

Spectroscopic: A practical PB Inception Attack and Implications for Confidential Computing

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Summary

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Overview

Overview

- **Literature baseline:** 17 primary sources (9 papers)
 - 7 attack papers covering **9 distinct** side-channel / speculative-execution attacks
 - 2 mitigation-focused papers + vendor/kernel documentation
- **Reproducibility artifact:** end-to-end PoC (*guest userland harness + guest LKM gadget*) with runbook and A/B toggles
- **Communication:** established a repro channel with **AMD PSIRT** and answered follow-up validation questions
- **Clarity:** diagrams of attack flow and component interfaces (sysfs gadget, trampolines, ASM harness, driver)

Outcome: a concrete, auditable implementation blueprint for post-IBPB return steering on Zen 1/2 in a CC-light (SEV/SEV-ES) setting.

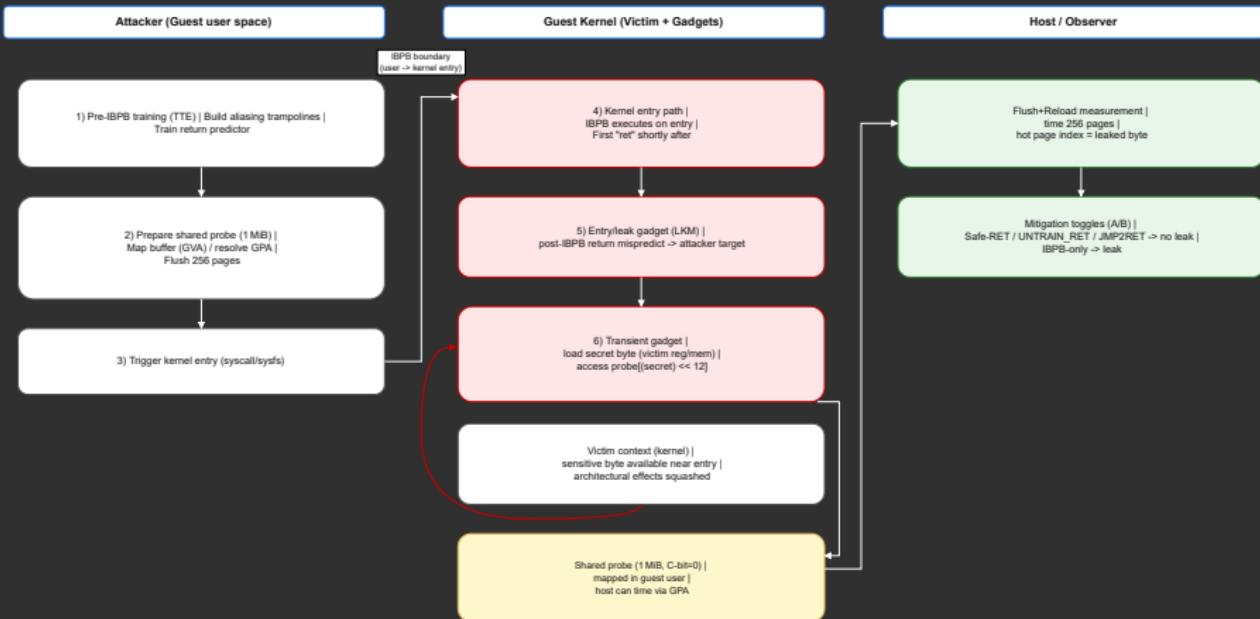
Related works

Related works

Attack name	Post-IBPB No	Attack type	Attack model	Preconditions	Target processors	Mitigations	Side channel	CC Impact
RETBLEED [2]	No	Kernel-level speculative code execution targeting the Branch Target Buffer	Unprivileged User Process → Kernel	RSB underflow to BTB fallback (Intel); BTB precedence over RSB (AMD); deep call stacks (Intel); cross-privilege BTB poisoning	AMD (Zen 1, Zen 2), Intel (Kaby Lake, Coffee Lake)	Intel (eIBRS and iBRS), AMD (jmp2ret)	Flush+Reload, Prime+Probe	Bypasses Retpoline; leaks arbitrary kernel memory; intra-guest leakage; host view requires shared side-channel
PB-RRSBA [1]	Yes	Exploit IP-based predictions of the Restricted RSB Alternate (RRSBA) predictor	Cross-process	RSB empty-state; IP-based RRSBA predictor active; IBPB execution; same-thread attacker/victim co-location	Intel (Golden Cove, Raptor Cove)	Enabling the RRSBA_DIS_U chicken bit	Flush+Reload	Leaks from IBPB-protected suid processes; shared library mappings used for cross-process exfiltration
PB-Inception [1]	Yes	Variant of Inception attack targeting Return Stack Buffer predictions	Cross-process	IBPB-on-entry active; TTE/Phantom training pre-IBPB; RSB persistence post-IBPB (AMD Zen 1/2)	AMD (Zen 1, Zen 2)	RSB stuffing	Secret-dependent cache side channel	Bypasses kernel/hypervisor protection (VMExit); host observation requires shared C-bit=0 mapping
PHANTOM [3]	No	Confuse the CPU's branch prediction unit by using asymmetric combinations of training and victim instruction types	Execute unprivileged code on top of a recent Linux kernel	Speculation before instruction decode; cross-privilege BTB aliasing; physically contiguous huge pages for Prime+Probe	AMD (Zen 1, Zen 2, Zen 3, Zen 4)	SuppressBPOnNonBr (AMD MSR), AutoIBRS (AMD Zen 4), IBPB	Flush+Reload, Prime+Probe	Bypasses AutoIBRS/-SuppressBPOnNonBr; enables transient fetch/decode leaks; host visibility needs shared memory

Attack flow & Reporting

Spectroscopic attack flow

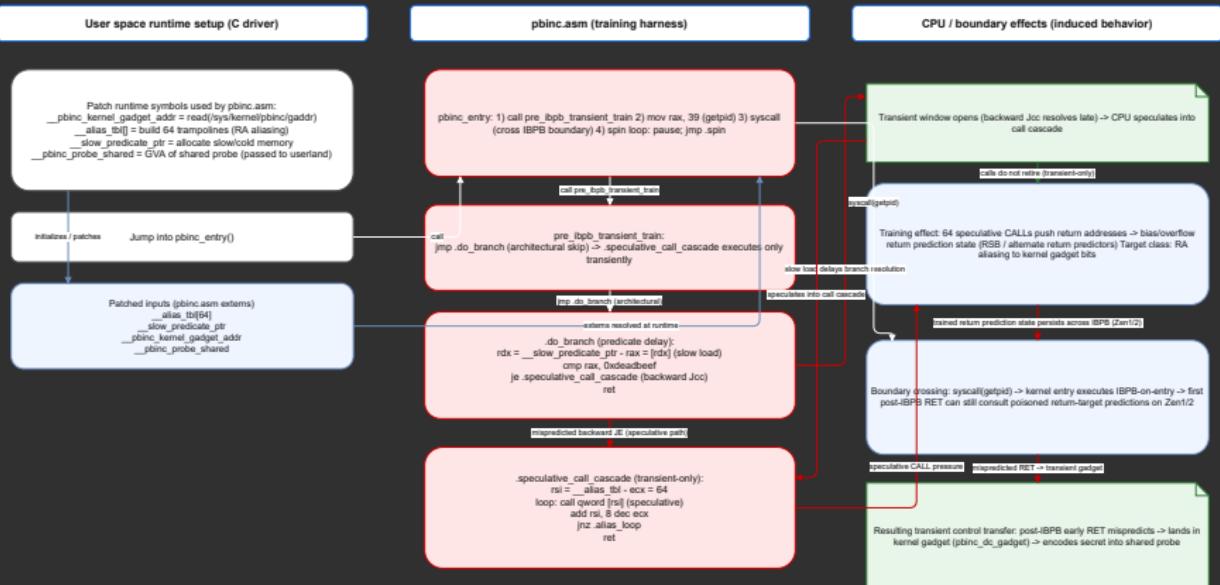


Report to AMD

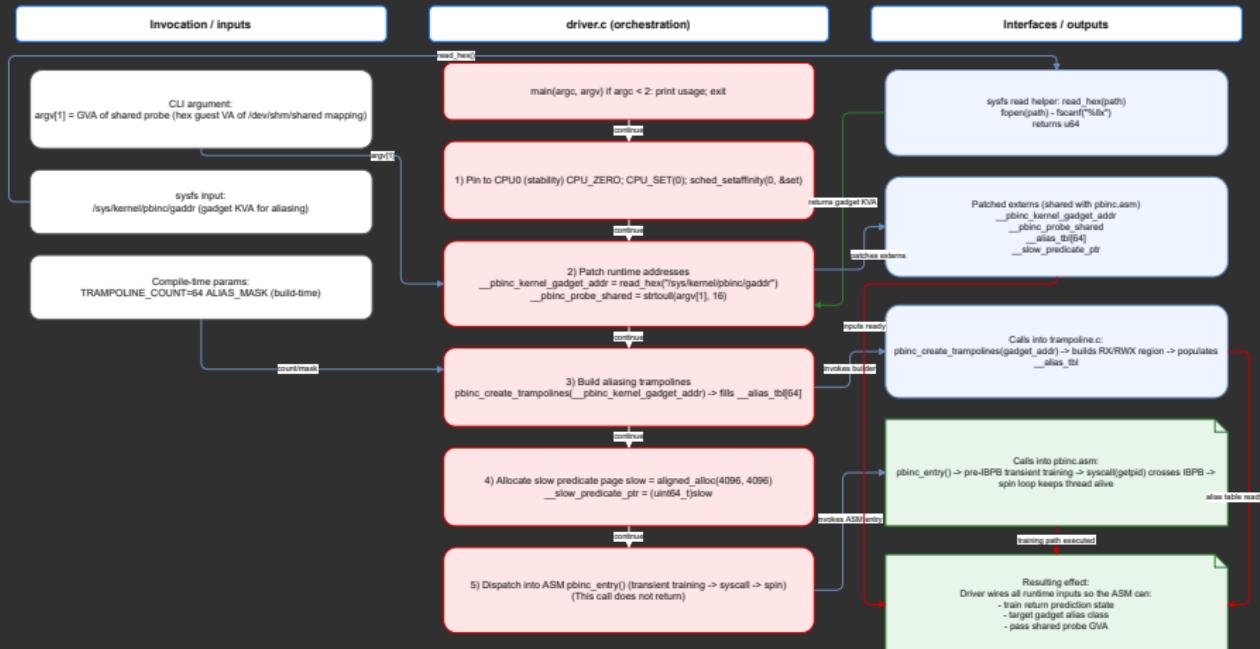
We reported the exploit and are currently in contact with AMD

Application-part visualizations

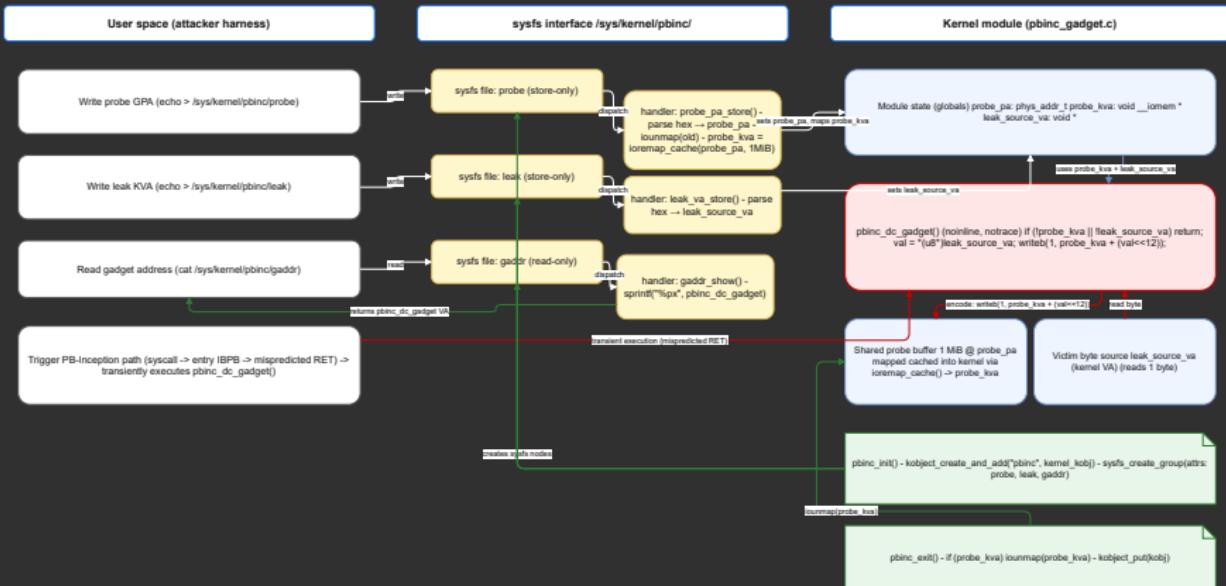
Assembly-Level Gadget Walkthrough



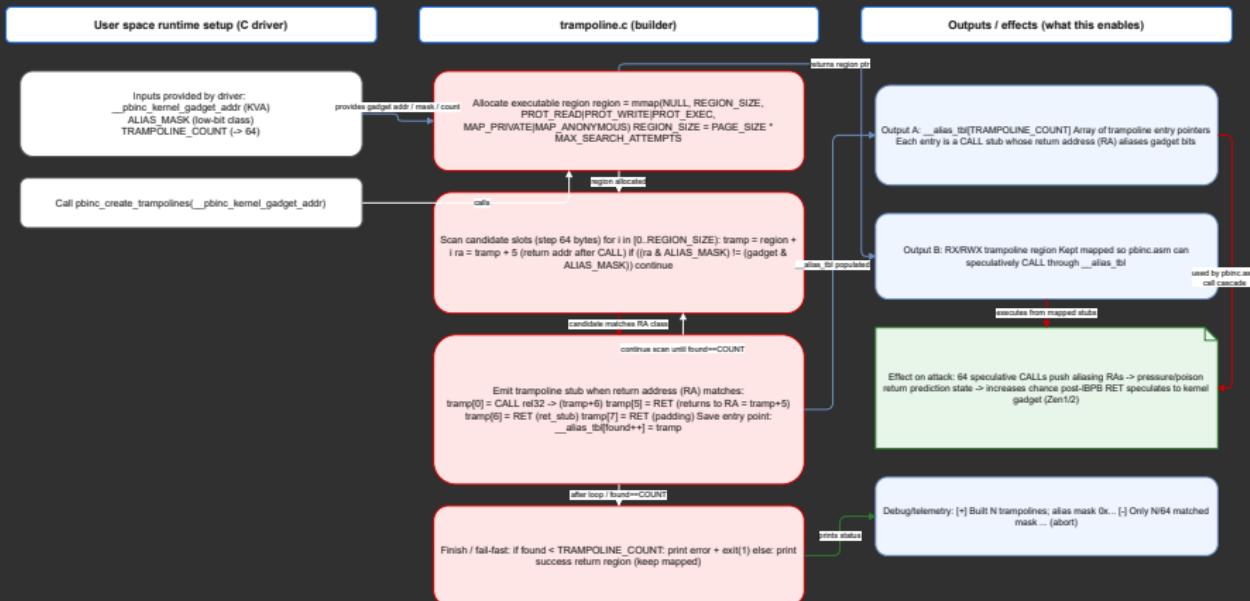
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Thanks for your attention!

Sources |

1. Wikner, J. & Razavi, K. *Breaking the Barrier: Post-Barrier Spectre Attacks.* in *IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy* (2025).
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2. Wikner, J. & Razavi, K. *RETbleed: Arbitrary Speculative Code Execution with Return Instructions.* in *31st USENIX Security Symposium* (2022).
<https://www.usenix.org/system/files/sec22-wikner.pdf>.
3. Wikner, J., Trujillo, D. & Razavi, K. *Phantom: Exploiting Decoder-detectable Mispredictions.* in *56th Annual IEEE/ACM International Symposium on Microarchitecture (MICRO '23)* (2023).
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