



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**PROTECTING COMPROMISED SYSTEMS WITH A  
VIRTUAL-MACHINE PROTECTION AND CHECKING  
SYSTEM USING OUT-OF-GUEST PERMISSIONS**

by

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December 2017

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**PROTECTING COMPROMISED SYSTEMS WITH A VIRTUAL-MACHINE  
PROTECTION AND CHECKING SYSTEM USING OUT-OF-GUEST  
PERMISSIONS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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from the

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December 2017**

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## ABSTRACT

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

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<b>NIST</b>	National Institute of Standards and Technology
<b>OS</b>	Operating System
<b>VM</b>	Virtual Machines
<b>CPU</b>	Central Processing Unit
<b>VMI</b>	Virtual Machine Introspection
<b>ACL</b>	Access Control List
<b>SACL</b>	Shadow ACL
<b>VMPCS-OGP</b>	Virtual-Machine Protection and Checking System Using Out-Of-Guest Permissions
<b>API</b>	Application program interface
<b>VT</b>	Virtualization Technology
<b>PT</b>	Page Table
<b>EPT</b>	Extended Page Tables
<b>GMFN</b>	Guest Machine Frame Number
<b>MFN</b>	Machine Frame Number
<b>IOMMU</b>	Input/Output Memory Management Unit
<b>GVA</b>	Guest Virtual Address
<b>MAC</b>	Mandatory Access Control
<b>HAP</b>	High Assurance Processes
<b>OI</b>	Object Identifiers

<b>SGX</b>	Software Guard Extensions
<b>IDS</b>	Intrusion Detection System
<b>HIDS</b>	Host Intrusion Detection System (IDS)
<b>NIDS</b>	Network IDS
<b>NIC</b>	Network Interface Card
<b>IoT</b>	Internet of Things
<b>SCADA</b>	Supervisory control and data acquisition
<b>PAM</b>	pluggable authentication module
<b>PWD</b>	present working directory



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## Executive Summary

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## Acknowledgments

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# CHAPTER 1:

## Introduction

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System virtualization has been increasing in popularity over the last years. It makes it possible to run many and different Operating Systems (OS) on the same physical machine. That kind of Operating System (OS), known as Virtual Machines (VM), is run independently of each other on the same physical machine, known as host, without any indication that there is another OS running on the same Host. It is essentially a resource sharing mechanism. The software that facilitates this capability is called a hypervisor.

The emergence of cloud computing has increased the requirement of many new and different services from different vendors, usually around the globe. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) [1], "cloud computing is a model for enabling ubiquitous, convenient, on-demand network access to a shared pool of configurable computing resources (e.g., networks, servers, storage, applications, and services) that can be rapidly provisioned and released with minimal management effort or service provider interaction".

Virtualization gave a solution to the increasing requirement of resources for these services to run on. Instead of having many separate physical machines running the required different software, usually resulting in underutilization, one machine, with better specifications, was used, and with the use of virtualization, each vendor could run his services on a dedicated VM.

Also, in order to improve network security on these machines, as well as redundancy among different services, instead of having one VM running all the services required by one vendor, service providers started using many different VMs, each requiring less resources and running one or just a couple of services. This way, if one VM fails, the rest of the services keep running. Furthermore, by having each VM run only a few services, the attack surface available for possible vulnerability exploitation is reduced significantly.

This increase in the use of virtualization has driven even hardware manufacturers, like Intel and AMD, to introduce special virtualization Central Processing Unit (CPU) instructions,

to facilitate better, more reliable and secure allocation, sharing, usage and performance of VMs.

Despite the evolution of CPU virtualization instructions, and the continuous development of more efficient and secure hypervisors, the bottom-line remains the same. A VM is still a system, with all the vulnerabilities of its running OS and software, which at some point in time, will be the victim of a successful exploitation.

## **1.1 Problem Statement**

The motivation for this research came from that idea exactly. When an OS is running directly on a physical machine, it is on its own to allocate and use its resources and protect itself from network or other types of attacks. But, when it runs on a virtualization platform, the hypervisor stands between the hardware and the running software, and has full visibility in what is happening inside a VM.

The native Linux file permission system, although simple to manage and efficient, it lacks fine-grained user/group access to files. Once a user belongs to a group, nothing prohibits him from accessing all the files accessible to that group. Furthermore, when an attacker gains access to a system, he usually will try to escalate his privileges by having access to the root account. From that point there is nothing out of reach and the attacker has unrestricted access to the entire system and is free to read and modify files and change the system's configuration to his liking, to serve his purposes.

In [2], the author names a new technique which leverages this viewing ability of the hypervisor. Virtual Machine Introspection (VMI) is the “approach of inspecting a virtual machine from the outside for the purpose of analyzing the software running inside it”. Having in mind that a system will be eventually subverted, we want to leverage the introspection capability of a hypervisor to try to protect critical files for the OS, the user or both. We want to create an out-of-guest Access Control List (ACL), which we call Shadow ACL (SACL), for managing file access inside a VM. We call this mechanism Protecting Compromised Systems with a Virtual-Machine Protection and Checking System Using Out-Of-Guest Permissions (VMPCS-OGP).

In our research, we develop a prototype for file access monitor and control outside a VM.

We use a 64-bit Ubuntu OS running on top of a Xen hypervisor. The prototype leverages the VMI capability of the Xen hypervisor leveraged with the LibVMI Application program interface (API) [3], as well as DRAKVUF [4], a system used for dynamic malware analysis. It includes a modified DRAKVUF implementation, as well as prototypes of the ACL, kept on the hypervisor, to be enforced on the guest VM. Our approach is to provide a more tightened but fine-grained environment.

In this work we will try to assess how we can leverage the introspection capabilities of the Xen hypervisor to improve the OS built-in confidentiality, integrity and availability mechanisms. Some of these cases include denying access to the root user, who has access to the entire filesystem. We want to make a more fine-grained access control to fill the gap of the Linux native permission bits, by denying access to files on users that belong to a group with access. Furthermore, we want to alter the user permissions, by keeping a SACL. Furthermore, we will try to enforce append-only permission instead of generic write for specific cases of files, which include primarily log files, as we would like to prevent a malicious action to be removed from any logs, as part of covering the tracks of the malicious activity.

This solution can potentially be used in a variety of platforms like Internet of Things (IoT) or Supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems, cellphones, cloud solutions, essentially everything that runs on a virtualized environment. It could also be used to enhance the filesystem security of end-of-life systems that do not receive any security updates and are more susceptible to exploitation.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The primary issue we will address in this research is whether we can enforce out-of-guest permissions to check access to the files of a system, so that the attacker is not able to read or write critical files on the system. Following that we will address:

- What is the best way to implement a monitor for file access on the guest.
- What is the performance overhead.
- If this mechanism can be leveraged to identify a compromised system or a system actively being compromised.
- If it is manageable to monitor all files on a system or only specific ones.

- What is the best way to implement VMPCS-OGP on a guest and still provide usability and protection.
- If VMPCS-OGP can be used to discover how a system was compromised and attacker methods in compromising a system – sort of honey pot approach.
- If we can return a valid error to the VM while denying access to a file, so that it does not reveal the extra security check imposed by the hypervisor.
- Can we enforce an append-only write policy for files like logs.

### **1.3 Organization**

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the concepts and thesis focus. Chapter 2 covers some background information for this thesis research used platform, as well as some of the security solution already presented, that make use of VMI. Chapter 3 analyzes the design and methodology of the implemented mechanism, and Chapter 4 discusses the performance testing results and presents our conclusions. Chapter 5 suggests future work.



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## CHAPTER 2:

### Background

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In this chapter, the information of the relevant software and hardware is presented. In the first section a short introduction on virtualization and its benefits is given. Then the types of hypervisors and Xen, the platform we will work on, are described. The next section refers to VMI and Xen's capabilities in that field, the LibVMI API and DRAKVUF, the library and main application we will leverage, as well as the system call functionality and convention. Finally, some of the existing solutions that leverage introspection are reviewed.

### 2.1 Virtualization

Running many and different services on a single OS is not recommended anymore. Cheap hardware lead during the past years in systems that ran a plethora of different software, which became over time a challenge to manage efficiently and securely. Because hardware was inexpensive, service providers, preferred to run a service per physical system to achieve higher security [5]. On the downside, running one service per physical machine, resulted to underutilization of hardware and capabilities, as well as increased cost of maintenance. Virtualization was a solution to the problem [5]. By hosting different VMs on a single and powerful system solves many of the problems. Resources are used efficiently, with each service using only a part of the underlying hardware. Security is implemented easier, as it is much simpler to secure one machine running one service, than having to combine all of them on one. Redundancy between services is also achieved, since each VM is independent from the rest, and any failure does not affect the rest of the VMs.

But the advantages of virtualization do not stop there. Easy backup, restore, cloning and migration of a system are just a few of them. Creating snapshots of entire machines and restoring to a previous state, in case of corruption or misconfiguration, has become a trivial task. Also, modern hypervisors implement a very solid and sophisticated VM isolation, that pivoting from one VM to another, as well as hypervisor attacks, have become extremely difficult.

Hypervisor is the software that drives this mechanism. It runs directly on the hardware



Figure 2.1. Migrating to virtualization

and uses a separate OS installation and resides outside all the guest VMs. At the same time, since the hypervisor manages the allocation and usage of the physical resources, has a unique visibility of the internal state of each VM.

### 2.1.1 Hypervisor types

Different vendors provide their solution in virtualization. Generally, hypervisors are separated in two categories. Type-I or bare-metal hypervisors and type-II or hosted hypervisors.

Type-II hypervisors are applications, which require a host OS to run on. Typical type-II solution are VMWare Workstation and Oracle VirtualBox. These hypervisors work as any other application and the VMs run on top of them. Although they are simpler to manage for the average user, as well as for simple applications or use as testing environment, type-II hypervisors perform worse than type-I, as explained below.

Type-I hypervisors run directly on the hardware, managing the resources directly without the intervention of any host OS. On the contrary, a more privileged OS is used, to provide an API for the efficient management of the hypervisor and its hosted VMs. Type-I hypervisors



Figure 2.2. Architectural difference of type-I vs type-II hypervisors

are most commonly used in server deployment and enterprise solutions, where performance and efficiency are important. Figure 2.2 shows the basic architectural difference between the two types.

### 2.1.2 The Xen project

The Xen Project is an open-source type-I hypervisor [6]. Its small footprint and limited interface to the Guest, makes it more robust and secure. The hypervisor runs directly on top of the hardware, as depicted in Figure 2.3. It requires a host OS which acts as an interface between the hypervisor and the user, as well as paravirtualized guests. This host OS is called control or privileged domain, also known as Dom0, and runs at a more privileged level than the rest of the VMs. The rest of the VMs run on a lower privilege level and are called guest domains or DomUs.

To understand how this happens, we need to introduce another CPU architectural feature, which provides different privilege levels for the execution of the CPU instructions, depending on what is the nature of the program invoking them. This mechanism is called protection rings and is present on all modern CPUs and is used from all modern OSs. Protection rings are numbered 0 to 3, with 0 being the most privileged. Usually, applications run in ring 3, also called user mode, and the kernel and device drivers run in ring 3, also called privileged or supervisor mode. But, the hypervisor must run at a more privileged level than the guest OS, in order to allocate and manage the shared resources, otherwise there

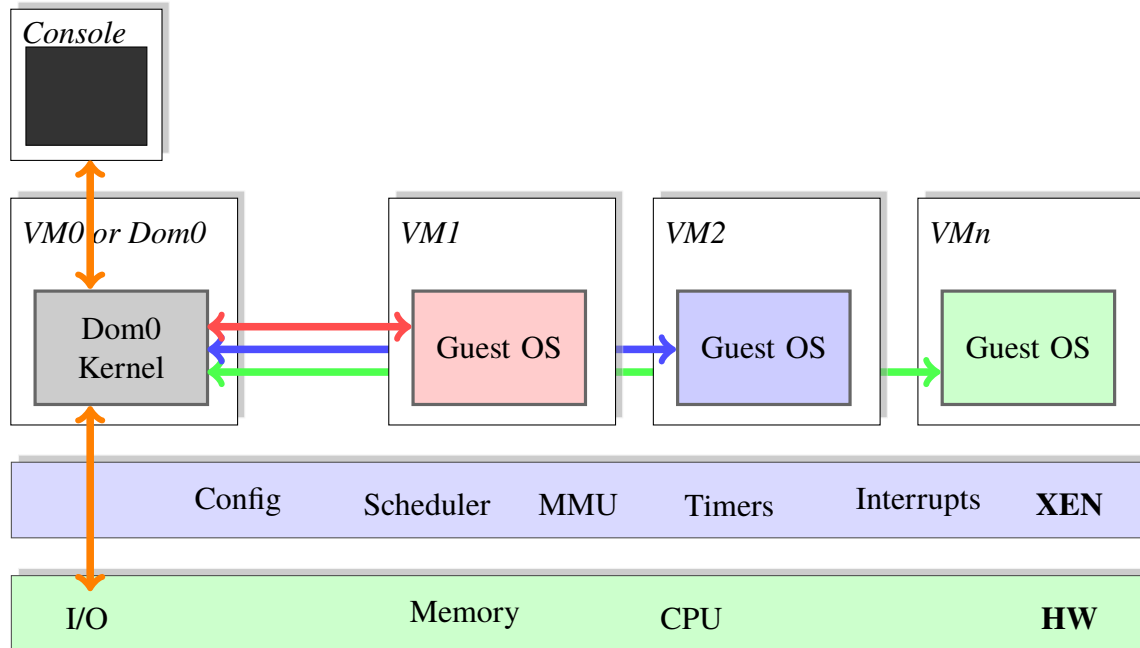


Figure 2.3. Xen Hypervisor Architecture

is a conflict when the guest OS or the hypervisor tries to manage the systems resources. Initially, paravirtualization was used. A technique where OS vendors had to modify their kernels to run on a different privilege level, besides 0, like 1 or 2, to avoid that conflict between the guest OS kernel and the hypervisor.

For type-I hypervisors to work efficiently and without any guest OS modification due to conflicts on the protection ring 0, CPU manufacturers have introduced a new ring -1 to support virtualization. The new ring, called hypervisor mode, is even more privileged than ring 0 and is employed only during hypervisor execution. This new architecture is supported on newer CPUs that employ Virtualization Technology (VT), VT-x for Intel and AMD-V for AMD processors. From the moment CPUs started supporting VT, the employment of VMs started rising significantly.

As virtualization keeps advancing, there is always the question of whether we can leverage it, to provide more than efficient sharing and usage of resources. The unique ability of the hypervisor to access the state of a VM, at a CPU register level or byte of memory, has been the center of research for many years.

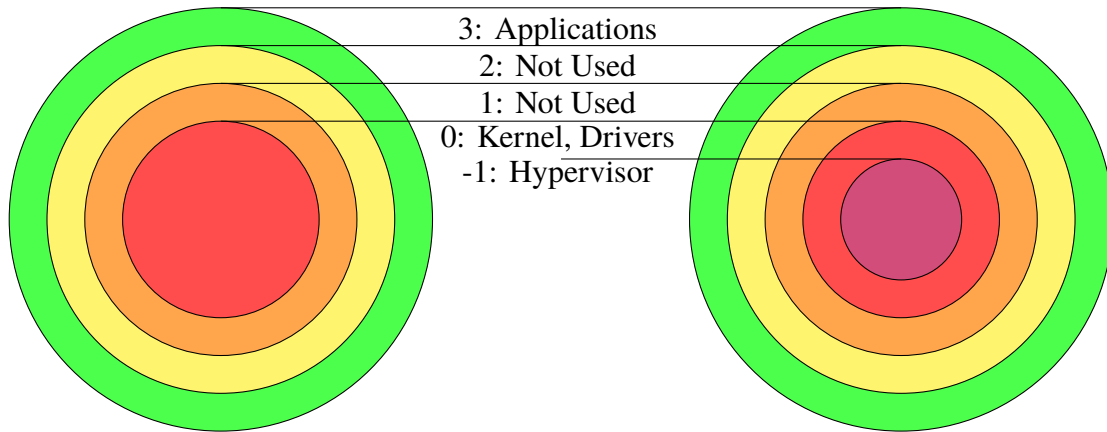


Figure 2.4. x86 protection rings

## 2.2 Virtual Machine Introspection

As firstly introduced as a concept in [2], VMI is the leverage of the more privileged status of the hypervisor, to inspect the internal state of a VM. The Xen hypervisor, trying to make that more efficient, included introspection methods to inspect its guest VMs. To make these methods more accessible and provide better introspection capabilities, XenAccess [7] was implemented, as well as the mem-events APIs to address that concept [8]. Because of strong research and security interest, introspection in Xen progressed and eventually LibVMI [3] was introduced. It is a library that makes the introspection capabilities of the Xen hypervisor even more accessible. It also provides access to part of the hypervisors introspection methods to third-party applications, using a C or Python interface, the later called PyVMI.

Initially, the memory management of the hypervisor included an extra step in the memory access mechanism. Because each VM assumes that has complete control over the entire address space, and assumes that it writes directly on the hardware, the hypervisor must introduce this extra step. Normally the OS had to translate the virtual address used by an application to a physical address on the hardware. For the hypervisor, each VM is essentially an application. Since every OS will try to write eventually on the same physical address, the hypervisor must make a distinction between the VMs. It assigns each VM a specific physical address space, which then tracks by having additional Page Table (PT) to translate between Guest Machine Frame Number (GMFN) and Machine Frame Number (MFN). This mapping is a one-to-one.



Figure 2.5. Hypervisor memory management concept

With the introduction of Input/Output Memory Management Unit (IOMMU), this extra step got eliminated. Additionally, when Intel, with its Haswell generation CPU, included the support of 512 Extended Page Tables (EPT)s, Xen's introspection capabilities increased, while the overhead reduced significantly. Furthermore, this allowed better isolation and therefore enhanced security between the VMs. Following that development, XenAccess and mem-events were redesigned and were evolved to altp2m, the new Xen VMI subsystem. One of the most critical changes that came with altp2m, was the concurrent assignment of multiple EPTs per VM, a capability which although it was available, was never leveraged. This was a significant improvement, as the hypervisor can keep track of different EPTs with different permissions, which can change during the execution of the VM.

LibVMI, as mentioned earlier, is an API which provides exposure to a subset of Xen's VMI functionalities, as well as other platforms. It makes possible to monitor the state of any VM, including memory and CPU state. Memory can be accessed directly, using physical addresses, or indirectly with the use of virtual addresses, OS and user application symbols. It can monitor memory and register events and provide notifications for them, allowing this way the execution of callback functions.

LibVMI focuses in a subset of introspection methods, that provide memory reading and writing capabilities from running VMs. It provides also methods for accessing and modifying CPU registers, as well as helper methods to pause and unpause a VM. Accessing a VM' memory space is not a trivial task. After detecting where the page directory is, a scan



Figure 2.6. Normal vs alt2m multiple EPT assignment

of the page tables follows, to detect the memory mapping of the running process. This gets translated to a virtual address, which later, on the hypervisor gets translated to a physical address. The following figure 2.8 shows a slightly different request, that of reading a kernel symbol.

Xen's introspection methods have a very significant impact on system security. The monitoring application resides on the Host and accesses the VMs state from the hypervisor. That implies a zero-footprint monitoring tool, from the VMs perspective. The monitor does not leave a trace of its action that can be detected from inside the guest.

Although this development was game-changing, it had its drawback. Just monitoring that values of specific parts of memory, or the CPU registers, over a time interval to make any inferences about the running state of the VM, leaves the VM vulnerable during the waiting period. A solution is to trap the memory regions that we want to monitor for access or modification. But this can be detected from a knowledgeable adversary.

To solve this problem the Xen's newest VMI API, alt2m, along with the substantial number of EPTs on the latest CPUs, were employed. This project, DRAKVUF [4], is a dynamic malware analysis platform. One of the most significant key features, is that it traps the



Figure 2.7. LibVMI out of guest access of VM state

memory addresses the user wants to monitor. When the event gets triggered, the EPT with the trapped address gets swapped with the original, continuing that way an unmodified execution of the guest VM. This allows the monitor of an arbitrary number of memory addresses, providing notification on every such event, while at the same time it is untraceable from inside the guest.

A compromised system is just a matter of time. Whether it results from user error, or targeted malicious activity, it is bound to happen. This eventuality led researchers to invest their resources to VM security. Some solutions focus on the analysis part, where by leveraging the hypervisors introspection methods gain better insight and understanding of the behavior and impact of a malware, so that it can be successfully intercepted. Other solutions have a more active role, by trying to protect crucial parts of a running VM. They prevent the kernel from being corrupt, or provide secure access to parts of memory where critical information or applications are stored. These solutions can provide valuable information on which events and actions led to a compromised system, or protect the vital OS space from being corrupt by malicious activity, each of them on its own unique way.



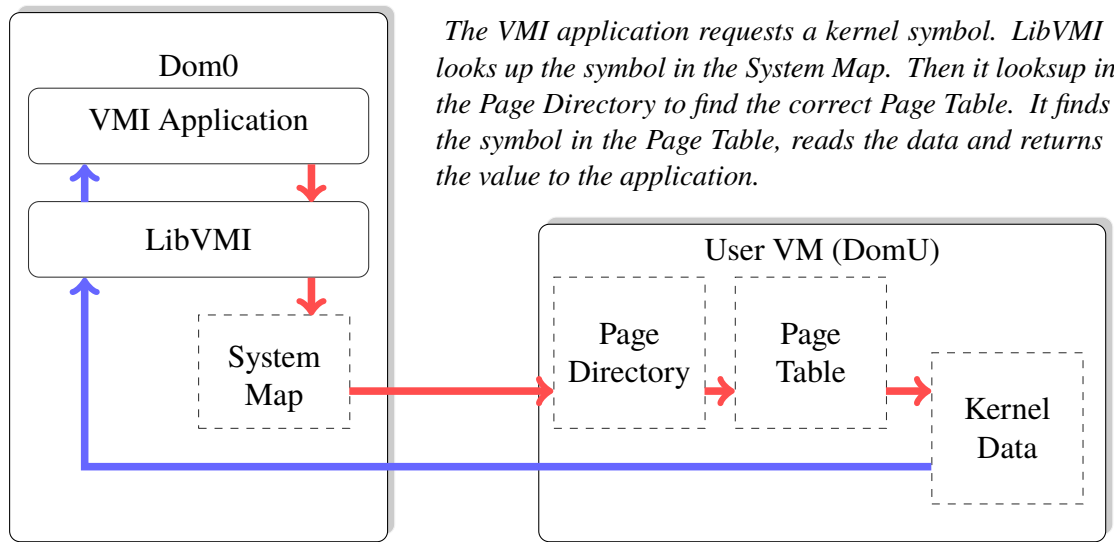


Figure 2.8. Using LibVMI to access the value of a kernel symbol

## 2.3 System Calls

Modern OSs are responsible for allocating their resources efficiently and securely to themselves, as well as the user level applications. The part of the OS assigned to manage these resources, like memory, hard disk drive access, or CPU time, is the kernel of the OS. The kernel is the heart of the OS that makes everything work in harmony without conflicts or resolves them if there are any, and runs in the kernel-space. When an application is running it runs in the so-called user-space. This distinction exists to prevent application from having direct access to the underlying hardware and is enforced with the protection rings, explained before in the chapter. The running application has no knowledge of any other application being executed on the same machine and whenever it requires some resource it asks the OS through the kernel. The kernel on its behalf accesses the hard disk drive, allocates memory or executes other commands that are considered privileged and the application cannot execute. It handles all the low-level details of what the application asked and returns the results of the action.

It is a very complicated software and the most crucial part of the OS. Therefore, not every process can access the kernel directly or invoke all its functions, to avoid corruption or misuse of the low-level access it has, to gain access where one should not. This limited interface to the kernel, a sort of protection mechanism, is called system call. The details of

making a system call depend on the OS.

Programming on a high-level language usually does not involve making system calls directly. Most languages have implemented wrappers for making a system call and simplifying the system call interface. Regardless that fact, the application will eventually have to make a system call to access some of the systems resources.

## **2.4 Related Work**

The Introspection concept gave birth to numerous interesting solutions, which target a more critical issue of the information world, that of computer security. Following are only some of the solutions produced so far. Although the approach on each research is different, the result and method of employment can potentially classify them according th the following categorization, also suggested in [9].

### **2.4.1 In-VM-Based Monitoring**

These solutions implement part of the application inside the VM. They employ an inside agent to gather information on the VM execution state and use the elevated privileges of the hypervisor to protect the agent from corruption or subversion. Depending on the application we can refine the classification more to detection, prevention and recovery solutions. Working in a VM to gather information for the hypervisor can become a very intensive task increasing the performance overhead. The hypervisor, as well as every VM, is a complete OS, running its processes and applications, its own scheduler and intercepting its own interrupts. Besides that, there is an extra overhead, when the execution switches between a VM and the hypervisor and vice versa, a pair of events called VM-exit and VM-entry (figure 2.9). Having a monitoring and logging application on the hypervisor, triggers a considerable number of VM-exit events. This is a problem some of the following solutions tried to address by using different approaches.

#### **Detection**

To prevent this overhead, a monitoring solution, SIM [10], used the hypervisor the following way. The hypervisor, since it provides all the resource allocation, can mark the memory pages allocated to a VM, different than the guest OS would. It can mark a page read-only



Figure 2.9. VM-exit and VM-entry events

when the OS marks it as read/write. This will trigger a VM-exit event and the hypervisor can act according to a different policy than that of the VM's OS. So, SIM, is placed inside the VM, monitoring the guest OS, but at the same time is protected by being placed on a protected by the hypervisor region of the VM's address space.

Virtuoso [11], is a tool that tries to bridge that semantic gap by automating the process of extracting OS kernel information, relevant to introspection. It runs a helper program inside the VM, which yields the wanted result. It analyzes the execution trace of that helper program and generates the introspection code that will give the same result when ran from the hypervisor. This method helps gain some knowledge about the internal machine state without having the required intricate knowledge of OS internals, but from the hypervisor's point of view.

### Prevention

In [12], in the same manner, Lares tries to modify the guest OS minimally, so that the code used for monitoring can be protected easily, while all the introspection and decision making code is placed in a security VM. The two communicate through the hypervisor, which protects the hooked code in the untrusted VM, while at the same time provides information to the security VM. It also provides communication between the VMs, so that the decision making on the security VM can be enforced to the untrusted one. In this case, the monitoring happens on process creation, allowing or denying the execution of programs, as defined in a whitelist.

SHype [13] is a modified hypervisor that implements Mandatory Access Control (MAC) on shared resources between VMs. SHype is used also in [14], to provide a more fine-grained MAC on data flow between VMs and services. Hyperlink [15] implements a hybrid of protected in-VM monitoring alongside MAC-based hypervisor protection, for guest VM and hypervisor protection.

InkTag [16] introduces many different new concepts to run High Assurance Processes (HAP) in an untrusted OS. The threat model for this approach is more advanced and sophisticated. Inktag to protect the HAP employs many different mechanisms, on various levels, to ensure that there is no data leak and malicious intervention during the HAPs runtime.

Paraverification, is the concept introduced, where the kernel is required to perform some extra tasks, to provide the hypervisor high-level information about the process state. This way, the hypervisor can easily determine the high-level effects of low-level actions. Furthermore, the HAP does not interact directly with the kernel. This is done by an untrusted trampoline code, which is responsible for making the system calls instead of the HAP, and receiving the system call results from the OS, and after validating them, return them to the HAP.

To protect the contents of the HAPs memory address space, InkTag employs two EPTs. One for use during untrusted execution, which is visible by the untrusted OS, and one for use during trusted execution which is visible and used only by the hypervisor. In addition, if a page from the HAPs address space needs to be evicted, InkTag hashes the contents and encrypts them before they get written on the disk. This way it provides protection against malicious modification and access. Also, to further protect the HAP and its files, a different access control mechanism is used. Each process and file is followed by attributes, which are used to enforce an access policy, such that it will protect the files, the processes and their spawned processes. InkTag also uses a different convention to address memory and files, with the use of Object Identifiers (OI), an internal representation visible and known only to the HAP and the hypervisor. These are used to define the permissions each HAP has. Finally, InkTag modifies the actual media layout, to inject file metadata, which are used to provide crash consistency. These metadata are not visible by the untrusted OS, since these sectors are not included in the media view of the OS.

Although InkTag provides many assurances for the secure execution of a HAP, the need

to recompile applications so that they can run securely, poses a significant drawback and compromise of usability.

On a similar approach, Overshadow [17] provides a one-to-many memory mapping from the VM to physical memory, as well as other mechanisms to further protect the applications and their data. As a high-level overview, the actual data in memory depend on the process trying to access them. The contents get encrypted and hashed for untrusted processes and decrypted when the trusted application tries to access them.

To manage secure application execution inside a compromised OS Haven [18] takes a different approach. To protect the application Haven employs Intel's Software Guard Extensions (SGX). SGX allows a process to define a secure region of address space, called enclave. What Haven does, is to put the whole application in an enclave and uses an in-enclave library OS for the interactions with the OS.

On the downside, InkTag and Haven were attacked in [19] with the use of controlled-channel attacks, resulting to the extraction of substantial amounts of sensitive information from protected applications. Complete text documents were extracted, as well as outlines of JPEG images, showing that data protection during process, is not a trivial task.

## **2.4.2 Out-of-VM-Based Monitoring**

Having a monitoring tool on the hypervisor has its benefits. At the same time though, there is a significant drawback. Although everything is visible from the hypervisors perspective, the data collected miss context. It is extremely difficult, by analyzing memory and CPU register values to understand the context, under which every execution cycle happens. Following, we comment some of the out-of-VM solutions. Some of them work on raw collected data, while others try to bridge that semantic gap to better understand the high-level commands being executed in the VM.

### **Detection**

ReVirt [20], is a logging application. By using the hypervisor's VM access, it creates extensive logs of a VM's execution. Since the hypervisor has unlimited access to the state of the VM, ReVirt can collect and record enough information to be able to recreate and simulate the execution of the target machine. This can be very valuable for collecting

malware activity data, even after the system has been compromised, hijacked or even replaced. The replay data can prove very useful in the malware analysis field, as every non-deterministic action of a malware is recorded and deterministic results can be recreated, providing this way a full system view and impact of the malware, on every step of the malicious activity.

[21] uses the ability of the hypervisor to transparently access the running VM's internal state to collect system-level provenance, starting even from the moment the VM starts booting.

On a different approach, [22] implements a mechanism to detect insider threats. It uses VMI to stealthy monitor the user's actions and detect suspicious activity that correlates to an insider threat. Although this alert mechanism is very useful, especially due to its transparency, the insider finally gets access to the information he wants.

When the introspection idea was conceived [2], it was utilized to create a hybrid Intrusion Detection System (IDS). By placing an IDS solution on the hypervisor, it gained the best of both worlds, Host IDS (HIDS) and Network IDS (NIDS). Since it is placed outside the VM, it has the advantage of not being prone to detection, attack and corruption or evasion. It can monitor directly the network traffic, given that the Network Interface Card (NIC) is a common shared resource. On the other hand, by having the hypervisor's introspection capability, it can act also as a HIDS, by monitoring the actual system behavior and execution.

Other solutions have been proposed to fill the semantic gap between the hypervisor and the guest VM like Strider Ghostbuster [23], PoKeR [24] and VMWatcher [25]. Although all of them employ different techniques to achieve that, but unfortunately, as later researches mention [26], they fail at a point, implying that way that this semantic gap is difficult to bridge.

## **Prevention**

This semantic gap was also addressed in [27] with a technique called process out-grafting. This method, instead of monitoring the VM as a whole, it focuses on each separate process, for a more fine-grained execution monitoring. This is done by implementing two new techniques. The first is called on-demand grafting, which can relocate a running process from the guest target VM to a security VM. This effectively bridges completely the

semantic gap, as for all intents and purposes the process is running on the same system as the monitor. This way the monitor can intercept all instructions executed by the suspicious process, without the need of hypervisor intervention. The second technique called split execution, makes a logical separation on the execution of instructions. If the process runs in user-space, it continues to run on the security VM. When there is a kernel request, like a system-call, it executes that instruction on the target VM. That technique creates an isolation between the monitor and the suspicious process, since they don't run on the same kernel, while at the same time the suspect's process perspective, it is still running inside the target VM.

Table 2.1. Overview of solutions

Solution	In-VM	Out-of-VM	Detection	Prevention	File Protection	
					Detection	Prevention
SIM [10]	✓	-	✓	-	-	-
Virtuoso [11]	✓	-	✓	-	-	-
Lares [12]	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
SHype [13]	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
InkTag [16]	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
Overshadow [17]	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
Haven [18]	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
ReVirt [20]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
Macko et al [21]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
Crawford et al [22]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
VMI [2]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
Strider Ghostbuster [23]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
PoKeR [24]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
VMWatcher [25]	-	✓	✓	-	-	-
Srinivasan et al [27]	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
SecVisor [28]	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
HUKO [29]	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
Sentry [30]	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
Nasab [31]	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Paladin [32]	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-

Furthermore, SecVisor [28] and HUKO [29], propose a kernel integrity method, that protects the kernel against code injection, such that happens from rootkits. In this case, SecVisor and HUKO are part of the hypervisor. They are used to allow user allowed code execution,

while at the same time prevents malicious code execution.

Sentry [30], does a more granular kernel protection by preventing low-trust kernel components from altering security-critical data used by the kernel to manage the system and itself. It protects dynamically allocated memory, is isolated from the untrusted kernel by running on the Hypervisor and reduces the overhead by monitoring only the kernel related memory pages for suspicious activity.

Paladin [32] introduces first the concept of Out-of-Guest ACL, although at a granular level, by enforcing generic access permissions. A more direct approach to file integrity is presented in [31]. The author tries to protect the OS from accessing maliciously modified files. The target VM is deployed offline and all the files are signed digitally using a private key. The digests are stored on the hypervisor. When the process has been completed for all the files to be protected, the VM gets online. During its execution, whenever a file is accessed, before it gets loaded into memory, the system retrieves its digest and compares it to the copy on the hypervisor. If the file hasn't changed access or execution continues, otherwise denied.

2.1 shows a representation of the key features of the solutions presented above.



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## CHAPTER 3:

### Design and Implementation

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In this chapter we will firstly give an overview of the project. We will discuss the specifications, threat model and goals of this research. We will expand on the design philosophy and go in depth on the implementation.

### 3.1 Overview

As far as we know, all works on VM monitoring and security focus in kernel and OS protection, malicious activity monitoring or extensive logging for replay and online or offline forensic purposes, or secure resource sharing among VMs. All these solutions do not provide any protection for the actual files of the system, which can be maliciously accessed when the VM has been compromised. VM security is a very active research field, that produces many solutions, each with different focus, but generally surrounding the malware protection realm, as depicted in table 2.1 and even more extensive in [9], an extensive survey on hypervisor-based solutions.

In this research, we will try to leverage the Xen's VMI capabilities and create a mechanism to protect some critical files on a VM. We want to create an alternate ACL on the hypervisor, that will include modified permissions for file access. The hypervisor will monitor what files are being accessed and cross-check the action with the ACLs entries, enforcing the out-of-guest ACL. Although a similar approach was employed with Paladin [32] and [31], there are some fundamental differences.

We will focus on the use of type-I hypervisor instead of type-II. Moreover, we want the guest OS to be unmodified and without any code, app or monitor injection that must be protected. We will employ the stealthy property of DRAKVUF [4], to make the process of file protection completely transparent to the guest OS, retaining this way a zero-footprint monitor on the guest. DRAKVUF also helps in bridging the semantic gap between the hypervisor and the VM with the use of a Rekall profile [33], having this way access to selected kernel structures. Furthermore, we want to employ a per user ACL, enforced on specific files or whole folders, sometimes not essential to the OS. Essentially, we want to

protect any type of data, regardless of the content. Confidentiality is enforced by denying even read access, while integrity by denying write and availability by protecting deletion of the files. This mechanism must also extend to the root user, since our threat model assumes that the system is compromised. Finally, we will try to enforce a specific file access mode, where log files are forced to open always in append mode rather than write, regardless of the program, process or user accessing them. To achieve all that we will intercept all relevant system calls and verify the validity of the request.

The concept is fairly simple. We will use DRAKVUF to create a trap on all the relevant system calls, which are shown in table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Trapped system calls

System call	Number
sys_open	2
sys_openat	257
sys_open_by_handle_at	304
sys_rename	82
sys_renameat	264
sys_renameat2	316
sys_unlink	87
sys_unlinkat	263

This gives us the opportunity to stop the VM execution when these system calls are called. At this point, we access the registers related with each system call to retrieve the information we need to perform the validation of the requested call. Figure 3.2 gives an overview of the flow of information during a trapped system call.

When one of the trapped system calls gets executed, LibVMI pauses the VM execution. It then passes the VMs state information to DRAKVUF, where our running plugin retrieves it. Going through some VM memory accesses, the plugin gets the file being accessed and from whom. With this information, it goes through the SACL to find any matching files or folders that are being protected. If none is found, it returns control to LibVMI, which then resumes the VMs execution. If an entry in the SACL is found, then the plugin checks if the requested file access is prohibited. If it is allowed, execution continues normally. If it is prohibited on the other hand, then the plugin changes the value of some registers related to the system call so that it will fail.

The SACL's format was kept as simple as possible, so that editing and reviewing it is easy. Figure 3.6 shows an example, which we will analyze later.

/home/user/Documents/readme.txt	100644	1000	1000
/home/user/Desktop/credit_card.pdf	100400	1000	1000
/home/user/Documents	140220	0	0

Figure 3.1. SACL sample

The system keeps to SACLs. One for all non-root users and one for root, since this account is of greater significance. Furthermore, two different checks are being performed. First it checks for a protected folder, as it is a more generic case. If no entry is found, it then checks for specific files in the list to match.

It is paramount to explain that at this point the system does not alter basic properties of the files that are being protected. It does not change the owner or the group, since this requires intervention in the VM. Although in the SACL we can define a different owner, the generic effects is denial of access. That means that we cannot change who can access a file, rather we can change who cannot. This system acts as a supplementary and more fine-grained access control mechanism, to make more strict file access policies. Therefore, if we change the owner of a file in the SACL, we essentially prohibit access to that file from the owner, we do not specify a new one, as the final call for file access comes from the unmodified guest OS.

## 3.2 Specifications

### 3.2.1 Requirements

The goal of this research is to provide a virtualization extension that will extend the granular-level file access control of the Linux OS. The requirements we defined for our system are:

- **(R1)** The solution must be Out-of-VM, to avoid modification from the potential adversary.
- **(R2)** The system must remain efficient and usable, by not introducing significant overhead on the runtime of the VM, as well as by not enforcing many restrictions to the users.



Figure 3.2. Information flow during a trapped system call execution

- **(R3)** The monitoring application must be stealthy to avoid detection.
- **(R4)** The coverage of the relevant system calls must be maximum.

By leveraging Xen’s introspection methods, we will create the Out-of-VM monitoring agent, which will run on Dom0, completely outside the VM, conforming this way with **(R1)**. Also, by ensuring that there is no code running on the guest OS, we increase the deployment speed, as there is no need to modify the guest VM in any way. The required pre-deployment configuration of the guest VM is limited to the creation of a Rekall profile, required by LibVMI and DRAKVUF.

The use of DRAKVUF [4], will provide us with stealthy monitoring, as it leverages alternate EPTs with different permissions, preventing any detection from applications inside a VM, achieving this way **(R3)**. We will have to restrict some of the usability of the system, although not during normal execution, to achieve the file confidentiality, integrity and availability we want, as explained later in this chapter. Therefore we assume that **(R2)** is achieved, although with some restrictions, mostly concerning the root user.

Going through the available system call list, as well as testing during different types of file access, we assess that the system calls mentioned in table 3.1 provide full coverage of the

possible ways a file can be accessed. Monitoring the execution of these system calls and validating the request made to the guest OS kernel is sufficient for ensuring the guest VM file confidentiality, integrity and availability, as we want to enforce it, thus conforming to (R4).

### **3.2.2 Threat Model**

Computer security has been evolving because the attackers methods evolve too. Modern OSs and applications are so complex that they introduce many bugs in their code. Some of these bugs are benign, but some are serious enough to allow security breaches like remote access to a system, administrator/root access, arbitrary code execution, etc.

For this research we have adopted a moderate threat model, where we assume that the guest VM is insecure. That means that an adversary can gain access to it remotely. We assume this way, that physical access to the hosting machine is restricted. This reflects many applications and systems working over a network connection.

Moreover, we assume that the underlying OS is not trusted. This essentially means that the adversary can gain root privileges, allowing him this way to modify system executables, as well as the kernel on runtime.

We consider the hypervisor along with its Dom0 to be secure and trusted. We will not address hypervisor vectored attacks.

### **3.2.3 Guest VM Configuration**

As mentioned before, there is no significant setup for the guest VM in order for our system to run. The only requirement coming from LibVMI and DRAKVUF, is the creation and export of a Rekall profile in the guest VM. Because this profile depends on the kernel version running, it is imperative to recreate the profile in the case of a kernel version update.

To protect the VM from running unprotected in such a case, we have set the options in the Xen guest configuration file to shutdown the VM in case it needs to reboot, as shown in figure 3.3. This does not affect significantly the usability of the guest system, as the Linux OS seldom requires a reboot, even after software updates.

```
on_poweroff = "destroy"  
on_reboot = "destroy"  
on_crash = "destroy"
```

Figure 3.3. Guest VM shutdown configuration line

To support file confidentiality, integrity and availability even from root access, we need to prohibit the root user from executing the *su* command. This command, short for switch user, allows root to switch to any account in the OS. To do that we need to edit a configuration file so that the execution of this command is not allowed. Our test VM uses pluggable authentication module (PAM) authentication. So, to achieve the required result we edited the */etc/pam.d/su* file by adding the line shown in figure 3.4.

```
auth          required    pam_wheel.so deny group=root
```

Figure 3.4. Guest VM shutdown configuration line

Furthermore, since root can change other user passwords, we need to deny that capability. To do that, we don't need any special in-VM configuration. We just need to protect the */etc/shadow* file from being modified by anyone. Therefore, a sample SACL to enforce these minimum security requirements we have set, is shown in figure3.5

```
/etc/shadow      100440  
/etc/pam.d/su    100000
```

Figure 3.5. root user SACL sample

As we see in figure 3.5, the SACL for protecting files from the root user, is more simple. Since it is targeted for this specific user, we do not need the entries for owner and group. Furthermore, the permission bits for group and others are ignored when parsed. This simplifies the file structure, while at the same time reduces memory utilization.

### 3.3 Design

In this section we will present the design philosophy of our solution.

### 3.3.1 Shadow Access Control List

During the initialization of our DRAKVUF plugin, we read the SACLs we have created for the VM to be protected. At this point of the research we were limited to small lists, so the initial implementation for storing and searching through the SACLs is two linked lists and two arrays of linked lists, as explained below. Figure 3.6 depicts the structure created for storing each entry.

Variable Name	Variable type
pathname	char *
mode	unsigned int
u	uid_t
g	gid_t
next	struct protected_files *

Figure 3.6. *struct protected\_files* memory layout

The above memory structure is used for both protected folders and protected files. Moreover, we create two of each, as mentioned before, one for the root user and one for the rest. To improve overall search speed for our algorithm, instead of keeping one linked list for all the files, we created two arrays, one for the root user and one for the rest, of size 4096 for the files, which is the maximum pathname length, as set in *linux/limits.h*. Then, according to the pathname length of each entry, it is appended to a linked list located at the array in index equal to the pathname length.

### 3.3.2 System Calls

All applications running in user-space to access a file need to ask the kernel. Applications do not have knowledge of the low-level OS and device details to access the files they need. So, they request from the kernel to do that work for them. The kernel accesses the requested file using the device drivers and when the operation is completed, returns to the application a handle to that file, called file descriptor. This happens for many operations restricted to the kernel for security reasons. Also it provides an abstraction to the applications, which are written without the need of the knowledge of device specifics and work on variations of the underlying hardware running the same OS.

For applications to be compatible to OS version upgrades and portable between different systems, there is a need for a specific standard calling convention of these kernel functions.

This calling convention is a system call. System calls are specific entry points to the kernel, which when provided specific arguments perform an operation sin behalf of the application. Many system calls exist, each performing a different operation. We will focus on those who are relevant to accessing files, whether for read or modification. These are depicted in table 3.1.

The arguments to the system calls for the 64-bit Linux OS we used as our test platform, are passed to the kernel through the registers in the order of rdi, rsi, rdx, r10, r8, r9, while the system call number is passed in rax. Table 3.2 shows what arguments need to be passed to each system call on each register for it to perform the requested operation.

Table 3.2. Trapped system calls  
[ basicstyle=]

Syscall Name	Syscall # rax	rdi	rsi	rdx	r10	r8
sys_open	2	const char *filename	int flags	int mode		
sys_openat	257	int dfd	const char *filename	int flags	int mode	
sys_open_by_handle_at	304	int dirfd	const char *pathname			
sys_rename	82	const char *oldname	const char *newname	struct file_handle *handle	int *mount_id	int flags
sys_renameat	264	int oldfd	const char *oldname	int newfd	const char *newname	
sys_renameat2	316	int oldfd	const char *oldname	int newfd	const char *newname	unsigned int flags
sys_unlink	87	const char *pathname				
sys_unlinkat	263	int dfd	const char *pathname	int flag		

### 3.3.3 System Call Hooking

To achieve the above mentioned system call intercept we need to place traps to the system calls of interest. This gets implemented by DRAKVUF. LibVMI reads the Rekall profile of the guest VM to get the base address of the kernel symbol table. DRAKVUF then starts from that base address and searches for the system call table. This table includes the function pointers for all supported system calls. Going through that table makes possible the detection and trapping of the system calls. This is achieved by placing the *INT3 (0xCC)*



byte at the beginning of the system call function. This byte is executed by the CPU as an debugging interrupt, a breakpoint. This in its turn triggers a VM-exit, which is caught by DRAKVUF and handled by our callback function. DRAKVUF implements multiple EPTs with different permissions for the same page. This allows placing the trap in the system calls, while at the same time when accessed for read, the original functions are accessed, not revealing this way the injected breakpoint.

Table 3.2 shows that there are two generic cases we need to examine. One case is for the `sys_open`, `sys_rename` and `sys_unlink` system calls, where we have to find the strings pointer by the pointers in the `rdi` register, and in the `rsi` register in the case of `rename`. After we retrieve the strings, we then try to match them to any entry in the SACLs in the hypervisor. If there is a match, we then retrieve the `userid` and `groupid` of the owner of the currently running process, which requested the specific file access. We check then if the user or group of the running process has enough permissions to access the files, according to the SACLs. if there is any difference between the permissions and the requested access mode, we overwrite the contents of the relevant registers with `NULL`, resulting to a failed system call.

The second case is for the `sys_openat`, `sys_renameat` and `sys_unlinkat` system calls, where we have to retrieve the string of the file being accessed from different registers, according to table 3.2. After that the algorithm is the same as above.

### 3.3.4 The `task_struct`

A crucial part in the design of our solution is the Linux kernel `task_struct`. It a complex structure where the kernel stores many information concerning the running processes. Each running process is assigned one such structure by the kernel, so that the kernel can monitor the process and retrieve various information about it. A special macro, `current`, points directly to the current running process. We need to map this structure and find the address offsets of the information we need. We will revisit the `task_struct` in the next sections, as we mention what we need to access.

Although normally this process is not complex, in our case there are some challenges. The first is that we need to find the correct offsets inside the `task_struct` for the entries we want, which depend on the kernel version. Furthermore, we need to make constant conversions

between GMFN and MFN, as the memory values we retrieve correspond to the VMs address space, but we need to access the actual physical memory to read the information we require.

### 3.3.5 Trap Handling

After a hooked system call gets executed, our callback function is called. We firstly retrieve the file that is being accessed and by which process, by getting its process id (figure 3.7).

```
currpid = vmi_dtb_to_pid(vmi, info->regs->cr3);
switch (info->regs->rax){
case S_OPEN:
case S_RENAME:
case S_UNLINK:
    addr=vmi_translate_uv2p(vmi, info->regs->rdi, currpid);
    filename=vmi_read_str_pa(vmi, addr);
    .
    .
    break;
case S_OPENAT:
case S_UNLINKAT:
case S_RENAMEAT:
case S_RENAMEAT2:
    addr=vmi_translate_uv2p(vmi, info->regs->rsi, currpid);
    filename=vmi_read_str_pa(vmi, addr);
    .
    .
    break; }
```

Figure 3.7. Getting the file being accessed

When a system call is executed the file being accessed is passed either with absolute, or relative path. The first case is straightforward, as by reading the string pointer by the corresponding register, we retrieve the full pathname of the file. If the file is passed with a relative path, the retrieval procedure is more complicated. That is because we need to recreate the present working directory (PWD). The Linux kernel does not store this information somewhere. On the contrary, in the *task\_struct*, the kernel only stores in another structure the parent directory. Therefore, we need to loop through the parent folders, so that by prepending each time the parent, we recreate the PWD and the full pathname. This allows us to try to match the file being accessed with the entries in the SACL.

After we have retrieved the pathname, we then check for the system call that triggered the

VM-exit event. For this research we will not handle the *sys\_open\_by\_handle\_at* system call. At this point of the research we are unaware of any compiled program that uses this specific system call. Moreover, although this is a valid and known attack vector to bypass this solution, support for it can be added in the future, while at the same time does not hinder our proof of concept. The rest of the system calls are handled as follows:

- *sys\_open* with *sys\_openat*
- *sys\_rename* with *sys\_renameat* and *sys\_renameat2*
- *sys\_unlink* with *sys\_unlinkat*

In the case of *sys\_unlink* and *sys\_unlinkat*, which are used for file deletion the procedure is straightforward. Once we look in the SACL, if there is an entry, we verify that the user or group deleting the file, has write permissions. If that is true, the callback function returns control to the VM to resume execution. If permissions do not match, the pointer to the filename string is modified to *NULL*, so that the system call, after the VM resumes execution, fails (figure 3.8). By hooking and preventing execution of these system calls we prevent deletion of the protected files, improving this way the availability assurances of the underlying OS.

```

case S_UNLINK:           // unlink syscall (to prevent deletion of a file)
case S_UNLINKAT:  switch(info->userid){
case ROOT: // root user
    if (strcmp(check->pathname, filename)==0){
        check_permissions(check, info, vmi, ROOT);
    }
    break;
default: // other users
    if (strcmp(check->pathname, filename)==0){
        if (check->u == info->userid){
            check_permissions(check, info, vmi, USER);}
        else if (check->g == info->groupid){
            check_permissions(check, info, vmi, GROUP);}
        else {
            check_permissions(check, info, vmi, OTHER);} }
    }
    break;}

```

Figure 3.8. *sys\_unlink* and *sys\_unlinkat* skeleton code flow

The search for a match in the SACLs is performed in two steps for all cases. Once to go through protected folders and once to go through individually protected files. Also, the root user is handled separately from the rest of the users because of the special elevated privileges that account is granted.

In the case of *sys\_rename*, *sys\_renameat* and *sys\_renameat2*, which are used for file moving, we perform the same check as per *sys\_unlink* and *sys\_unlinkat*, with the difference that if we do not find a match for the *oldname* of the system call, we additionally check for a match on the *newname*. The first part ensures that if the user or group does not have read permissions, as enforced by our SACL, he cannot rename or move the file to an unprotected folder or filename, ensuring the confidentiality of the information stored in the file. In the second case we prevent the protected file from being overwritten by another file, if the permissions are not correct. This way we improve integrity of the underlying OS, by preventing modification of the protected file.

Finally in the case of *sys\_open* and *sys\_openat*, we only have to check for one filename in our SACLs. If there is an entry, then the permission check algorithm is more complicated. This happens because we have to match the requested by the process access *mode* with the permissions we want to enforce. So, we check for read permission when a *O\_RDONLY* access is requested and for write permissions on a *O\_WRONLY*. In the case of a *O\_RDWR* request we initially check for both permissions. If that fails, we then check if the process user or group has read permissions. If that is true, we alter the file access mode to read-only and allow execution. If all of them fail we change the *rax* register contents to *NULL* and resume VM execution, which results to a failed system call. This more complex permission check improves confidentiality, by not allowing read access to those who do not have the right, and integrity and availability by denying write access to those who cannot write to the file, as per the SACL enforced policy. Figure 3.9 shows the code for the permission checks done in case of the *sys\_open* and *sys\_openat* system calls.

```

switch(info->regs->rax){
case S_OPEN:
case S_OPENAT:
    if ( ((info->regs->rsi & 07) | O_RDONLY) == O_RDONLY){
        if ( !(check->mode & r) ) {
            vmi_set_vcpureg (vmi, 0, RDI, info->vcpu);
            return 1; }
    } else if ( ((info->regs->rsi & 07) | O_WRONLY) == O_WRONLY) {
        if ( !(check->mode & w) ) {
            vmi_set_vcpureg (vmi, 0, RDI, info->vcpu);
            return 1; }
    } else if ( ((info->regs->rsi & 07) | O_RDWR) == O_RDWR) {
        if ( !(check->mode & w) && !(check->mode & r) ) {
            vmi_set_vcpureg (vmi, 0, RDI, info->vcpu);
            return 1;
        } else if ( !(check->mode & w) ){
            vmi_set_vcpureg(vmi, 0, RSI, info->vcpu);
            return 1; }
    }
break;

```

Figure 3.9. sys\_open and sys\_openat permission checks

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## CHAPTER 4:

### Results and Conclusion

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In this chapter, the information of the relevant software and hardware is presented. In the first section a short introduction on virtualization and its benefits is given. Then the types of hypervisors and Xen, the platform we will work on, are described. The next section refers to VMI and Xen's capabilities in that field, the LibVMI API and DRAKVUF, the library and main application we will leverage, as well as the system call functionality and convention. Finally, some of the existing solutions that leverage introspection are reviewed.

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## CHAPTER 5:

### Future Work

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In this chapter, the information of the relevant software and hardware is presented. In the first section a short introduction on virtualization and its benefits is given. Then the types of hypervisors and Xen, the platform we will work on, are described. The next section refers to VMI and Xen's capabilities in that field, the LibVMI API and DRAKVUF, the library and main application we will leverage, as well as the system call functionality and convention. Finally, some of the existing solutions that leverage introspection are reviewed.

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