

# HyperMI: A Privilege-level VM Protection Approach against Compromised Hypervisor

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**Abstract**—Sensitive data in guest virtual machine is easy to be leaked once hypervisor is compromised. Therefore, VM protection is important to protect the memory of VM from compromised hypervisor's malicious access causally. Previous efforts employ hardware or employ new software relying on a higher privilege level than hypervisor.

This paper proposes HyperMI, a novel approach that provides a privilege-level secure execution environment for VM protection in cloud computing against compromised hypervisor. It provides HyperMI world, effective VM isolation and event-driven VM monitoring in order to prevent customers' sensitive data in VM from being leaked. HyperMI world, placed at the same privilege level with hypervisor, is a privilege-level secure isolated execution environment. As TCB, it is used for VM isolation and VM monitoring. What's the most important, HyperMI focuses on decoupling the function of interaction between hypervisor and VM and decoupling the function of address mapping of VM from hypervisor. As a result, HyperMI can only controls page mapping of VM and EPT updating when a page is allocated to a VM. We have implemented a prototype for KVM hypervisor with multiple Linux as guest OSes, which can be used in commercial cloud computing industry with portability and compatibility for all kinds of CPU platforms. The security analysis shows that this approach can provide protection for VM with effective isolation and event-driven monitoring, and the performance evaluation confirms the efficiency of HyperMI.

**Index Terms**—Virtualization, VM Protection, VM Security

## I. INTRODUCTION

As more and more functionalities are added into the hypervisor, the code bases of commodity hypervisors (KVM or Xen) increase to be large lines. On the one hand, commodity hypervisor has more vulnerabilities because of the larger code bases. On the other hand, because the hypervisor possesses the highest privilege in the cloud environment, an attacker who compromises hypervisor can harm the whole cloud infrastructure and endanger data in the cloud. Being aware of such serious situation, current researchers try to alleviate those vulnerabilities by hardware or software on a higher level than the hypervisor.

**Hardware** Different hardware platforms provide different hardware mechanisms, such as Intel's Software Guard Extensions (SGX) and AMD's Secure Memory Encryption (SME) [16]. SGX provides protection for pieces of application logic inside encrypted enclave memory against malicious OS. However, it is limited to protect a relatively small portion of

memory, and the developers have to mostly reconstruct the protected software or build it from scratch. Therefore it is nontrivial for SGX to protect large-scale software like the entire VM. SME can encrypt memory in page level granularity by simply setting the C-bit in the page table entry. More importantly, AMD enables the Secure Encrypted Virtualization (SEV) feature. However, a malicious hypervisor can bypass the protection by manipulating some critical resources, guest memory mapping and key sharing mechanisms.

**Software at Higher Privilege Level** In order to mitigate the hazard caused by the hypervisor, plenty of software solutions propose and introduce a higher privilege-level than the original hypervisor. Nested virtualization is one of the representative approaches, which provides a higher-privileged and isolated execution environment to run the monitor securely. The turtles project [3] and CloudVisor [17] are examples of systems that propose nested virtualization idea to achieve isolation for protected resources. Especially, CloudVisor uses nested virtualization to decouple resource management into the nested hypervisor to protect VMs.

In practice, the independence on platforms and minimum changes to existing systems are the most prized features for cloud providers. For this purpose, some recent efforts introduce software-based approaches that achieve the same privilege-level isolation and protection instead of relying on a higher privilege level.

Inspired by the idea of "same privilege-level" isolation, we propose HyperMI, a "same privilege-level" and software-based VM protection approach for guest VMs against the compromised hypervisor. With HyperMI, interaction data protection and VM memory isolation modules are resided in a secure execution environment, referred to as HyperMI World. We implement this prototype on x86 as an example, more details on HyperMI are described as follows.

HyperMI protects interactions between hypervisor and VM and achieves memory isolation among VMs. There are some especially critical interaction structures data that records state information of VMs which HyperMI should protect. These data includes Extended Page Tables (EPT) and Virtual Machine Control Structure (VMCS). EPT contains the mapping relationship from Guest Physical Address (GPA) to Host Physical Address (HPA). VMCS is used in VMX operation to manage the behavior of VMs as well as transitions between

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the VM and the hypervisor. Thus, the modification of context of VMCS, especially the Guest-state area and VM-execution control fields, may cause unpredictable consequences. Given the great importance of the data structures mentioned above, HyperMI isolates them beyond access from compromised hypervisor.

VM memory isolation can resist malicious VM memory accessing from compromised hypervisor, especially, remapping and double mapping attack. Firstly, HyperMI marks each page with page marking technique to guarantee each page can only be owned by one VM or hypervisor. Secondly, it deprives address translation function of the hypervisor to ensure that the page is marked with the owner when it is mapped. Finally, since any update to guest page table can be synced to EPT, HyperMI verifies whether any protected virtual addresses is double mapped or remapped. In order to avoid double mapping attack, the owner of the page is verified when EPT updates. In order to resist remapping attack, HyperMI clears the content of the page when it is released.

Our prototype introduces 4K SLOC (Source Lines of Code) to VM protection and 300 SLOC modifications of the hypervisor. The experimental results show trivial performance overhead and independence on multi-platforms for runtime VM protection.

Our contributions are as follows:

- A secure isolated execution environment placed at the same privilege level with hypervisor instead of relying on a higher privilege-level or hardware.
- An approach of isolating memory among VMs and hypervisor securely for VM by using page marking technique to avoid malicious access from compromised hypervisor.
- A unypassable hypervisor monitoring for VMCS and EPT approach which can ensure the security of interaction between hypervisor and VM.
- A prototype based on KVM and x86 architecture with trivial performance overhead, high security and portability.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section II discusses our threat model and assumption. Section III elaborates on the design and implementation of HyperMI on x86 platform. Section IV gives the evaluation of security and performance. Section V compares HyperMI with previous work. At last, Section VI gives the conclusion.

## II. THREAT MODEL AND ASSUMPTION

### A. Threat Model

We assume that the hypervisor has been compromised and controlled by the powerful adversary. The adversary can implement attacks based on two attack paths. First, the adversary can subvert the critical interaction data during the context switching process between VM and the hypervisor. Second, the adversary can tamper values of EPT entry. This can result in remapping attack and double mapping attack.

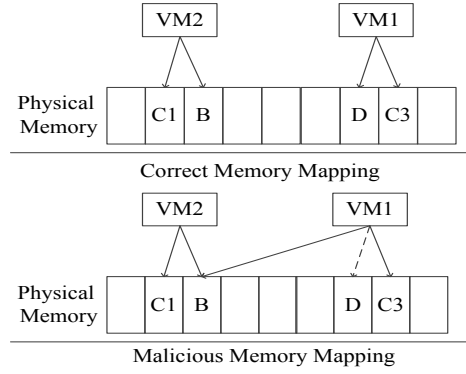


Fig. 1. The execution process of double mapping.

*a) Modifying the Interaction Data:* For the modification of the critical interaction data during the context switching process, the attacker can obtain the address of VMCS and modify it, such as HOST\_RIP, GUEST\_CR0, EPTP, et al. For example, modifying the value of privilege register, CR0, can close DEP mechanism, and modifying CR4 can close SMEP mechanism.

*b) Modifying the Address Mapping of EPT:* Modification of EPT can result in memory information leakage. There are two attack scenes, double mapping, and remapping attack.

**Scene 1.** For double mapping attack, attackers control and compromise a VM, then obtain the privilege of hypervisor through VM escape attack, and maliciously access the VMCS structure to obtain the value of EPT\_Pointer(EPTP). The attack process is as shown in Figure 1. There are two guest VMs, VM1 (attacker) and VM2 (victim). In this way, EPTP of VM1 and EPTP of VM2 are respectively obtained by attackers. Also, for a guest virtual address (GVA) in VM2, named 'A', is mapped to the corresponding real physical address, named 'B'. For VM1, the real physical address corresponding to the guest virtual address 'C' is 'D', then 'D' is modified to be 'B' by modifying the value of the last page item of EPT. At last, 'A' and 'C' are mapped to the real physical address 'B', no address is mapped to 'D'. Then VM1 can access the data of VM2 successfully through accessing 'B', this attack process is called double mapping attack.

**Scene 2.** For the remapping attack, there are VM1 (attacker) and VM2 (victim). A physical page (named 'A') used by VM2 is released after it is used and it is released with VM2's content. After 'A' is released, VM1 remaps a GVA (named 'E') to 'A'. By this way, VM1 can access the content on 'A' used by VM2 through 'E', causing information leakage. Through the analysis of these two kinds of attack models, it is necessary to achieve attack prevention.

### B. Assumption

We propose some assumptions. First, we assume hardware resources are trusted including processor, buses, BIOS, UEFI

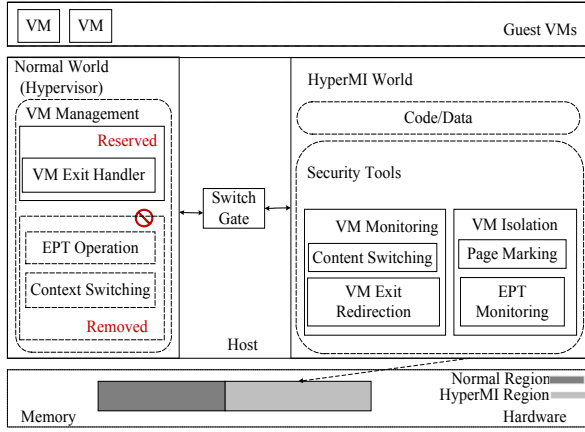


Fig. 2. The architecture of HyperMI.

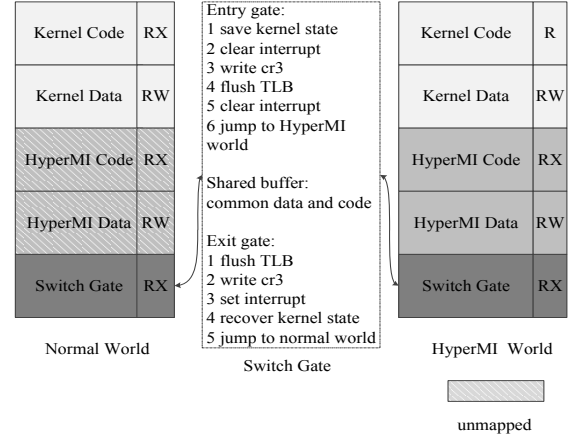


Fig. 3. An overview of address space layout.

and so on, the trusted boot based on hardware can ensure the security and integrity of bootloaders. The TCB contains created HyperMI and hardware resources. Second, this paper does not consider denial of service attack (DOS), side channel attack and hardware-based attack, such as cold-boot attack and RowHammer. Third, we assume that there exists no software that runs at a higher privilege level than the hypervisor.

### III. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

#### A. Architecture

HyperMI is designed to provide a secure isolated execution environment to protect VMs against compromised hypervisor without depending on a higher privilege level software than the hypervisor or hardware.

Figure 2 shows the architecture, the overall system contains three parts: several isolated VMs, hypervisor either in normal world or in HyperMI word, memory hardware including HyperMI region for HyperMI world and normal region for normal world.

The origin hypervisor is divided into two parts: HyperMI world which security tools can run in and normal world which hypervisor runs in. Firstly, HyperMI world is used to run security tools when hypervisor is compromised, so that these tools running in secure HyperMI world can resist attacks from compromised hypervisor. Secondly, operations for EPT and context switching module are deprived from normal world for security, then are put into HyperMI world, but VM exit handler module is reserved to handle VM exit in normal world. Thirdly, these two worlds can communicate with each other through the only secure channel, named Switch Gate.

While the hypervisor together with guest VMs run in the normal world, the hypervisor is forced to request HyperMI to perform four operations on its behalf: 1) switching context between the hypervisor and VMs, 2) updating EPT of VMs, 3) verifying the pages when executing swapping operations to resist double mapping attack, 4) verifying the pages when

executing releasing operations to resist remapping attack. After setting up the HyperMI, the whole system is ready to create isolated executing environment. With these designs, HyperMI enforces the isolation and protection of memory used by each VM. Furthermore, HyperMI guarantees security of interaction, memory isolation between the hypervisor and VMs.

#### B. HyperMI World

The creation of HyperMI World has two purposes: 1) creating a address space which can provide protection for key data and memory of VMs. 2) creating a software system that does not depend on hardware devices and adapts to multi-system platforms. The key point of its design is that it creates another address space at the same privilege-level with hypervisor. Unlike other same privilege-level software, HyperMI World depends on another new page table and two different address spaces.

**Creating HyperMI World** We use two isolated address spaces based on two sets of page tables to achieve isolation of HyperMI World. Figure 3 describes the address space layout of two worlds through two sets of page table, the normal page table and HyperMI page table. On the left of Figure 3, the normal page table contains code and data of the normal world except for that of HyperMI World. This can prevent compromised hypervisor from breaking the integrity of HyperMI World. Programs running in normal world can not access data in HyperMI World. On the right of Figure 3, all address is mapped in HyperMI page table. HyperMI code remains executable and HyperMI data remains writable. What's the most important, kernel code is forbid to execute when HyperMI World is active, so that it can not attack HyperMI World.

**Creating Switch Gate** In the middle of Figure 3, the switch gate includes entry/exit gate and shared buffer. Entry gate provides the only entrance to HyperMI World and the exit gate provides the address for returning to the normal world. The

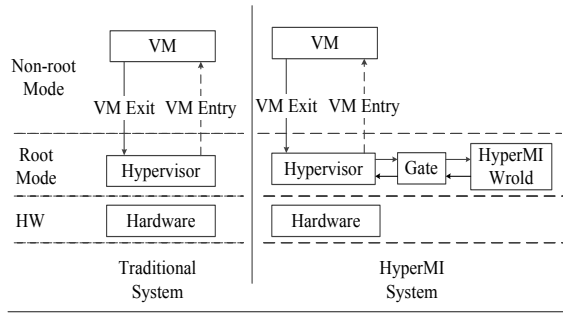


Fig. 4. Interaction comparison.

shared buffer contains common data and code in normal world and HyperMI World. Common code is switch code, common data is entrance address to HyperMI World and return address to the normal world. The switch gate is mapped at the same place in the normal world and HyperMI World because the switch gate code must be called by the two worlds before and after switching. Of course, the entrance address must be protected after switching to HyperMI World in case that a attacker accesses HyperMI World causally after trusted boot. This is introduced in section III-D.

### C. VM Protection Approach

**VM Monitoring** VMCS and EPT are the most two important data structures that the hypervisor can utilize to interact with the VM. And these two data structures can only be accessed by the hypervisor in traditional virtualization environment without HyperMI. If the hypervisor is compromised by an attacker, during the interval between VM Exit and VM Entry, some attacks can be conducted to subvert the VM.

**VMCS Monitoring** 1) The compromised hypervisor can illegally get the address of VMCS and modify the content of VMCS directly. It can falsify the value of HOST\_RIP and execute control flow hijack attack. 2) It can also supply the VM with a dedicated illegal EPT by tampering the value of (EPTP) of VMCS. 3) The compromised hypervisor can illegally modify the content of EPT entries. Because the EPT is responsible for managing all physical memory mapping of VM. The compromised hypervisor can easily conduct remapping or double mapping attack to the VM. 4) The attacker can load EPT of any VM and access the VM's normal memory illegally.

Hence, we straightforwardly provide the protection for these data structures by using HyperMI World. These two data are hidden in HyperMI World in case of malicious access from hypervisor. In specific, at each time when VM exits to compromised hypervisor, HyperMI catches these events and

transfers VM Exit/Entry to HyperMI World. All functions that access VMCS and EPT entry are hooked and trapped into HyperMI World.

We hide VMCS in HyperMI World to avoid access from hypervisor. In order to ensure that some functions (vmcs\_writel, vmcs\_readl et al.) can access VMCS properly, HyperMI hooks these functions into HyperMI World. So hypervisor requests HyperMI to handle operations about VMCS and return the corresponding result for the legal request.

Since VMCS is hidden in HyperMI World, all context management (accessing VMCS operations) must be trapped to hypervisor. During VM Exit, hypervisor needs to access VM Exit reason data of VMCS, and then deal with the exit event. Because hypervisor can not access VMCS, VM exit redirection is designed. The control flow jumps to HyperMI World to access VM exit reason data of VMCS structure, then switches to hypervisor and executes VM exit event handler function. VM Entry also accesses VMCS in HyperMI World. The control flow is shown as Figure 4.

TABLE I  
VM-MARK TABLE.

VM-Mark Table			
Label	VMID	EPTID	EPT_Address
Description	The VM Identifier	The EPT Identifier	The Entry Address of EPT

**EPT Monitoring** Some functions, EPT creating, loading, walking and destroying, need access address of EPT. It can cause system suspend if they can not access the address of EPT. In order to ensure these functions can execute normally, HyperMI places hooks on these functions, then dispatches them to HyperMI World and handles appropriately. In the meantime, HyperMI avoids double mapping attack to ensure that there is only one virtual address mapping to one physical memory page during EPT updating, and handles remapping problems to ensure the content of page cleaned after page is swapped out. This will be described in detail later.

If EPT isolation among VMs can not be guaranteed, a malicious VM can load other VM's EPT and access the memory data. It is important to ensure EPT isolation and one VM only access own corresponding EPT. To ensure one EPT for one VM, HyperMI creates the VM-Mark structure stored in HyperMI World as Table 1 described. It records VMID, EPTID, EPT\_Address and binds them together. VMID is created when the VM is created. EPTID and EPT\_Address is recorded as long as the EPT of current VM is created.

**VM Isolation** Isolating memory is another aspect that should be considered. We need to ensure that the VM and the hypervisor can only access their own corresponding memory, as shown in Figure 5. Without memory isolation, a VM may suffer double mapping attack and remapping attack described in section II-A. We use Page-Mark structure described in Table II to record the owner and status of every page.

In order to go against the double mapping attack in the process of EPT updating, HyperMI should finish these two

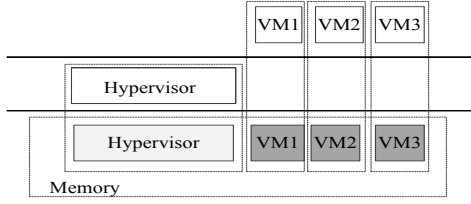


Fig. 5. Memory isolation for VMs.

TABLE II  
PAGE-MARK TABLE.

Page-Mark Table		
Label	OwnerID	Used
Description	The Owner Identifier	Free or Used

tasks: 1) It should verify the owner of pages when EPT updates. 2) It should mark the OwnerID field of Page-Mark structure for unused pages or thwart the mapping operation for used pages in case of malicious double mapping behavior. So page marking technique can divide all the pages into different catalogs: the pages of hypervisor or the pages of every VM.

To go against the remapping attack, HyperMI cleans the content of the page when the page is swapped out, so attackers can't get the content of the page by the way of remapping. HyperMI clears the Page-Mark structure of the corresponding page.

#### D. Security Guarantee for HyperMI World

The security of HyperMI World guarantees the security of HyperMI, because HyperMI relies on HyperMI World to provide a secure execution environment. Nevertheless, without any protection measures, the normal world kernel page table is not secure for four reasons: 1) Attackers can control page table with the highest privilege after hypervisor is compromised. 2) Attackers can bypass the switch gate to break the security of HyperMI World. 3) Attackers with the highest privilege can free to execute privileged instructions to access the value of privilege registers, such as CR0, CR3 and so on. 4) Attackers can carry out DMA attack to access HyperMI World casually. We detail the protection measures for these four types of attacks below.

**Protecting Page Table** There are three reasons for controlling the two sets of kernel page tables: 1) To access casually or bypass HyperMI World, the attacker can tamper normal page table to map address of HyperMI World or load malicious page table to CR3. 2) The attacker can cover the hooked functions, redirect the functions to malicious code and bypass interaction monitoring of HyperMI. 3) To break HyperMI World, malicious kernel code with execution permission can be executed to subvert HyperMI.

For the first attack, we remove all entries that map to HyperMI World from the page table in normal world. Deprive the ability to access CR3 of the kernel. For the second attack, we intercept the accessing operation to CR0 and maintain the WP bit as 1. We stick to  $W \oplus X$  and maintain the code segment of hooked functions unwritable. For the third attack, we set the kernel code segment as NX (non-executable) when HyperMI World is running. For more security, we modify the kernel to configure these two sets of page table as read-only by setting the memory regions of the page tables unwritable. This is necessary to prevent the page tables from being modified by attackers. Any write permission modification of two sets of page table must cause the kernel to page fault, then we dispatch page fault to HyperMI World to verify the correctness of address mapping.

**Worlds Switching Securely** HyperMI creates a switch gate between the normal world and HyperMI World by loading entry address of page table into CR3. In order to ensure switch security, we design the switch process as follows.

The switching process described in Figure 3 is as follows: 1) Save the kernel state to the stack including general registers and interrupt enable/disable status. 2) Clear the interrupt with the CLI instruction. 3) Load the page table to the register CR3. 4) Interrupt again. 5) Jump to the HyperMI World. For the exit process, the control flow returns to the normal world by performing the operations in the reverse order.

**Accessing Privilege Registers Securely** The hypervisor without HyperMI is privileged and it can free to execute privileged instructions, so that it can write any value to the related privileged registers. 1) Malicious attackers can close DEP mechanism by writing CR0, close SMEP mechanism by writing CR4. 2) Kernel code can load a crafted page table to bypass HyperMI World by converting a meticulously constructed address of one page table to CR3. To prevent the attack, HyperMI deprives sensitive privilege instructions executed by the hypervisor, and dispatches captured events to HyperMI World. HyperMI World can choose how to handle this event, such as executing, issuing alerts or terminating the process.

**Resisting DMA Attack** DMA operation is used by hardware devices to access physical address directly. Malicious attackers can read or write arbitrary memory regions including HyperMI World by DMA. Therefore, it is a crucial focus of intercepting direct access to physical pages belonging to HyperMI World by DMA operation. Fortunately, HyperMI employs IOMMU mechanism to avoid DMA attack, which can carry out access control for DMA access. Our approach adopts two policies: 1) We remove the corresponding mapping of the critical data from the page table which IOMMU uses. These critical unmapped data includes the entrance address of HyperMI, data recording Page-Mark structure used in VM memory isolation, VM-Mark structure used in EPT management and so on. 2) HyperMI intercepts the address mapping functions about I/O, verifies whether the address belongs to an address space of HyperMI World, then chooses to map or unmap.

Through the above security measures, HyperMI can be protected from being bypassed and being breaking, thus providing a secure execution environment for VM protection.

#### IV. EVALUATION

In this section, we first analyze the security guarantees provided by HyperMI. Then, we evaluate the performance overhead by running a set of benchmarks on both standard KVM and HyperMI.

##### A. Security Analysis

In this section, we elaborate the security evaluation on how HyperMI achieves memory isolation among VMs through the monitoring interaction data. In addition, we analyze the security of HyperMI itself. Table III shows the real attack instances in line with the above attack model.

**Modifying Interaction-Data Attack** We clarify interaction data including VMCS in Section III-C. To prevent interaction-data leakage, we protect VMCS from the attacker. Firstly, VMCS is hidden in HyperMI World and can not be accessed by hypervisor. Secondly, functions that can access VMCS are hooked into HyperMI World, therefore, no functions outside HyperMI World can access VMCS. The attacker can not get location of VMCS and access it. This prevents attackers from tampering interaction data attacks. We examine protection for VMCS by conducting several attack cases which are widely adopted in real world. Table III lists all attack cases we used. The attack, named Interaction-data attack, tries to tamper the Guest\_CR3 field in VMCS. This attack fails because it can not access VMCS. According to the above analysis, the attacker can not access VMCS, and can not conduct further attacks. Therefore, the VM interaction data can be protected by HyperMI.

**Subverting Memory Across VMs Attack** The main attacks that attackers can execute on subverting memory are double mapping attack and remapping attack. Firstly, double mapping attack succeeds by allocating memory pages that have already been owned by a hostile VM to a victim VM. Page marking and write-protection of EPT prevent this kind of attack. For each new mapping to a VM, HyperMI validates whether the page is already in use according to Used field of Page-Mark structure. Meanwhile, the allocated pages must be marked in the Page-Mark table for tracking. Secondly, another challenge is page remapping attack by a compromised hypervisor from a victim VM to a conspiratorial VM. This attack involves remapping a private page to another address space. To defeat this type of attack, HyperMI ensures that whenever a page is released, its content must be zeroed out before creating a new mapping.

We implement a real attack, CVE-2017-8106 in kernel version 3.12. A privileged KVM guest OS user accesses EPT, conducts attacks via a single-context INVEPT instruction with a NULL EPT Pointer. Attackers can not implement successfully and incur EPT access fault because HyperMI hides the address of EPT in HyperMI World and hijacks the loading of EPT. HyperMI verifies the value of EPT

TABLE III  
HYPERVISOR ATTACKS AGAINST HYPERMI.

Attack	Description
Interaction-data Attack	Load a crafted GUEST_CR3 value
CVE-2017-8106	Load a crafted EPT value
DMA Attack	Access HyperMI World by DMA
Code Injection Attack	Inject code and cover hooked functions to bypass HyperMI World

to avoid load NULL value. Therefore, HyperMI can avoid subverting memory across VMs including double mapping attack, remapping attack as well as malicious EPT access.

**Destroying HyperMI World** HyperMI is created by relying on page tables. We analyze the protection of HyperMI World from four aspects, page table modification attack, hooks redirection attack, reg modification attack and DMA attack.

1) *Page Table Modification Attack*: Page table protection has been introduced in section III-D. The entry address mapping of the HyperMI World page table is deleted from the old page table to prevent the kernel from accessing HyperMI World directly through the page table mapping. When HyperMI World is active, the kernel code does not have any executable permissions in case of attacking running processes in HyperMI World. An attacker may attack in two ways. First, the attacker may try to directly access the new page table address on the kernel page table by virtual address mapping. When he accesses it, there is page fault due to the absence of address mapping. Second, the attacker may run kernel code while HyperMI World is active to attack programs running in HyperMI World. This can be prevented because of the absence of executable privilege of kernel code.

2) *Hooks Redirection Attack*: Due to the code of hooked functions including VMCS operations, EPT operations and control register access operations is writable-protection. Accessing CR0 register operation used to set  $W \oplus X$  is controlled and page table updating used to change code execution privilege is limited, the attacker can not redirect hooked functions and bypass monitoring.

3) *Reg Modification Attack*: Some registers access operations including CR0, CR3, CR4, are controlled and hooked to HyperMI World. CR0 register can control the  $W \oplus X$  privilege of code, CR3 can control the loading of the page table and CR4 can decide SMEP mechanism. Protection for page table, hooked functions and regs, plays a role mutually in protection for HyperMI.

4) *DMA Attack*: DMA attack is described in detail in section III-D. Attackers can use this feature to read or corrupt arbitrary memory regions. DMA attack is not a threat to HyperMI, because HyperMI is inherently secure against DMA using IOMMU. Remove the corresponding mapping of the critical data from the page table which IOMMU uses. These critical unmapped data includes the entrance address of HyperMI, data recording Page-Mark structure used in VM isolation, VM-Mark structure and so on. DMA attack that aims at modifying the VM memory or the page tables can also be defeated.

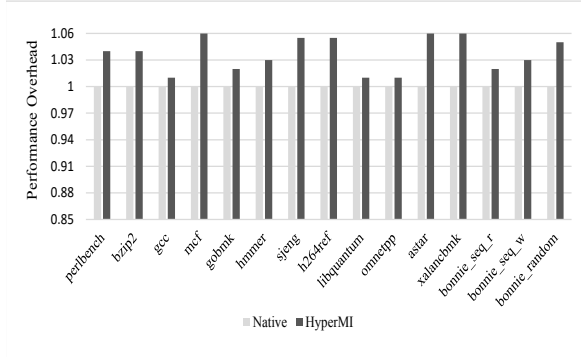


Fig. 6. Performance overhead.

### B. Performance Evaluation

In HyperMI, the hypervisor is modified so that HyperMI World is initialized during the boot up sequence. This includes creating a new memory page table for HyperMI, allocating memory pages, as well as creating Page-Mark table and VM-Mark table. This process introduces security verification for pages according to Page-Mark table, and security accessing for VMCS in HyperMI World during VM Exit/Entry sequence. The kernel is modified to place hooks upon some functions, introducing worlds switching overhead using switch gate.

In order to assess the effectiveness of all aspects of HyperMI, we conduct a set of experiments to evaluate the performance impact imposed by HyperMI against an original KVM system (the baseline). We run two groups of experiments, compare the performance overhead including benchmarks performance overhead and VM load time. For simplicity, we only present the performance evaluation on a server with 64 cores and 32 GB memory, running at 2.0 GHz and guest VM with 2 virtual cores. The version of the hypervisor and guest VM is 3.10.1. Different experiments are based on different numbers of guest VMs with different memory size. Both the original hypervisor and HyperMI systems have the same configuration except the protection supported by HyperMI. The deviation of these experiments is insignificant. All the experiments are replicated fifty times and the average results are reported here.

**Benchmarks Performance** In order to obtain the impact of HyperMI on the whole system, we measure HyperMI with microbenchmarks and application benchmarks. We use one guest VM with 1 GB memory size.

To better understand the factor causing the performance overhead, we experiment with compute-bound benchmark (SPEC CPU2006 suite) and one I/O-bound benchmark (Bonnie++) running upon original KVM and HyperMI in a Linux VM. The experiment result described in Figure 6(the last three groups) shows a relatively low cost. Most of the SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks (the first twelve groups) show less than 6% performance overhead. It's not surprising as there are few OS interactions and these tests are compute-bound. Mcf, astar, and xalanbmk with the highest performance loss allocate lots of memory. HyperMI handles Page-Mark structure and

TABLE IV  
EXECUTION TIME OF VM OPERATION(S).

Test Case	VM Create	VM Destroy
No_HyperMI	11.79 s	1.75 s
With_HyperMI	12.97 s	1.89 s
Efficiency	1.1	1.08

verifies the legality of page mapping when EPT updates. This can incur worlds switching which involves controlling register access and incur VM exit which involves EPT updating. For Bonnie++, we choose a 1000 MB file to perform the sequential read, write and random access. The performance loss of sequential read, write and random access is 2%, 3% and 5%, not high, the main reason is that HyperMI has no extra memory operations for I/O data. The performance result shows that HyperMI introduces trivial switch overhead of two worlds and trivial overhead of memory isolation of VMs.

**VM Load Time** The load time of a VM is a critical aspect of performance to be considered because it influences user experience. We design experiments to evaluate the performance impact of HyperMI for VM loading. We measure the impact of completely booting and shutting down a VM (configured with 2 VCPU and 512MB memory). As Table IV shown, the booting time is suffered a 1.1 times slowdown under HyperMI, shutdown time is suffered a 1.08 times slowdown, due to the extra overhead of worlds switching and Page-Mark table accessing in HyperMI World. Such overhead is worth for HyperMI.

## V. RELATED WORK

We describe the related work from these three aspects, reconstructed hypervisor, customized hardware, and the same privilege-level isolation.

### A. Customized Hardware

Some works at hardware level complete the protection of the process by extending the virtualization capabilities [10], [8]. These tasks provide fine-grained isolation of processes and modules from the hardware level. Haven [2] uses Intel SGX [6], [9] to isolate cloud services from other services and prevent cross-domain access. SGX provides fine-grained protection at the application space instead of hypervisor space, and needs developers spend time reconstructing code and dividing code into trusted part or untrusted part. SGX has requirement for version of CPU and is applied on a few platforms.

### B. Reconstructed Hypervisor

Except for approaches based on hardware, some works [11], [12], [15] pay attention to software isolation. Pre-allocating physical resource and completed isolated environment for every VM can avoid VM cross-domain attack, and data leakage attack. NOVA [12] divides hypervisor into micro-hypervisor and user hypervisor running in root mode, adopts an idea which is similar to fault domain isolation to guarantee an isolated user hypervisor for every VM. The drawback of

this approach is the lack of fractional traditional hypervisor functions. HyperLock [15] prepares backup KVM for every VM by copying KVM code, and ensures every VM run in own isolated space. These approaches redesign hypervisor greatly. In contrary, HyperMI adopts a feasible way to isolate VM without lots of modification of hypervisor.

### C. The Same Privilege Level Isolation

Some efforts, SKEE [1] and SecPod [13], [5], adopt the same privilege-level idea to avoid performance overhead of inter-level translation. SKEE can only be applied to limited levels of system software in comparison with HyperMI. First, targeting ARM's 32-bit architecture, SKEE capitalizes mainly on Translation Table Base Control Register (TTBCR) for dynamic page table activation. To be more specific, SKEE creates separate page tables for the secure world and activates it in a timely manner by modifying the N field of TTBCR. However, as this hardware feature is only defined in the kernel privilege level on AArch32, SKEE is not commonly applicable to different levels of system software, such as hypervisors. SecPod, an extensible approach for virtualization-based security systems that can provide both strong isolation and the compatibility with modern hardware. The biggest difference between SecPod and HyperMI is that SecPod creates the secure isolation environment for every VM. SecPod solves the problem of VM address mapping with the assistance of shadow page table (SPT) technology.

We neither adopt software at a higher level than the hypervisor, nor use customized hardware. Inspired by the same privilege-level, we propose HyperMI World placed at the same privilege-level with hypervisor. HyperMI is independent on multi-platforms and practical for cloud providers.

## VI. CONCLUSION

We introduce HyperMI, an approach that enables x86 platforms to support a secure isolated execution environment at the same privilege-level with hypervisor. The environment is designed to provide memory isolation protection for VMs, and event-driven runtime monitoring for interaction between hypervisor and VM. This approach, which does not rely on additional hardware devices or a higher privilege level software, has fewer changes to system and fewer requirements for types of CPU hardware device. It reflects good practicality, portability, and independence on multi-platforms. And security analysis describes protection for VM and HyperMI itself, the performance evaluation shows its efficiency by introducing negligible performance overhead. It can be implemented widely in real-world for cloud providers.

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