

## **To Branch or Not to Branch** Security Implications of x86 Frontend Implementations

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#### Outline

- Theory
  - Quick AMD microarchitecture overview
  - Branch predictors
    - Basic introduction
    - Purpose
    - Building blocks and functionality
  - Straight-Line Speculation (SLS)
    - Basic introduction
    - Root cause mechanics
    - Types

- Practice
  - CVE-2021-26341: a new unexpected type of SLS
    - Basic introduction
    - Speculation window and its limitations
    - SLS gadgets
    - Store-to-Load Forwarding (STLF)
  - SLS mitigations
  - Spectre v1: Fall-thru speculation of conditional branches
    - Bounds check latency related out-of-bound array access?
    - Branch predictor involvement
    - Speculation window and its limitations

• AMD Zen2 microarchitecture



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- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend



- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend
    - Fetch



- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend
    - Fetch
    - Decode



- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend
    - Fetch
    - Decode
    - Dispatch





- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Backend





- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Backend
    - Superscalar





- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Backend
    - Superscalar
    - Out-of-order execution





- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Backend
    - Superscalar
    - Out-of-order execution
    - In-order retire





Forwarding Muxes

ALU2 ALU3

ALU0 ALU1

Х

AGU0 AGU1 AGU2 Ld/St Ld/St St

#### Microarchitecture - overview

- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend
    - Fetch
    - Decode
    - Dispatch
  - Backend
    - Superscalar
    - Out-of-order execution
    - In-order retire



Frontend

Backend

Forwarding Muxes

FADD FMA FADD FMA

Pipe 3 Pipe 0

- AMD Zen2 microarchitecture
  - Frontend
    - Fetch
    - Decode
    - Dispatch
  - Backend
    - Superscalar
    - Out-of-order execution
    - In-order retire



# Microarchitecture - overview AMD Zen2 microarchitecture Frontend

- Fetch ٠
- Decode ٠
- Dispatch •
- Backend •

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- Superscalar ٠
- Out-of-order execution •
- In-order retire •





#### Branch predictors - purpose

- Why do we need the branch prediction unit (BPU)?
  - Backend of modern superscalar and out-of-order CPUs can have many instructions "in-flight"
  - Frontend must keep up supplying instructions to the Backend
  - Frontend needs to know where to find next instructions to fetch and decode
    - Easy for sequential execution  $\rightarrow$  next instruction
    - Problematic upon control flow change (branch)
      - Two questions:
        - IF taken or not taken
        - Where-to address of the next instruction
  - However, some definitive information (e.g., about actual control flow) available only in the Backend



#### Branch predictors - purpose

- Why do we need the branch prediction unit (BPU)?
  - Backend of modern superscalar and out-of-order CPUs can have many instructions "in-flight"
  - Frontend must keep up supplying instructions to the Backend
  - Any feedback from Backend to Frontend may stall the CPU
    - Must be avoided
      - Frontend must **predict** the likely outcome upfront
        - Correct prediction → performance win
        - Misprediction → penalty, Frontend re-steer when Backend detects it
        - The better (more accurate) prediction rate, the better performance (fewer pipeline bubbles)



- Branch Prediction Unit (BPU)
  - Many different designs and categories
    - Static vs Dynamic
    - One-Level vs Two-level
    - Local vs Global
    - Adaptive
    - Agree
    - Hybrid
    - Neural (Machine Learning)
      - Perceptron-based (AMD Zen2)



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- Prediction based on the actual branch instruction and a pre-defined heuristic:
  - Type of branch
    - Conditional
    - Unconditional
  - Branch direction
    - Forward
    - Backward
- Examples:
  - Unconditional branches are always taken
  - Backward cond. branches taken (loops accuracy)
  - Forward conditional branches not taken
- Unconditional branches are easier to predict than conditional



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- Prediction based on previous execution results of a given branch
  - If taken before, likely to be taken again



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  - If taken before, likely to be taken again
    - 1-bit saturation counter
      - Previously taken or not taken



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- Prediction based on previous executions results of a given branch
  - If taken before, likely to be taken again
    - 1-bit saturation counter
      - Previously taken or not taken
    - 2-bit saturation counter
      - Four states state machine





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 Prediction is based on a two-dimensional table of 2bit saturation counters (Branch/Pattern History Table) indexed with branch history register (BHR)





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 Branch History Table is indexed using a distinct branch history register (BHR) for each encountered conditional branch



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- Branch History Table is indexed using a shared (global) branch history register (GHR) for all encountered conditional branches
  - Pros:
    - Correlation between different branches is considered
  - Cons:
    - May harm prediction accuracy when too many branches are not correlated



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 gshare – Two-level adaptive predictor with global history buffer





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    - Agree
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- Consists of multiple different branch prediction mechanisms
- Prediction is based on:
  - Prediction mechanism that has had highest accuracy in the past
  - Combined output of all implemented prediction mechanisms



- So far, we have been implicitly focusing on direct conditional branch predictions
  - Taken / Not taken
  - Question: IF to branch or not to branch ©



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- What is the address of a next instruction when the branch is taken?



- So far, we have been implicitly focusing on direct conditional branch predictions
  - Taken / Not taken
  - Question: IF to branch or not to branch ©
- What is the address of a next instruction when the branch is taken?
- What about other branch types?
  - Do they need a branch predictor too?



- So far, we have been implicitly focusing on direct conditional branch predictions
  - Taken / Not taken
  - Question: IF to branch or not to branch ©
- What is the address of a next instruction when the branch is taken?
- What about other branch types?
  - Do they need a branch predictor too?
    - Yes, they do!
    - Question: Where-to what is the address of the next instruction?



- Another important BPU component:
  - Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

| Branch Target Address 1<br>Branch Target Address 2<br>Branch Target Address 3<br><br>Branch Target Address N<br>Branch Target Address N |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| Branch Target Address 3   | Branch Target Address 1 |
|   | Branch Target Address 2 |
|   | Branch Target Address 3 |
| Branch Target Address N   |                         |
|   | Branch Target Address N |
|   |                         |
|   |                         |
|   |                         |



- Another important BPU component:
  - Branch Target Buffer (BTB)
    - Predicts address of next instructions after the control flow changes because of a branch
    - Table of branch target addresses
      - indexed with a value derived from a current
        - branch's program counter value (address)

| Branch Target Buffer (BTB) |                   |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Branch Target Address 1    |                   |
| Branch Target Address 2    |                   |
| Branch Target Address 3    |                   |
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| Branch Target Address N    |                   |
|                            |                   |
|                            |                   |
|                            |                   |
|                            | $\longrightarrow$ |



- Turns out: **ALL branch types need BTB!** Why?
  - Frontend fetches and decodes, but does not execute (nor specifically analyses) instructions
    - With a few exceptions, e.g.:
      - int3 #BP debug exception
      - call Oh get PC thunk
  - Upon a branch, frontend needs to know (instantly)
    where to fetch next instructions from
    - It must not wait for Backend → Performance!
- Hence, BPU is frontend's component and leverages BTB to steer frontend upon branches

Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

| Branch Target Address 1 |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Branch Target Address 2 |  |
| Branch Target Address 3 |  |
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| Branch Target Address N |  |
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- Analyzing exact branch instructions' addressing is backend's job
- The Where-to problem:
  - Direct conditional branches:
    - Not taken → next instruction
      - easy
    - Taken → where-to?
      - backward? forward? not easy
  - Direct unconditional branches:
    - Always taken → where-to?
      - backward? forward? not easy
  - Indirect unconditional branches:
    - Always taken → where-to?
      - backward? forward? not easy
    - Target address may change at runtime, not static
      - static prediction will not do
      - BTB is crucial for performance

Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

| Branch Target Address 1 |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Branch Target Address 2 |  |
| Branch Target Address 3 |  |
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|                         |  |
| Branch Target Address N |  |
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|                         |  |



## Hybrid branch predictor – building blocks diagram




# Hybrid branch predictor – building blocks diagram – Taken/Not Taken





#### Hybrid branch predictor – building blocks diagram – Where-to





# Straight-Line Speculation (SLS) - introduction

- Straight-Line Speculation term was coined by Arm
  - result of Google SafeSide project research CVE-2020-13844
  - Arm described SLS as a speculative execution past an unconditional change in the control flow: "Straight-line speculation would involve the processor speculatively executing the next instructions linearly in memory past the unconditional change in control flow"
    - Initially observed on **indirect** unconditional branches on Arm CPUs
- Shortly after, the SLS was also observed on "some x86 CPUs"
  - Also, on **indirect** unconditional branches
- However:
  - SLS had to have been observed on x86 CPUs prior to Arm coining the term
    - Appearance of traps after RET instructions:
      - ~2018: Microsoft Windows
      - ~2019: grsecurity





# Straight-Line Speculation (SLS)

- Types of SLS
  - Indirect
    - Unconditional
      - Jump and Call
        - JMP/CALL reg
        - JMP/CALL [mem]
      - Function return
        - RET
  - What about direct branches?





- AMD x86 CPUs (Zen1 and Zen2 microarchitectures)
  - All direct unconditional branch instructions experience SLS vulnerability too!
    - JMP \$relative\_offset
    - CALL \$relative\_offset
  - Branch direction does not matter
    - Both forward and backward branches suffer from SLS
  - It is possible to trigger SLS between two co-located hyper-threads
- AMD x86 CPU (Zen3 microarchitecture)
  - SLS on direct unconditional branches seems to be fixed
  - Big design upgrade of the branch predictor unit
  - Intentional or accidental?



- Why would a modern CPU speculate past a direct unconditional branch?
  - After all:
    - Its target address is static!
      - And encoded as part of the branch instruction!
    - There is no latency involved
      - It is unconditional no need to spend time on
        - evaluating any conditions
- Let's see why...











New Decoded Instructions Block (16 Bytes)

Predicted correctly





Decoded Instructions Block (16 Bytes)

Mispredicted



















- If there is no entry in the BTB (or Return Address Stack (RAS) for RET instructions)
  - the branch will be mispredicted and SLS might occur
    - Any branch type!
- What does it mean?
  - We can easily and almost 100% reliably make affected AMD CPUs mispredict any branch ...
    - Direct or indirect
    - Conditional or unconditional
  - ... and trigger SLS past it.
- How?
  - We need to make sure the corresponding BTB entry is not present
  - Simplest way: flushing entire BTB



- Flushing entire BTB
  - Execute a large enough number of consecutive branches
  - Each will take at least one entry in the BTB
  - BTB entries can hold up to two branches within the same 64byte instruction block
  - Provided the first branch is a conditional branch
- Solution
  - Place two unconditional branches within a single cache-line
    - Upon execution at least one entry of the BTB will be taken
  - Repeat this code construct a NUMBER of times
    - Entire BTB overwritten if the NUMBER is equal to or greater than the number of entries of the given BTB
  - Or... (ab)use Spectre v2 mitigations
    - Trigger IBPB
      - via MSR write or by context/privilege switch

```
.macro flush btb NUMBER
    ; start at a cache-line size aligned address
    .aliqn 64
    ; repeat the code between .rept and .endr
    ; directives a NUMBER of times
    .rept \NUMBER
       jmp 1f ; first unconditional jump
       .rept 30 ; half-cache-line-size padding
           nop
       .endr
1:
       jmp 2f
              ; second unconditional jump
        .rept 29 ; full cache-line-size padding
           nop
       .endr
2:
       nop
    .endr
.endm
```



- Speculation window
  - up to 8 simple and short (up to 16 bytes) x86 instructions can be speculatively executed
    - in practice: 4-5 short x86 instructions that do not compete for execution units
  - up to 2 memory loads can be executed speculatively
    - the loads (even pre-cached) cannot provide data to the following µops in time
    - the loads **do** get scheduled and can leave traces in cache hierarchy
- Limitations
  - constructing a full Spectre v1 gadget is not possible with this type of SLS
  - Secret data needs to be available in GPR (registers) for the SLS gadget
  - or...



- Store-To-Load-Forwarding (STLF)
  - Forwarding data of a completed (but not yet retired) stores to the later loads
    - Stores are buffered in the Store Queue (WAW and WAR dependencies)
    - Later loads must get fresh data either from the Store Queue (if fresh) or memory
- Memory loads executed under SLS receive data from the earlier stores to the same address
  - STLF enables speculative loads under SLS to execute fast enough
  - Such loads do provide data to their dependent µops!
- STLF requirements
  - Earlier store contains all the load's bytes (cannot load more than has been stored)
  - CPU uses memory load address bits 11:0 to determine STLF eligibility
  - Same address space and ideally same registers, closely grouped together



• Direct unconditional branch SLS with STLF gadget PoC example

```
asm goto (
    "mov $0x41414141414141, %%rbx\n"
    "mov %%rbx, (%0)\n"
    "sfence\n"
    "lfence\n"
    ".aliqn 64 n"
    "jmp %l[end]\n"
    "mov (%0), %%rbx\n"
    "and \$1, \$rbx\n"
    "add %2, %%rbx\n"
    "mov (%%rbx), %%ebx\n"
 :: "r" (&path), "r" (1UL << bufsiz), "r" (buf)
 : "rbx", "memorv"
 : end);
end:
```

wipawel@pawel-poc:~\$ time taskset -c 2 ./readlink Baseline: 200 Secret: 4141414141414141 Result: 0000fffffffff40 Result: 0000ffffffefff40 Result: 0000fdffffefff40 Result: 0000fdffffeff740 Result: 0000fddfffeff740 Result: 0000fddbffeff740 Result: 0000fddbfbeff740 Result: 0000fddbfbe7f740 Result: 0000fd5bfbe7f740 Result: 0000fd5b7be7f740 Result: 0000fd5b7be7f540 Result: 0000fd5b7be7e540 Result: 0000fd5b7be5e540 Result: 0000fd5b7be1e540 Result: 0000fd5b7be1c540 Result: 0000fd4b7be1c540 Result: 0000fd437be1c540 Result: 0000f5437be1c540 Result: 0000f5437bc1c540 Result: 0000f5417bc1c540 Result: 0000f54179c1c540 Result: 0000f54169c1c540 Result: 0000e54169c1c540 Result: 0000c54169c1c540 Result: 0000c5416941c540 Result: 0000c5414941c540 Result: 0000c54149414540 Result: 0000c54149414140 Result: 0000c14149414140 Result: 0000414149414140 Result: 0000414141414140 real 0m14.620s user 0m11.650s sys 0m2.875s



• Vulnerable pipeline



Source: https://p0.pxfuel.com/preview/170/208/982/gas-production-technology-power.jpg

• Pipeline leak



Source: Nord Stream natural gas pipelines spring multiple leaks | Oil & Gas Journal (ogi.com)



#### **SLS** Mitigations

- First, we discuss SLS mitigation for the following branches:
  - Direct unconditional jump
  - Indirect unconditional jump
  - Function return **RET**
- These three cases are easy to mitigate
  - Just follow them with a speculative execution barrier (i.e., serializing or ordering instruction)
    - The shorter the barrier instruction the better
    - Never gets executed architecturally
- SLS mitigation for direct or indirect **call** is not that simple
  - At some point control flow resumes execution at an instruction following the call
    - The speculative execution barrier **does** get executed architecturally
    - Should be fast and must not have architectural "side-effects"



- The simplest yet effective and therefore commonly used mitigation for
  - Direct unconditional jump
  - Indirect unconditional jump
  - Function return **RET**
  - is the INT3 instruction
    - single byte opcode (0xCC)
    - #BP exception generation caught at the decode stage in the frontend
- What does it look like in action?































#### **SLS** Mitigations - calls

- What is an optimal SLS mitigation for calls?
  - Direct unconditional **call**
  - Indirect unconditional **call**
- LFENCE
  - No architectural "side-effects"
  - Memory ordering and/or serializing instructions
    - Gets executed architecturally after every call not good for performance!
- XOR EAX, EAX
  - Wait, what!?
  - It's complicated...



#### SLS Mitigations - calls

- XOR EAX, EAX
  - Idea based on compiler post-call behavior assumptions
    - Callee-clobbered registers won't be used without a re-write
    - Callee-preserved registers are preserved invariant
    - Return value register (eax) is assumed to be modified by the callee code
    - → Hence, under SLS, only return value register (eax) might be abused
  - Clearing return value register before the call is sufficient as a mitigation
    - Forces eax value to 0 during SLS instead of a potentially arbitrary content



#### SLS Mitigations - calls

- XOR EAX, EAX
  - Why is it complicated?
    - Based on compiler behavior assumptions that might not always hold
      - Compiler implementation dependent
    - Some calling convention ABIs use return value register (eax) as function input parameter
      - Fastcall / regparm(3)
    - Variadic functions may use eax as parameter
    - Functions may return small structures via eax + edx registers
    - What to do with:
      - CALL eax





# Straight-Line Speculation (SLS)

- Types of SLS
  - Indirect
    - Unconditional
      - Jump and Call
        - JMP/CALL reg
        - JMP/CALL [mem]
      - Function return
        - RET
  - Direct
    - Unconditional
      - Jump and Call
        - JMP/CALL \$rel\_offset
    - What about direct conditional branches?





#### Speculation of conditional branches

- Both paths of conditional branches (taken or not taken) are architecturally legitimate
  - Hence, there is no direct conditional branch SLS
  - Rather, we speak of a branch fall-through speculation
- Assuming a conditional branch is architecturally taken
  - When mispredicted  $\rightarrow$  Its not taken path could be speculatively executed too
- Such conditional branch fall-through speculation may lead to Spectre v1-like vulnerability situations



# Fall-through speculation of conditional branches

- AMD x86 CPUs (Zen1, Zen2 and Zen3 microarchitectures)
  - All conditional branch instructions may experience a fall-through speculation
    - Root-cause similar to the direct unconditional branch SLS
      - When BPU mispredicts or otherwise mis-detects the conditional branch
        - No BTB entry for the branch instruction  $\rightarrow$  fall-through speculation
    - Even very simple conditional branches with trivially evaluated conditions are susceptible!
  - Branch direction does not matter
    - Both forward and backward branches suffer from the fall-through speculation
  - It is possible to trigger the fall-through speculation between two co-located hyper-threads
  - AMD Zen3, despite its significant BPU upgrade, still affected



- Speculation window
  - Noticeably shorter than "regular" Spectre v1 speculation window
  - up to 8 simple and short (up to 16 bytes) x86 instructions can be speculatively executed
    - in practice: ~5-7 short x86 instructions that do not compete for execution units
  - up to 2 memory loads can be executed speculatively
    - the loads (must be pre-cached) do provide data to the following µops in time
- Constructing a full Spectre v1 gadget **is** possible
- Secret data can be anywhere in memory
- Limitations
  - Shorter speculation window → fewer instructions
    - More difficult to build cache oracle



- It is Spectre v1 again! What's the big deal?!
- A "classic" Spectre v1 gadget is believed to have the following components:
  - Out-of-bound array access
  - Speculative bypass of a bound check
  - Bound check memory access latency
- Most of the implemented mitigations target "array-based" Spectre v1 gadgets only
- But is Spectre v1 really limited to its "classical" form?



- If there is no entry in the BTB
  - The conditional branch will be mispredicted and fall-through speculation might occur
    - Regardless of the condition and its evaluation latency!
    - No bound check memory access required!
    - No out-of-bound array access required either!
  - Easy to make **any** conditional branch mispredict
    - Even the most trivial one
    - Context or privilege level separation does not help
      - User-land can flush BTB, and kernel-land code execution will speculate
      - Enabled Spectre v2 mitigations might already flush the BTB (e.g., IBPB)



- Other Spectre v1 gadget types Speculative Type Confusion
  - Paper: "An Analysis of Speculative Type Confusion Vulnerabilities in the Wild" by Kirzner and Morrison
  - Definition:
    - **Conditional branch misprediction** leading to speculative execution of code with variables holding values of the wrong type and thereby leaking potentially arbitrary memory content
  - Source of such gadgets
    - Attacker-introduced (e.g., via eBPF)
    - Compiler-introduced (compilers might not consider conditional branch mispredictions)
    - Code objects polymorphism-related



• Spectre v1: Bound Check Bypass

```
if (x < array1_len) { // branch mispredict: taken
    y = array1[x]; // read out of bounds
    z = array2[y * 4096]; // leak y over cache channel
}</pre>
```

• Spectre v1: Speculative Type Confusion

```
// ptr argument held in x86 register %rsi
void syscall_helper(cmd_t* cmd, char* ptr, long x) {
  cmd_t c = *cmd; // cache miss
  if (c == CMD_A) { // branch mispredict: taken
    ... code during which x moves to %rsi ...
  }
  if (c == CMD_B) { // branch mispredict: taken
    y = *ptr; // read from addr x (now in %rsi)
    z = array[y * 4096]; // leak y over cache channel
  }
  ... rest of function ...
```



- Compiler-introduced gadget example
- First "if" block modifies the register holding a trusted pointer with an untrusted value of x
  - Compiler assumes that if first "if" block executes (CMD\_A) the second "if" block will not execute (CMD\_B) and vice versa
- Easy to make both "if" blocks to execute altogether speculatively by forcing both conditional branches to mispredict (e.g., by flushing BTB)!
  - → Full Spectre v1 gadget with attackercontrolled arbitrary memory location to be leaked

• Spectre v1: Speculative Type Confusion

```
// ptr argument held in x86 register %rsi
void syscall_helper(cmd_t* cmd, char* ptr, long x) {
  cmd_t c = *cmd; // cache miss
  if (c == CMD_A) { // branch mispredict: taken
    ... code during which x moves to %rsi ...
  }
  if (c == CMD_B) { // branch mispredict: taken
    y = *ptr; // read from addr x (now in %rsi)
    z = array[y * 4096]; // leak y over cache channel
  }
  ... rest of function ...
```



- Comparing to the bound check bypass:
  - Branch condition and its evaluation latency is irrelevant
  - There is no array access bound check
  - Automatic Spectre v1 gadget detection and mitigation is very hard
    - Both conditions depend on neither the trusted pointer nor the untrusted attacker-controlled data
  - Difficult to spot the potential vulnerability during manual code audit

• Spectre v1: Speculative Type Confusion

```
// ptr argument held in x86 register %rsi
void syscall_helper(cmd_t* cmd, char* ptr, long x) {
  cmd_t c = *cmd; // cache miss
  if (c == CMD_A) { // branch mispredict: taken
    ... code during which x moves to %rsi ...
  }
  if (c == CMD_B) { // branch mispredict: taken
    y = *ptr; // read from addr x (now in %rsi)
    z = array[y * 4096]; // leak y over cache channel
  }
  ... rest of function ...
```



• Conditional branch fall-through speculation PoC example

```
asm volatile(
    "xor %%r15, %%r15\n"
    "jz 1f\n"
    "mov (%0), %%rsi\n"
    "and %%rcx, %%rsi\n"
    "add %1, %%rsi\n"
    "mov (%%rsi), %%eax\n"
    "1: nop\n"
:: "r" (pathname), "r" (buf), "c" (1UL << bufsiz)
: "r15", "rsi", "eax", "memory");</pre>
```

```
wipawel@pawel-poc:~$ sudo sysctl -w
kernel.core_pattern="AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
kernel.core_pattern = AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
```

```
wipawel@pawel-poc:~$ time taskset -c 2 ./readlink
Baseline: 170
Result: 0000fdf7fffffc0
Result: 0000e9f7ffffffc0
Result: 0000c977fbefebc0
Result: 0000c977f3efebc0
Result: 0000c957f3efebc0
Result: 0000c957f3efe3c0
Result: 0000c957f36fe3c0
Result: 0000c9555145e3c0
Result: 0000c9514141e3c0
Result: 0000c951414163c0
Result: 0000c951414143c0
Result: 0000c941414143c0
Result: 0000c141414143c0
Result: 00004141414141c0
Result: 0000414141414140
real 0m0.338s user 0m0.338s sys 0m0.000s
```

# Thank you

Blogs: <u>https://grsecurity.net/amd\_branch\_mispredictor\_just\_set\_it\_and\_forget\_it</u> <u>https://grsecurity.net/amd\_branch\_mispredictor\_part\_2\_where\_no\_cpu\_has\_gone\_before</u>

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