Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Network and Computer Applications

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jnca

Review

Cross-VM cache-based side channel attacks and proposed prevention mechanisms: A survey

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Cloud computing
Cache-based Side channel attacks
Cross-VM Cache-based side channel attacks
Countermeasures

ABSTRACT

The state-of-the-art Cloud Computing (CC) has been commercially popular for shared resources of third party applications. A cloud platform enables to share resources among mutually distrusting CC clients and offers cost-effective, on-demand scaling. With the exponential growth of CC environment, vulnerabilities and their corresponding exploitation of the prevailing cloud resources may potentially increase. Although CC provides numerous benefits to the cloud computing tenant. However, features namely resource sharing and Virtual Machine (VM) physical co-residency raising the potential for sensitive information leakages such as Side Channel (SC) attacks. In particular, the physical co-residency feature allows attackers to communicate with another VM on the same physical machine and leak the confidential information due to inadequate logical isolation. Unlike encryption, which protects information from being decoded by unauthorized persons, SC attacks aim to exploit the encryption systems and to hide the occurrence of communication. SC attacks were initially identified as the main threat on multi-level secure systems i.e. OS, database, and networks. More recently, the focus of the researchers has shifted toward SC attacks in CC. Since the last level cache (L2 or L3) is always shared between VM, is the most targeting device for these attacks. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore cross-VM SC attacks involving the CPU cache and their countermeasures in CC and to compare with the traditional SC attacks and countermeasures. We categorized the SC attacks according to the hardware medium they target and exploit, the ways they access the module and the method they use to extract confidential information. We identified that traditional prevention mechanisms for SC attacks are not appropriate for prevention of cross-VM cache-based SC attacks. We also proposed countermeasures for the prevention of these attacks in order to improve security in CC.

1. Introduction

Cloud Computing (CC) is a new paradigm that acquires more importance and brings unique features and vulnerabilities in today Information Technology (IT) industry. Specifically, it introduces multi-tenancy to facilitate the users to share computing physical resources provisioned over the Internet and offers cost-effective, on-demand scaling to the CC tenants. Although multi-tenancy provides numerous benefits to the CC tenants, this paradigm introduces a new concept known as clients’ co-residence and Virtual Machine (VM) physical co-residency. However, the security vulnerabilities arise from these well-known concepts because it enables a new form of sensitive information leakage. One of the security vulnerability to CC is the Side Channel (SC) attacks. Co-residence clients and physical co-residency of VMs allow the attacker’s VM to communicate with the victim’s VM running on the same physical device that they should not by design, have access to (Ristenpart et al., 2009). Since CC is not equivalent to physically separated systems. Therefore, due to an inadequate logical isolation, it facilitates the co-located malicious VM to use the SC attacks to leak sensitive information about the victim VM functionality and exploit the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jnca.2017.06.001
Received 25 January 2017; Received in revised form 4 June 2017; Accepted 6 June 2017
Available online 09 June 2017
1084-8045/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd.