtual NIC.

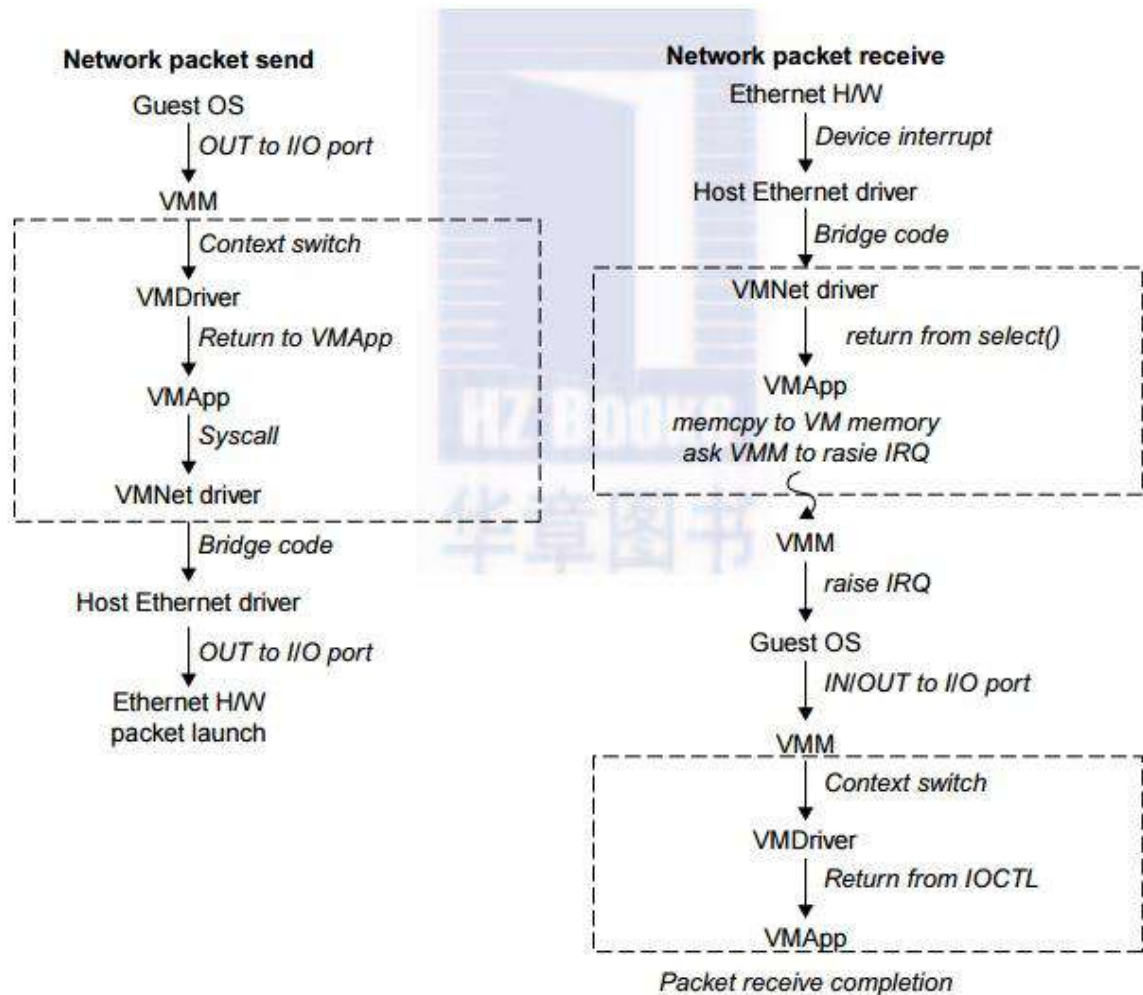


FIGURE 3.15

Functional blocks involved in sending and receiving network packets.

The virtual NIC models an AMD Lance Am79C970A controller. The device driver for a Lance controller in the guest OS initiates packet transmissions by reading and writing a sequence of virtual I/O ports; each read or write switches back to the VMAApp to emulate the Lance port accesses. When the last OUT instruction of the sequence is encountered, the Lance emulator calls a normal write() to the VMNet driver. The VMNet driver then passes the packet onto the network via a host NIC and then the VMAApp switches back to the VMM. The switch raises a virtual interrupt to notify the guest device driver that the packet was sent. Packet receives occur in reverse.

5. Virtualization in Multi-Core Processors

Virtualizing a multi-core processor is relatively more complicated than virtualizing a uni-core processor. Though multicore processors are claimed to have higher performance by integrating multiple processor cores in a single chip, multi-core virtualization has raised some new challenges to computer architects, compiler constructors, system designers, and application programmers. There are mainly two difficulties: Application programs must be parallelized to use all cores fully, and software must explicitly assign tasks to the cores, which is a very complex problem.

Concerning the first challenge, new programming models, languages, and libraries are needed to make parallel programming easier. The second challenge has spawned research involving scheduling algorithms and resource management policies. Yet these efforts cannot balance well among performance, complexity, and other issues. What is worse, as technology scales, a new challenge

called dynamic heterogeneity is emerging to mix the fat CPU core and thin GPU cores on the same chip, which further complicates the multi-core or many-core resource management. The dynamic heterogeneity of hardware infrastructure mainly comes from less reliable transistors and increased complexity in using the transistors.

5.1 Physical versus Virtual Processor Cores

Wells, et al. proposed a multicore virtualization method to allow hardware designers to get an abstraction of the low-level details of the processor cores. This technique alleviates the burden and inefficiency of managing hardware resources by software. It is located under the ISA and remains unmodified by the operating system or VMM (hypervisor). Figure 3.16 illustrates the technique of a software-visible VCPU moving from one core to another and temporarily suspending execution of a VCPU when there are no appropriate cores on which it can run.

5.2 Virtual Hierarchy

The emerging many-core chip multiprocessors (CMPs) provides a new computing landscape. Instead of supporting time-sharing jobs on one or a few cores, we can use the abundant cores in a space-sharing, where single-threaded or multithreaded jobs are simultaneously assigned to separate groups of cores for long time intervals. This idea was originally suggested by Marty and Hill. To optimize for space-shared workloads, they propose using virtual hierarchies to overlay a coherence and caching hierarchy onto a physical processor. Unlike a fixed physical hierarchy, a virtual hierarchy can adapt to fit how the work is space shared for improved performance and performance isolation.

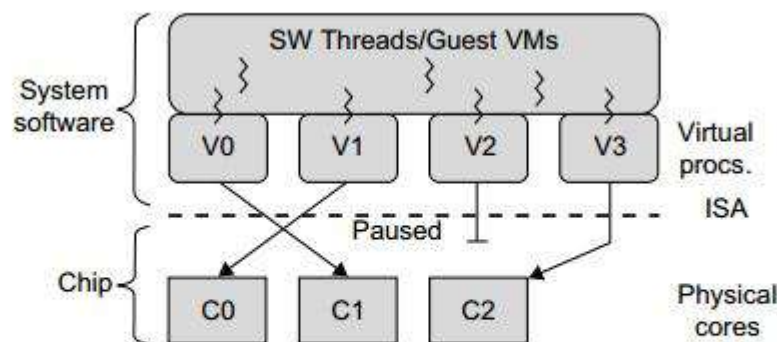


FIGURE 3.16

Multicore virtualization method that exposes four VCPUs to the software, when only three cores are actually present.

Today's many-core CMPs use a physical hierarchy of two or more cache levels that statically determine the cache allocation and mapping. A virtual hierarchy is a cache hierarchy that can adapt to fit the workload or mix of workloads. The hierarchy's first level locates data blocks close to the cores needing them for faster access, establishes a shared-cache domain, and establishes a point of coherence for faster communication. When a miss leaves a tile, it first attempts to locate the block (or sharers) within the first level. The first level can also provide isolation between independent workloads. A miss at the L1 cache can invoke the L2 access.

The idea is illustrated in Figure 3.17(a). Space sharing is applied to assign three workloads to three clusters of virtual cores: namely VM0 and VM3 for database workload, VM1 and VM2 for web server workload, and VM4–VM7 for middleware workload. The basic assumption is that each workload runs in its own VM. However, space sharing applies equally within a single operating system. Statically distributing the directory among tiles can do much better, provided operating systems or hypervisors carefully map virtual pages to physical frames. Marty and Hill suggested a two-level virtual coherence and caching hierarchy that harmonizes with the assignment of tiles to the virtual clusters of VMs.

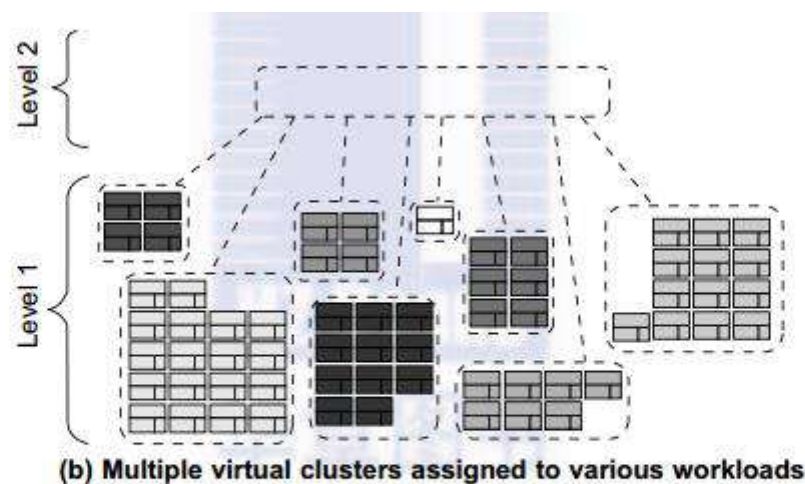
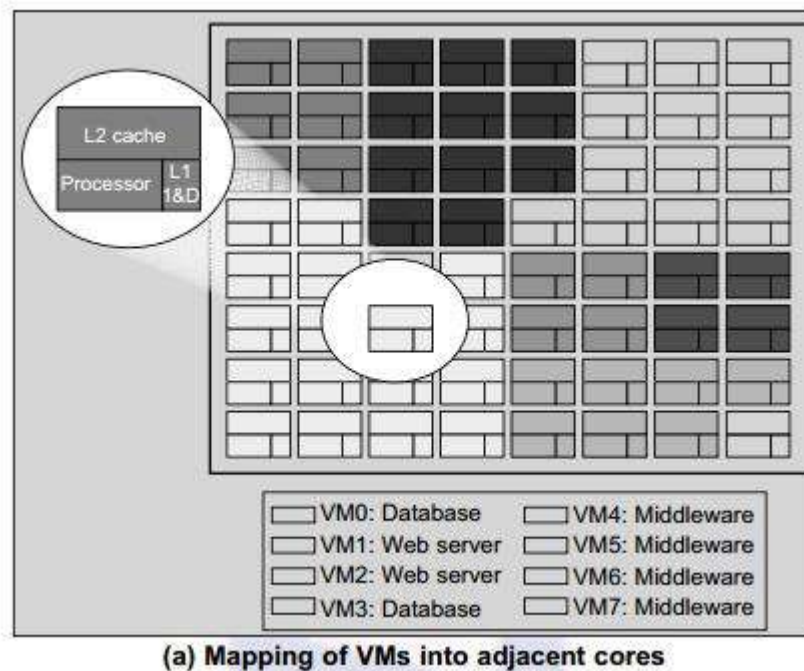


FIGURE 3.17

CMP server consolidation by space-sharing of VMs into many cores forming multiple virtual clusters to execute various workloads.

Figure 3.17(b) illustrates a logical view of such a virtual cluster hierarchy in two levels. Each VM operates in a isolated fashion at the first level. This will minimize both miss access time and performance interference with other workloads or VMs. Moreover, the shared resources of cache capacity, inter-connect links, and miss handling are mostly isolated between VMs. The second level maintains a globally shared memory. This facilitates dynamically repartitioning resources without costly cache flushes. Furthermore, maintaining globally shared memory minimizes changes to existing system

software and allows virtualization features such as content-based page sharing. A virtual hierarchy adapts to space-shared workloads like multiprogramming and server consolidation. Figure 3.17 shows a case study focused on consolidated server workloads in a tiled architecture. This many-core mapping scheme can also optimize for space-shared multiprogrammed workloads in a single-OS environment.

Hardware Support for Virtualization

Modern operating systems and processors permit multiple processes to run simultaneously. If there is no protection mechanism in a processor, all instructions from different processes will access the hardware directly and cause a system crash. Therefore, all processors have at least two modes, user mode and supervisor mode, to ensure controlled access of critical hardware. Instructions running in supervisor mode are called privileged instructions. Other instructions are unprivileged instructions. In a virtualized environment, it is more difficult to make OSes and applications run correctly because there are more layers in the machine stack. Example 3.4 discusses Intel's hardware support approach.

At the time of this writing, many hardware virtualization products were available. The VMware Workstation is a VM software suite for x86 and x86-64 computers. This software suite allows users to set up multiple x86 and x86-64 virtual computers and to use one or more of these VMs simultaneously with the host operating system. The VMware Workstation assumes the host-based virtualization. Xen is a hypervisor for use in IA-32, x86-64, Itanium, and PowerPC 970 hosts. Actually, Xen modifies Linux as the lowest and most privileged layer, or a hypervisor.

One or more guest OS can run on top of the hypervisor. KVM (Kernel-based Virtual Machine) is a Linux kernel virtualization infrastructure. KVM can support hardware-assisted virtualization and paravirtualization by using the Intel VT-x or AMD-v and VirtIO framework, respectively. The VirtIO framework includes a paravirtual Ethernet card, a disk I/O controller, a balloon device for adjusting guest memory usage, and a VGA graphics interface using VMware drivers.

Example 3.4 Hardware Support for Virtualization in the Intel x86 Processor

Since software-based virtualization techniques are complicated and incur performance overhead, Intel provides a hardware-assist technique to make virtualization easy and improve performance.

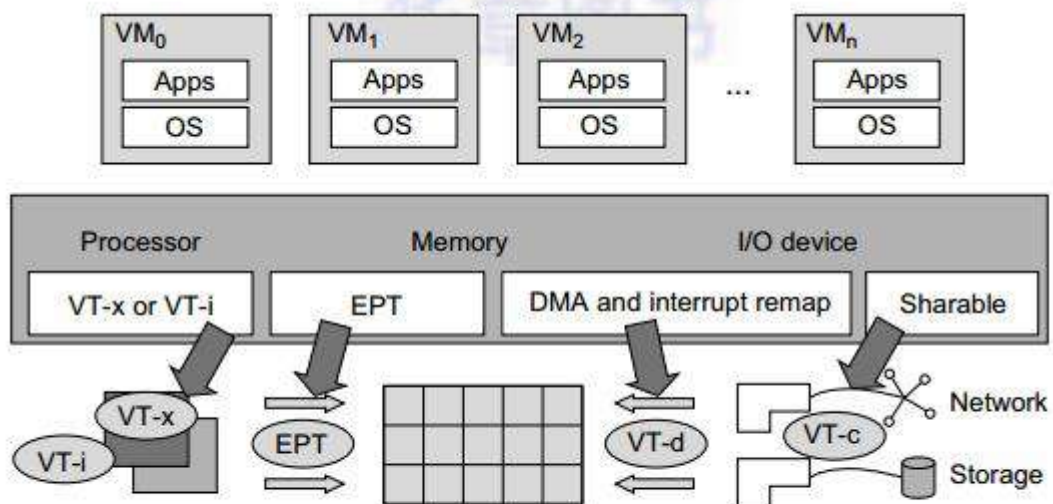


FIGURE 3.10

Intel hardware support for virtualization of processor, memory, and I/O devices.

Figure 3.10 provides an overview of Intel's full virtualization techniques. For processor virtualization, Intel offers the VT-x or VT-i technique. VT-x adds a privileged mode (VMX Root Mode) and some instructions to processors. This enhancement traps all sensitive instructions in the VMM automatically. For memory virtualization, Intel offers the EPT, which translates the virtual address to the machine's physical addresses to improve performance. For I/O virtualization, Intel implements VT-d and VT-c to support this.

CPU Virtualization

A VM is a duplicate of an existing computer system in which a majority of the VM instructions are executed on the host processor in native mode. Thus, unprivileged instructions of VMs run directly on the host machine for higher efficiency. Other critical instructions should be handled carefully for correctness and stability. The critical instructions are divided into three categories: privileged instructions, control-sensitive instructions, and behavior-sensitive instructions. Privileged instructions execute in a privileged mode and will be trapped if executed outside this mode. Control-sensitive instructions attempt to change the configuration of resources used. Behavior-sensitive instructions have different behaviors depending on the configuration of resources, including the load and store operations over the virtual memory.

A CPU architecture is virtualizable if it supports the ability to run the VM's privileged and unprivileged instructions in the CPU's user mode while the VMM runs in supervisor mode. When the privileged instructions including control- and behavior-sensitive instructions of a VM are executed, they are trapped in the VMM. In this case, the VMM acts as a unified mediator for hardware access from different VMs to guarantee the correctness and stability of the whole system. However, not all CPU architectures are virtualizable. RISC CPU architectures can be naturally virtualized because all control- and behavior-sensitive instructions are privileged instructions. On the contrary, x86 CPU architectures are not primarily designed to support virtualization. This is because about 10 sensitive instructions, such as **SGDT** and **SMSW**, are not privileged instructions. When these instructions execute in virtualization, they cannot be trapped in the VMM.

On a native UNIX-like system, a system call triggers the 80h interrupt and passes control to the OS kernel. The interrupt handler in the kernel is then invoked to process the system call. On a paravirtualization system such as Xen, a system call in the guest OS first triggers the 80h interrupt normally. Almost at the same time, the 82h interrupt in the hypervisor is triggered. Incidentally, control is passed on to the hypervisor as well. When the hypervisor completes its task for the guest OS system call, it passes control back to the guest OS kernel. Certainly, the guest OS kernel may also invoke the hypercall while it's running. Although paravirtualization of a CPU lets unmodified applications run in the VM, it causes a small performance penalty.

Hardware-Assisted CPU Virtualization

This technique attempts to simplify virtualization because full or paravirtualization is complicated. Intel and AMD add an additional mode called privilege mode level (some people call it Ring-1) to x86 processors. Therefore, operating systems can still run at Ring 0 and the hypervisor can run at Ring -1. All the privileged and sensitive instructions are trapped in the hypervisor automatically. This technique removes the difficulty of implementing binary translation of full virtualization. It also lets the operating system run in VMs without modification.

Example 3.5 Intel Hardware-Assisted CPU Virtualization

Although x86 processors are not virtualizable primarily, great effort is taken to virtualize them. They are used widely in comparing RISC processors that the bulk of x86-based legacy systems cannot discard easily. Virtualization of x86 processors is detailed in the following sections. Intel's VT-x technology is an example of hardware-assisted virtualization, as shown in Figure 3.11. Intel calls the privilege level of x86 processors the VMX Root Mode. In order to control the start and stop of a VM and allocate a memory page to maintain the

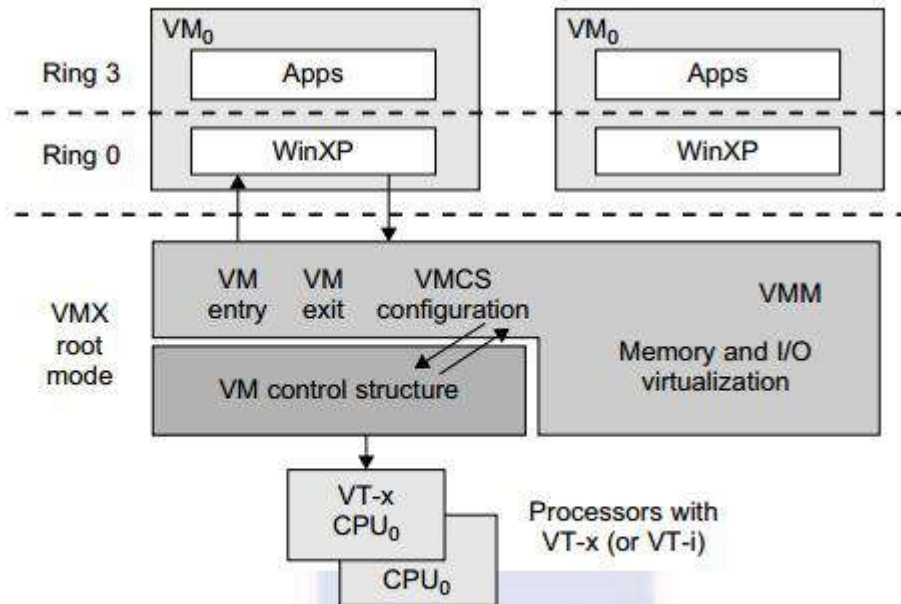


FIGURE 3.11

Intel hardware-assisted CPU virtualization.

CPU state for VMs, a set of additional instructions is added. At the time of this writing, Xen, VMware, and the Microsoft Virtual PC all implement their hypervisors by using the VT-x technology.

Generally, hardware-assisted virtualization should have high efficiency. However, since the transition from the hypervisor to the guest OS incurs high overhead switches between processor modes, it sometimes cannot outperform binary translation. Hence, virtualization systems such as VMware now use a hybrid approach, in which a few tasks are offloaded to the hardware but the rest is still done in software. In addition, para-virtualization and hardware-assisted virtualization can be combined to improve the performance further.

Memory Virtualization

Virtual memory virtualization is similar to the virtual memory support provided by modern operating systems. In a traditional execution environment, the operating system maintains mappings of virtual memory to machine memory using page tables, which is a one-stage mapping from virtual memory to machine memory. All modern x86 CPUs include a memory management unit (MMU) and a translation lookaside buffer (TLB) to optimize virtual memory performance. However, in a virtual execution environment, virtual memory virtualization involves sharing the physical system memory in RAM and dynamically allocating it to the physical memory of the VMs.

That means a two-stage mapping process should be maintained by the guest OS and the VMM, respectively: virtual memory to physical memory and physical memory to machine memory. Furthermore, MMU virtualization should be supported, which is transparent to the guest OS. The guest OS continues to control the mapping of virtual addresses to the physical memory addresses of VMs. But the guest OS cannot directly access the actual machine memory. The VMM is responsible for mapping the guest physical memory to the actual machine memory. Figure 3.12 shows the two-level memory mapping procedure.

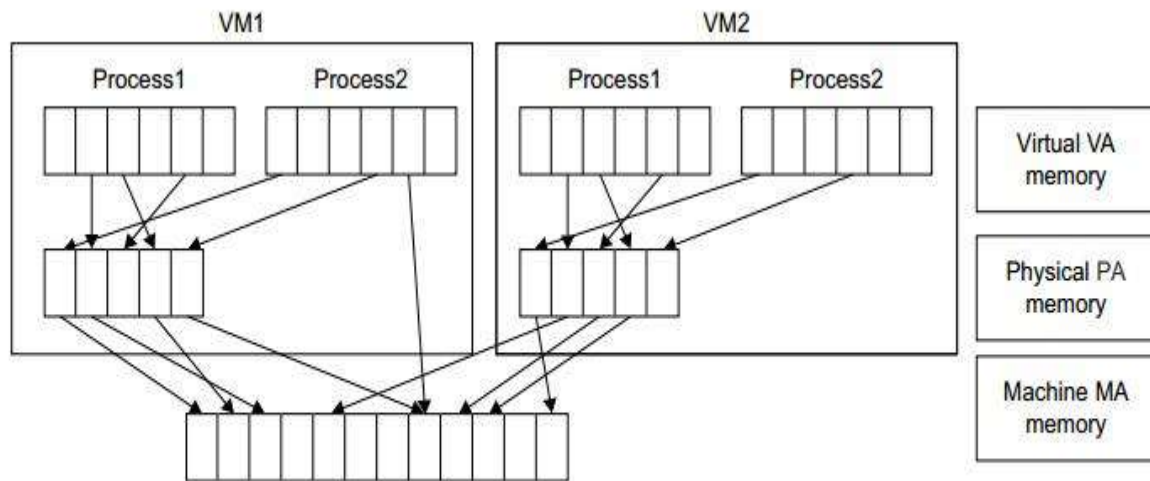


FIGURE 3.12

Two-level memory mapping procedure.

Since each page table of the guest OSes has a separate page table in the VMM corresponding to it, the VMM page table is called the shadow page table. Nested page tables add another layer of indirection to virtual memory. The MMU already handles virtual-to-physical translations as defined by the OS. Then the physical memory addresses are translated to machine addresses using another set of page tables defined by the hypervisor. Since modern operating systems maintain a set of page tables for every process, the shadow page tables will get flooded. Consequently, the performance overhead and cost of memory will be very high.

VMware uses shadow page tables to perform virtual-memory-to-machine-memory address translation. Processors use TLB hardware to map the virtual memory directly to the machine memory to avoid the two levels of translation on every access. When the guest OS changes the virtual memory to a physical memory mapping, the VMM updates the shadow page tables to enable a direct lookup. The AMD Barcelona processor has featured hardware-assisted memory virtualization since 2007. It provides hardware assistance to the two-stage address translation in a virtual execution environment by using a technology called nested paging.

Example 3.6 Extended Page Table by Intel for Memory Virtualization

Since the efficiency of the software shadow page table technique was too low, Intel developed a hardware-based EPT technique to improve it, as illustrated in Figure 3.13. In addition, Intel offers a Virtual Processor ID (VPID) to improve use of the TLB. Therefore, the performance of memory virtualization is greatly improved. In Figure 3.13, the page tables of the guest OS and EPT are all four-level.

When a virtual address needs to be translated, the CPU will first look for the L4 page table pointed to by Guest CR3. Since the address in Guest CR3 is a physical address in the guest OS, the CPU needs to convert the Guest CR3 GPA to the host physical address (HPA) using EPT. In this procedure, the CPU will check the EPT TLB to see if the translation is there. If there is no required translation in the EPT TLB, the CPU will look for it in the EPT. If the CPU cannot find the translation in the EPT, an EPT violation exception will be raised.

When the GPA of the L4 page table is obtained, the CPU will calculate the GPA of the L3 page table by using the GVA and the content of the L4 page table. If the entry corresponding to the GVA in the L4 page table is a page fault, the CPU will generate a page fault interrupt and will let the guest OS kernel handle the interrupt. When the PGA of the L3 page table is obtained, the CPU will look for the EPT to get the HPA of the L3 page table, as described earlier. To get the HPA corresponding to a GVA, the CPU needs to look for the EPT five times, and each time, the memory needs to be accessed four times. There-fore, there are 20 memory accesses in the worst case, which is still very slow. To overcome this short-coming, Intel increased the size of the EPT TLB to decrease the number of memory accesses.

I/O Virtualization

I/O virtualization involves managing the routing of I/O requests between virtual devices and the shared physical hardware. At the time of this writing, there are three ways to implement I/O virtualization: full device emulation, para-virtualization, and direct I/O. Full device emulation is the first approach for I/O virtualization. Generally, this approach emulates well-known, real-world devices.

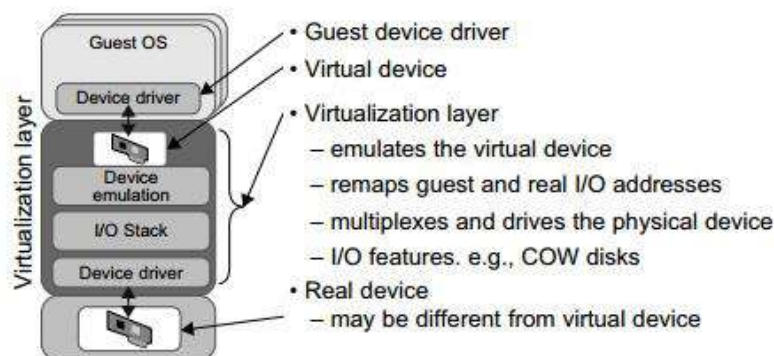


FIGURE 3.14

Device emulation for I/O virtualization implemented inside the middle layer that maps real I/O devices into the virtual devices for the guest device driver to use.

All the functions of a device or bus infrastructure, such as device enumeration, identification, interrupts, and DMA, are replicated in software. This software is located in the VMM and acts as a virtual device. The I/O access requests of the guest OS are trapped in the VMM which interacts with the I/O devices. The full device emulation approach is shown in Figure 3.14.

A single hardware device can be shared by multiple VMs that run concurrently. However, software emulation runs much slower than the hardware it emulates [10,15]. The para-virtualization method of I/O virtualization is typically used in Xen. It is also known as the split driver model consisting of a frontend driver and a backend driver. The frontend driver is running in Domain U and the backend driver is running in Domain 0. They interact with each other via a block of shared memory. The frontend driver manages the I/O requests of the guest OSes and the backend driver is responsible for managing the real I/O devices and multiplexing the I/O data of different VMs. Although para-I/O-virtualization achieves better device performance than full device emulation, it comes with a higher CPU overhead.

Direct I/O virtualization lets the VM access devices directly. It can achieve close-to-native performance without high CPU costs. However, current direct I/O virtualization implementations focus on networking for mainframes. There are a lot of challenges for commodity hardware devices. For example, when a physical device is reclaimed (required by workload migration) for later reassignment, it may have been set to an arbitrary state (e.g., DMA to some arbitrary memory locations) that can function incorrectly or even crash the whole system. Since software-based I/O virtualization requires a very high overhead of device emulation, hardware-assisted I/O virtualization is critical. Intel VT-d supports the remapping of I/O DMA transfers and device-generated interrupts. The architecture of VT-d provides the flexibility to support multiple usage models that may run unmodified, special-purpose, or “virtualization-aware” guest OSes.

Another way to help I/O virtualization is via self-virtualized I/O (SV-IO) [47]. The key idea of SV-IO is to harness the rich resources of a multicore processor. All tasks associated with virtualizing an I/O device are encapsulated in SV-IO. It provides virtual devices and an associated access API to VMs and a management API to the VMM. SV-IO defines one virtual interface (VIF) for every kind of virtualized I/O device, such as virtual network interfaces, virtual block devices (disk), virtual camera devices, and others. The guest OS interacts with the VIFs via VIF device drivers. Each VIF consists of two message queues. One is for outgoing messages to the devices and the other is for incoming messages from the devices. In addition, each VIF has a unique ID for identifying it in SV-IO.

Example 3.7 VMware Workstation for I/O Virtualization

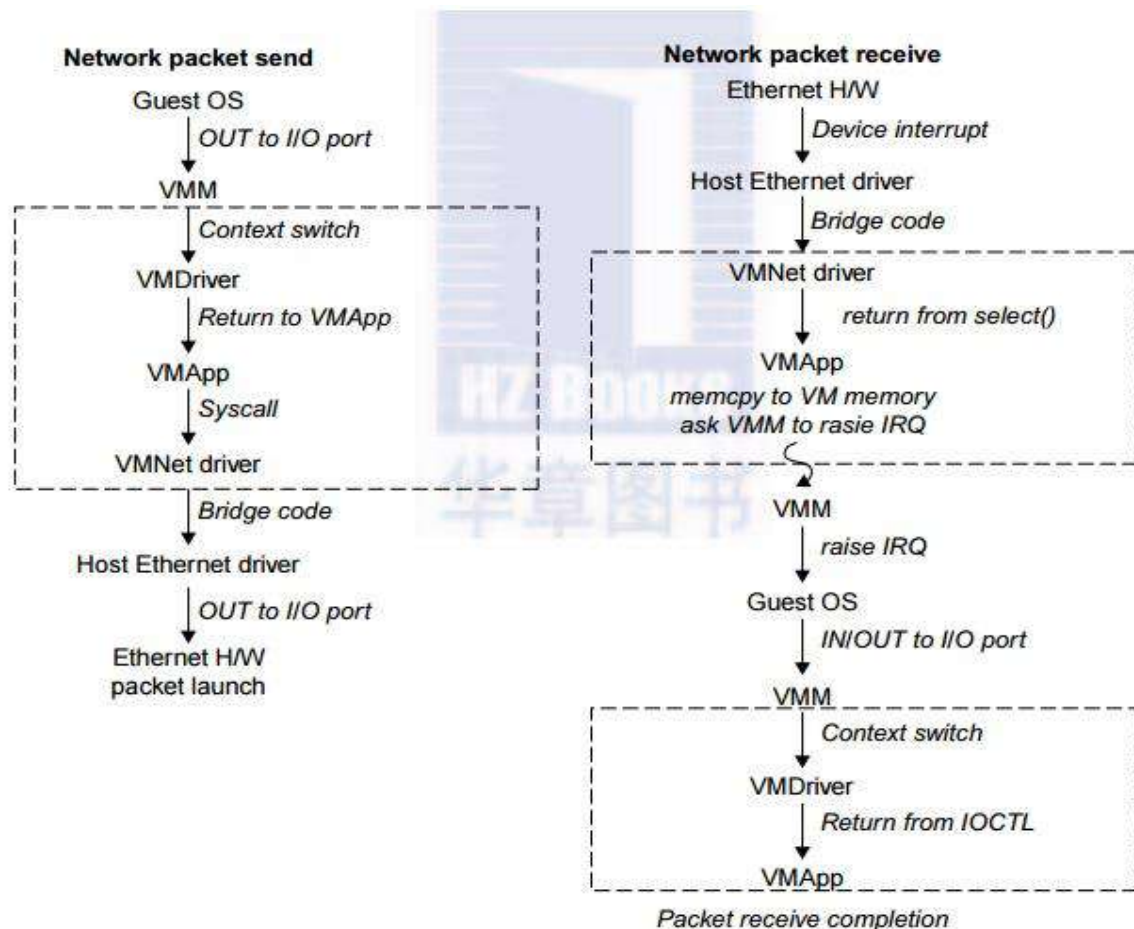


FIGURE 3.15

Functional blocks involved in sending and receiving network packets.

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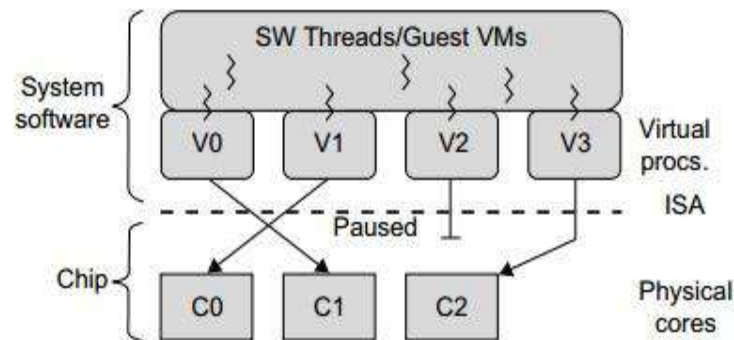


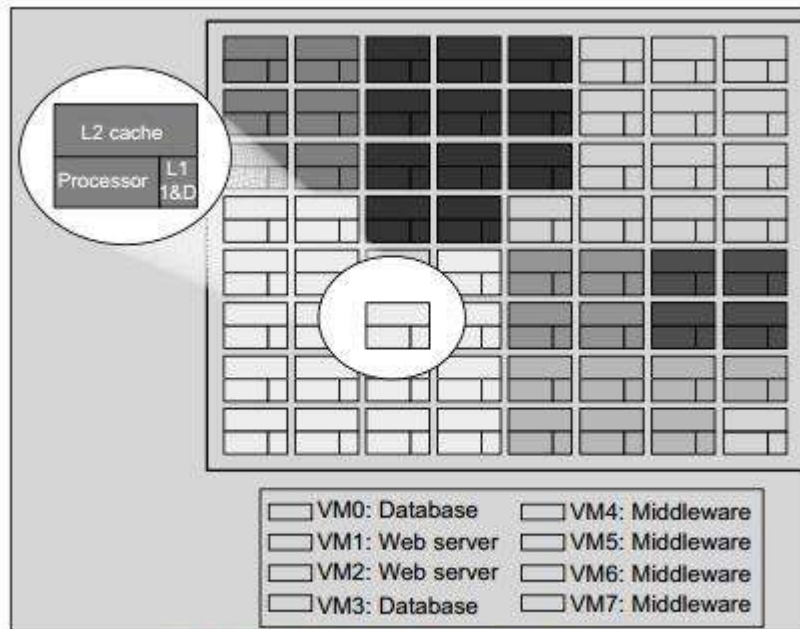
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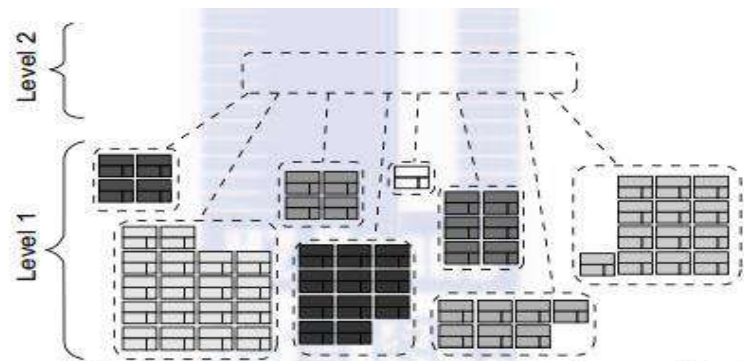
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(a) Mapping of VMs into adjacent cores



(b) Multiple virtual clusters assigned to various workloads

FIGURE 3.17

CMP server consolidation by space-sharing of VMs into many cores forming multiple virtual clusters to execute various workloads.