Scaling Guest OS Critical Sections with eCS
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Scaling Guest OS Critical Sections with \( eCS \)

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Georgia Institute of Technology VIRGINIA TECH†

Abstract
Multi-core virtual machines (VMs) are now a norm in data center environments. However, one of the well-known problems that VMs suffer from is the vCPU scheduling problem that causes poor scalability behaviors. More specifically, the symptoms of this problem appear as preemption problems in both under- and over-committed scenarios. Although prior research efforts attempted to alleviate these symptoms separately, they fail to address the common root cause of these problems: the missing semantic gap that occurs when a guest OS is preempted while executing its own critical section, thereby leading to degradation of application scalability.

In this work, we strive to address all preemption problems together by bridging the semantic gap between guest OSes and the hypervisor: the hypervisor now knows whether guest OSes are running in critical sections and a guest OS has hypervisor’s scheduling context. We annotate all critical sections by using the lightweight para-virtualized APIs, so we called enlightened critical sections (\( eCS \)), that provide scheduling hints to both the hypervisor and VMs. The hypervisor uses the hint to reschedule a vCPU to fundamentally overcome the double scheduling problem for these annotated critical sections and VMs use the hypervisor provided hints to further mitigate the blocked-waiter wake-up problem. Our evaluation results show that \( eCS \) guarantees the forward progress of a guest OS by 1) decreasing preemption counts by 85–100% while 2) improving the throughput of applications up to 2.5× in an over-committed scenario and 1.6× in an under-committed scenario for various real-world workloads on an 80-core machine.

1 Introduction
Virtualization is now the backbone of every cloud-based organization to run and scale applications horizontally on demand. Recently, this scalability trend is also extending towards vertical scaling [2, 11], i.e., a virtual machine (VM) has up to 128 virtual CPUs (vCPUs) and 3.8 TB of memory to run large in-memory databases [24, 35] and data processing engines [47]. At the same time, cloud providers strive to oversubscribe their resources to improve hardware utilization and reduce energy consumption, without imposing any permissible overhead on the application [38, 46]. However, over subscription requires multiplexing of physical CPUs among VMs to equally distribute physical CPU cycles. Thus, the multiplexing of these VMs introduces the double scheduling problem [40]: 1) the guest OS schedules processes on vCPUs and 2) the hypervisor schedules vCPUs on physical CPUs. Some of the prior works address this problem by adopting co-scheduling approaches [17, 41, 45], which can suffer from priority inversion, CPU fragmentation, and may mitigate the double scheduling symptoms [40]. Such symptoms, that have mostly been addressed individually, are lock-holder preemption (LHP) [8, 15, 42], lock-waiter preemption (LWP) [44], and blocked-waiter wakeup (BWW) [5, 39], problems.

The root cause of this double scheduling phenomenon is a semantic gap between a hypervisor and guest OSes, in which the hypervisor is agnostic of not only the scheduling of VMs but also guest OS-specific critical code that deter the scalability of applications. Furthermore, LHP/LWP are not only limited to spinlocks [15, 19, 42], but are also possible in blocking primitives such as mutex and rwsem as well as readers of the rwsem. Moreover, because of their non work-conserving nature, these blocking primitives inherently suffer from the BWW problem (refer Psearchy in Figure 1 (a)). Besides these, none of the prior works have identified the preemption of an interrupt context that happens in interrupt-intensive applications such as Apache web-server (Figure 1 (b)). We define this problem as interrupt context preemption (ICP).

Our key observation is that these symptoms occur because 1) the hypervisor is scheduling out a vCPU at a time when the vCPU is executing a critical code, and 2) a vCPU, waiting to acquire a lock, is either uncooperative or sleeping [16], leading to LWP and BWW issues. Thus, we propose an alternative perspective, i.e., instead of devising a solution for each symptom, we use four key ideas that allows a VM to hint the hypervisor for mak-
ing an effective scheduling decision to allow its forward progress. First, we consider all of the locks and interrupt contexts as critical components. Second, we devise a set of para-virtualized APIs that annotate these critical components as enlightened critical sections \(eCS\). These APIs are lightweight in nature and notify a hypervisor from the VM and vice-versa with memory operations via shared memory, while avoiding the overhead of hypercall and interrupt injection. Third, the hypervisor now can figure out whether a vCPU is executing an eCS and can reschedule it. We empirically found that an extra schedule (one millisecond \([27]\)) is sufficient as it decreases preemptions by 85–100%; and these critical sections are shorter (in \(\mu s\) \([42]\)) than one schedule. However, by rescheduling a vCPU, we introduce unfairness in the system. We tackle this issue with the OS’s fair scheduling policy \([27]\), which compensates for that additional schedule by allowing other tasks to run for extra time, thereby maintaining the eventual fairness in the system. Lastly, we leverage our APIs to design a virtualized schedule-aware spinning strategy \(eSchdSpin\) that enables lock waiters to be work conserving as well as cooperative inside a VM. That is, a vCPU now cooperatively spins for the lock, if a physical CPU is under-committed, else it yields the vCPU.

Thus, our approach improves the scalability of real-world applications by 1.2–1.6\(\times\) in an under-committed case. Moreover, our \(eCS\) annotation, combined with \(eSchdSpin\), avoids preemption by 85–100% while improving the scalability of applications by 1.4–2.5\(\times\) in an over-committed scenario on an 80-core machine.

In summary, we make the following contributions:

- We identify similarities among various subproblems that stem from the double scheduling phenomenon. Moreover, we identify three new problems: 1) LHP in blocking locks, 2) readers preemption (RP) in read-write locks and semaphores, and 3) vCPU preemption while processing an interrupt context (ICP).
- We address these subproblems with \(eCS\), which we annotate with six new APIs that bridge the semantic gap between a hypervisor and a VM, and even among vCPUs inside a VM.
- Our annotation approach, along with \(eSchdSpin\), improves the scalability of applications in both under- and over-committed scenarios up to 2.5\(\times\) with only 0–15% preemptions, while maintaining eventual fairness with merely one extra schedule.

2 Background and Motivation

We first describe the problem of double scheduling and highlight its implications. Later, we summarize the prior attempts to solve this problem, and then motivate our approach.
problem that occurs when an RCU reader is preempted, while holding the RCU read lock [33]. Because of RRP, the guest OS suffers from an increased quiescence period. This issue can increase the memory footprint of the application, and is responsible for 5% of preemptions.

**Interrupt context preemption (ICP)** problem happens when a vCPU that is executing an interrupt context gets preempted. In particular, this problem is different from prior works that focus on interrupt delivery [12, 43] rather than interrupt handling. This issue occurs in cases such as TLB shootdowns, function call interrupts, rescheduling interrupts, IRQ work interrupts, etc. in every commodity OS. For example, we found that Apache web server, an interrupt-intensive workload, suffers from the ICP problem as it accounts to almost 18% of preemptions for evaluated workloads (refer Figure 3).

### 2.2 Prior Approaches

Some of the prior studies mitigate LWP and LMP problems by relaxed co-scheduling [45], balancing vCPUs to physical CPUs [41] with IPIs as a heuristic [17], or using hardware features [34]. Meanwhile, others designed a para-virtualized interface [8, 14, 42, 44] to only tackle the LHP and LMP problem for spinlocks. Besides these, one radical design focused on scheduling VM’s processes than vCPUs by hot plugging vCPUs on the basis of load on the VM [3, 40]. Unfortunately, all of these prior works address the double scheduling problem either partially that misses other preemption problems, or take a radical path that is not only difficult to adopt in practice but can have significant overhead, in terms of scaling for machines with almost 100 physical cores. Because their approach involves 1) the detection of response to the double scheduling in the form of hypercalls and interrupt injection [3], and 2) explicit task migration from idle vCPUs to active vCPUs. On the contrary, our approach does simple memory operations and exploits the vCPU scheduling boundary to notify the hypervisor for scheduling decisions without any explicit task and vCPU migration: a lightweight approach even at high core count.

### 2.3 The Case for An Extra Schedule

As mentioned before, OS critical sections are the ones that define the forward progress of an application for which the OS is responsible. For instance, let us take an example of two threads competing to acquire a lock to update contents of a file. If the lock holder, which is updating the file, is preempted, the other waiter will waste CPU cycles. There are several critical operations that affect the application scalability [16, 25], and OS performs such operations either by acquiring a lock or executing an interrupt context (I/O processing, TLB shootdowns, etc.). In particular, a delay in processing of these critical sections can result in a severe performance anomaly such as a convoy effect [14, 16], or decreased network through-put for applications such as web servers (refer Figure 1).

Hence, unlike prior approaches, we propose a simple and an intuitive approach, i.e., now a VM hints the hypervisor about a critical section that enables the hypervisor to let a vCPU execute for a pre-defined time slot (schedule). This extra schedule is sufficient to complete a critical section because 1) most critical sections are very fine-grained, and have a time granularity of several microseconds [42], while 2) the granularity of a single schedule is in the order of milliseconds, which is sufficient enough to complete a critical section. For instance, an extra schedule decreases the preemption count by 85–100% (Figure 3). This approach is not only practical but also critical to apply on machines with large core count. However, the extra schedule introduces unfairness in the system, which we address by designing a simple, zero-overhead schedule penaltisation algorithm that tries to maintain the eventual fairness in the system by leveraging the CFS [27] that tries to maintain fairness in the system.

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**Figure 2:** Overview of the information flow between a VM and a hypervisor. Each vCPU has a per-CPU state that is shared with the hypervisor, denoted as eCS state. Figure (a) shows how the vCPU, relays information about an eCS to the hypervisor. On entering a critical section or an interrupt context (1), vCPU updates the non_preemptable_ecs_count (2). After a while, before scheduling out vCPU, the hypervisor reads its eCS state (3), and allows it run for one more schedule to mitigate any of the double scheduling problems. Figure (b) shows how the hypervisor shares the information whether a vCPU is preempted or a physical CPU is overloaded, at the schedule boundary. For instance, the hypervisor marks vcpu_preempted, while scheduling out a vCPU; or updates pcpu_overloaded flag to one if the number of active tasks on that physical CPU is more than one. Both try to further mitigate LWP and BWW problems.
We propose a set of six APIs that the hypervisor can use to mitigate various preemption problems, such as double polling, by providing hints to the hypervisor and VM via shared memory. A hypervisor can rely on its scheduler aware primitives, namely, mutex and rwsem, while an OS can be of two types. First is the non-preemptable OS, which is either an interrupt or a kernel thread running after a marked context. We now present our lightweight APIs that use simple read and write memory operations. A simple approach to maintain eventual fairness in the system is to provide hints from the hypervisor by using the last two APIs to mitigate LWP and BWW problems. The cpu_id is the core id that is used by tasks running inside a guest OS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hint</th>
<th>Lightweight Para-virtualized API</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VM → Hypervisor</td>
<td>void activate_non_preemptable_ecs(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Increase the eCS count for a vCPU with cpu_id by 1 for a non-preemptable task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>void deactivate_non_preemptable_ecs(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Decrease the eCS count for a vCPU with cpu_id by 1 for a non-preemptable task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>void activate_preemptable_ecs(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Increase the eCS count for a vCPU with cpu_id by 1 for a non-preemptable task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>void deactivate_preemptable_ecs(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Decrease the eCS count for a vCPU with cpu_id by 1 for a non-preemptable task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypervisor → VM</td>
<td>bool is_vcpu_preempted(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Return whether a vCPU with cpu_id is preempted by the hypervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bool is_pcpu_overcommitted(cpu_id)</td>
<td>Return whether a physical CPU running a vCPU with cpu_id, is over-committed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Set of para-virtualized APIs exposed by the hypervisor to a VM for providing hints to the hypervisor to mitigate double scheduling. These APIs provide hints to the hypervisor and VM via shared memory. A vCPU relies on the first four APIs to ask for an extra schedule to overcome LWP, LWP, RPP, RRP, and ICP. Meanwhile, a vCPU gets hints from the hypervisor by using the last two APIs to mitigate LWP and BWW problems. The cpu_id is the core id that is used by tasks running inside a guest OS.

3 Design

A hypervisor can mitigate various preemption problems, if it is aware of a vCPU executing a critical section. We denote such a hypervisor-aware critical section as an enlightened critical section (eCS), that can be executed for one more schedule. eCS is applicable to all synchronization primitives and mechanisms such as RCU and interrupt contexts. We now present our lightweight APIs that act as a cross-layer interface for annotating an eCS and later focus on our notion of an extra schedule and our approach to maintain eventual fairness in the system.

3.1 Lightweight Para-virtualized APIs

We propose a set of six lightweight para-virtualized APIs to bridge the semantic gap between VM and hypervisor in an over-committed scenario. Figure 2 presents two scenarios in which the scheduler context information is shared between a vCPU and the hypervisor. Figure 2 (a) shows how a vCPU, i.e., entering an eCS, shares information with the hypervisor. During entry (1), vCPU first updates its corresponding state (non_preemptable_ecs_count or preemptable_ecs_count) (2) and continues to execute its critical section. Meanwhile, the hypervisor, before scheduling out vCPU, checks vCPU’s eCS states (3) and allows it to run for extra time if certain criteria are fulfilled (§3.2); otherwise, it schedules out vCPU with other waiting tasks. When vCPU exits the eCS, it decreases the eCS state count, denoting the end of critical section. Figure 2 (b) illustrates another scenario that addresses the BWW problem, in which the hypervisor updates the eCS states: pcpu_overloaded and vcpu_preempted while scheduling in and out vCPU, respectively, at each schedule boundary (4). We devise a simple approach—virtualized scheduling-aware spinning (eSchedSpin)—that enables efficient scheduling aware waiting for both blocking and non-blocking locks (§4). That is, vCPU reads both states (2) and decides whether to keep spinning until the lock is acquired if the pCPU is not overloaded (5), else it yields, which allows the other vCPU (in VM2) or a hypervisor’s task to progress forward by doing some useful task, thereby mitigating the double scheduling problems.

3.2 Eventual Fairness with Selective Scheduling

As mentioned before, the hypervisor relies on its scheduler to figure out whether a vCPU is executing an eCS. That is, when a vCPU with a marked eCS is about to be
scheduled out, the hypervisor scheduler checks the value of $eCS$ count variables (Figure 2). If any of these values are greater than zero, the hypervisor lets the vCPU run for an extra schedule. However, vCPU rescheduling introduces two problems: 1) How does the hypervisor handle a task with $eCS$, which the guest OS can preempt or schedule out? 2) How does it ensure the system fairness?

We handle an $eCS$ preemptable task with preemtible ecs_count counter APIs, which differentiate between a preemptable task and a non-preemptable task. We do so because the guest OS can schedule out a preemptable task. In this case, the hypervisor should avoid rescheduling that vCPU because 1) it will result in false rescheduling, and 2) it can hamper the VM performance. We address this issue inside the guest OS, i.e., before scheduling out an $eCS$-marked task inside a guest OS, we save the value of preemtible ecs_count to a task-specific structure and reset the counter to zero. Later, when the task is rescheduled again by the guest OS, we restore the preemtible ecs_count with the saved value from the task-specific structure, thereby mitigating the false scheduling.

With vCPU rescheduling, we introduce unfairness at two levels: 1) An $eCS$ marked vCPU will always ask for rescheduling on every schedule boundary.2 2) By rescheduling a vCPU, the hypervisor is unfair to other tasks in the system. We resolve the first issue by allowing the hypervisor to reschedule an $eCS$-marked vCPU only once during that schedule boundary as rescheduling extends the boundary. At the end of schedule boundary, the hypervisor schedules other tasks to avoid the starving other tasks or VMs and addresses indefinite rescheduling. In addition, the hypervisor also keeps track of this extra reschedule information and runs other vCPUs for longer duration and inherently balances the running time, an equivalent to vCPU penalization. Thus, our approach selectively reschedules and penalizes a vCPU rather than balancing the extra reschedule information across all cores, which will result in an unnecessary overhead of synchronizing all runtime information of rescheduling. We call our approach as the local CPU penalization approach, as we only penalize a vCPU that executed an $eCS$, thereby ensuring eventual fairness in the system. Moreover, our local vCPU scheduling is a form of selective-relaxed co-scheduling of vCPUs depending on what kind of tasks are being executed, while without maintaining any synchronization among vCPUs, unlike prior approaches [41, 45].

### 4 Use Case

The double scheduling phenomenon introduces the semantic gap in three places: 1) from a vCPU to a physical CPU that results in LHP, RP, and ICP problems; 2) from a

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2Such a VM can be either an I/O or an interrupt-intensive VM that spends most of its time in the kernel, or even a compromised VM.
5 Implementation

We realized the idea of eCS by implementing it on the Linux kernel version 4.13. Besides annotating various locks and interrupt contexts with eCS, we specifically modified the scheduler and the para-virtual interface of the KVM hypervisor. Our changes are portable enough to apply on the Xen hypervisor too. The whole modification consists of 1,010 lines of code (see Table 3).

Lightweight para-virtualized APIs. We share the information between the hypervisor and a VM with a shared memory between them, which is similar to the kvm_steal_time [4] implementation. For instance, each VM maintains a per-core eCS states, and the hypervisor maintains per-vCPU eCS states for each VM.

Scheduler extension. We extend a scheduler-to-task notification mechanism, preempt_notifier [18], for identifying an eCS-marked vCPU at the schedule boundary. Our extension allows the scheduler to know about the task scheduling requirement and decide scheduling strategy at the schedule boundary. For example, in our case, the extension reads the non_preemptable ecs_count and preempttable ecs_count to decide the scheduling strategy for the vCPU. Besides this, we rely on the notifier’s in and out APIs to set the value of vcpu_preempted and pcpu_overloaded variables.

We implemented our vCPU rescheduling decision in the schedule_tick function [36]. The schedule_tick function performs two tasks: 1) It does the bookkeeping of the task runtime, which is used for ensuring the fairness in the system. 2) It also is responsible for setting the rescheduling flag (TIF_NEED_RESCHED) if there is more than one task on that run queue, which is used by the scheduler to schedule out the task if the reschedule flag is set. We implemented the rescheduling strategy by bypassing the setting up of the reschedule flag in case the preempt_notifier check function returned true, meanwhile updating the runtime statistics of the vCPU.

Annotating locks for eCS. We mark eCS by using the non-preemptable APIs for non-blocking primitives, preemtatable ones for mutex and rwsem. Our annotation comprises only 60 LoC that covers around 12,000 lock instances with 85,000 lock API calls in the Linux kernel that has 10 million LoC for the kernel version 4.13.

6 Evaluation

We evaluate our approaches by answering the following questions:

- What is the overhead of an eCS annotation and the scheduler overhead to read the values? (§6.1)
- Does eCS helps in an over-committed case? (§6.2)
- How does eCS impact the scalability of a VM? (§6.3)
- How do our APIs address the BWW problem? (§6.4)
- Does our schedule penalization approach maintain the eventual fairness of the system? (§6.5)

Experimental setup. We extended VBench [13] for our evaluation. We chose four benchmarks: Apache web server [7], Metis [21], Psearchy from Mosbench, and Pzzip2 [9]. The Apache web server serves a 300 bytes static page for each request that is generated by WRK [10]. Both of them are running inside the VM to remove the network wire overhead and only stress the VM’s kernel components. We choose Apache to stress the interrupt handler to emphasize the importance of eCS for an interrupt context. Metis is a map-reduce library for a single multi-core server that mostly stresses the memory allocator (spinlock) and the page-fault handler (rwsem) of the OS. Similar to Metis, Psearchy is an in-memory parallel search and indexer that stresses the writer side of the rwsem design. In addition, we also choose Pzzip2—a parallel compression and decompression program—because we wanted to use a minimally kernel-intensive application. Moreover, none of these workloads suffer from performance degradation from any known user space bottleneck in a non-virtualized environment. We use memory-based file system, tmpfs, to isolate the effect of I/O. We further pin the cores to circumvent vCPU migration at the hypervisor level to remove the jitter from our evaluation.

We evaluate our eCS approach against the following configurations: 1) PVM is a para-virtualized VM that includes unfair qspinlock implementation, which mitigates LWP and BWW issues, and it is the default configuration since Linux v4.5. 2) HVM is the one without para-virtualization support and also includes unfair qspinlock implementation. Both PVM and HVM are not eCS annotated. Note that we could not compare other prior works because they are not open sourced [3, 45] and are very specific to the Xen hypervisor [42]. We evaluate these configurations on an eight socket, 80-core machine with Intel E7-8870 processors. Another point is that the current version of KVM partially addresses the BWW problem that can occur from the user space [22].

6.1 Overhead of eCS

We evaluate the cost of our lightweight para-virtualized APIs on various blocking and non-blocking locks, and RCU. Table 4 enumerates the overhead of the sole API cost including the cost of executing a critical section with a simple microbenchmark that executes an empty critical section, whereas 80 core denotes that 80 threads are competing. We observe that eCS adds an overhead of almost 0.9–18.4 ns in low contention, whereas negligible overhead in high contention scenario, except RCU. For RCU, the empty critical section
We evaluate the performance of the aforementioned APIs allow cooperative co-scheduling of the VMs; 3) our workloads for APIs overhead partially mitigates the highly contended system at higher core count by acting as a back-off mechanism. Another interesting observation is that we observe almost every type of preemption (refer Figure 3 (p:a)) because of serving the static pages, which involves blocking locks for the socket connection and softirq and spinlocks use for the interrupts processing. In particular, the number of preemptions is dominated by LHP for non-blocking and blocking locks, followed by ICP and then RP. We believe that the ICP problem will further exacerbate with optimized interrupt delivery mechanisms [12, 43]. PVM is 1.36× faster than HVM at 80 cores because of the support of para-virtualized spinlock (qspinlock [20]) as well as the asynchronous page fault mechanism that decreases the contention [30].

The major bottleneck for this workload is the interrupt injection, which can be mitigated by proposed optimized methods [12, 43]. In addition, Figure 4 (b) presents the latency CDF for the Apache workload at 80 cores in both under- and over-compression case. We observe that eCS not only maintains almost equivalent latency as that of PVM in an under-committed case, but also decreases in the over-committed case by 10.3–17% and 9.5–27.9% against PVM and HVM, respectively.

Psearchy mostly stresses the writer side of rwsem as it performs 20,000 small and large mmap/munmap operations along with stressing the memory allocator for inode operations, which mostly idles the guest OS because of the non-work conserving blocking locks [16]. Figure 3 (t:b) shows the throughput, in which eCS outperforms both PVM and HVM by 2.3× and 1.7×, respectively. The reason is that we 1) partially mitigate the BWW problem with our eSchnSpin approach, and 2) decrease the number of preemptions by 95.7–100% with an extra schedule (refer (n:b)). In addition, our eSchdSpin approach decreases the idle time from 65.4% to 45.2%, as it allows waiters to spin than schedule out themselves, which severely degrades the scalability in a virtualized environment, as observed for both PVM and HVM. This workload is dominated by mostly blocking and non-blocking locks, as they account to almost 98% preemptions (refer (p:b)). We also observe that HVM outperforms PVM by 1.33× because the asynchronous page fault mechanism introduces more BWW issue as it schedules out a vCPU if the page is not available, which does not happen for HVM.

Metis is a mix of both page fault and mmap operations that stress both the reader and the writer of the rwsem. Hence, it also suffers from the BWW problem, as we observe in Figure 3 (t:c). eCS outperforms PVM and HVM by 1.3× at 80 cores because of the reduced BWW problem and decreased preemptions that account to 91.4–99.5% (Figure 3 (n:c)). Note that the reader preemptions are 20%, thereby illustrating that readers preemptions is possible for read-dominated workloads, which has not been observed by any prior works. We do not observe any difference in the throughput of HVM and PVM.

Phbzip2 is an efficient compression/decompression work-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical sections</th>
<th>1 core</th>
<th>80 core</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W/o eCS</td>
<td>W/ eCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spinlock</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rwlock (read)</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rwlock (write)</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mutex</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rwsem (read)</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rwsem (write)</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCU</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Cost of using our lightweight para-virtualized APIs with various synchronization primitives and mechanism. 1 core and 80 core denote the time (in ns) to execute an empty critical section with one and 80 threads, respectively. Although, our approach slightly adds an overhead on a single core count, there is no performance degradation for our evaluated workloads.
Figure 3: Analysis of real-world workloads in an over-committed scenario, i.e., two instances of VM are executing the same workload. Column (i) represents the scalability of selected workloads in three settings: PVM, HVM, and with eCS annotations. Column (ii) represents the number of preemptions caught and prevented by the hypervisor with our APIs. Column (iii) represents the type of preemptions caught by the hypervisor (refer Table 4). By allowing an extra schedule, our approach reduces preemptions by 85–100% and improve scalability of applications by up to 2.5×, while observing almost all types of preemptions for each workload.

Figure 4: CDF of the latency of requests for the Apache web server workload in both under- and over-committed scenarios at 80 cores. It clearly shows the impact of eCS in the over-committed scenario, while having minimal impact in the under-committed case.
We evaluate our work conserving. We partially address this problem with
which do not provide any gains even after decreasing
1) these preemptions may not be too critical to affect the
Figure 6:
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include bare-metal configuration (Host) as a baseline
pact of both APIs and
lock [20] that mitigates the problem of
placed it with a highly optimized unfair queue-based
has dropped the FIFO-based
by prior works [42], because the current Linux kernel
that we do not observe too many preemptions, as shown
the help of our
suffer from the
problem because of them being non-
Moreover, we found that these preemptions occur for
almost every type of primitives, specifically in the case
of blocking synchronization primitives, read locks (Metis
and has re-
we observe that
(b) Psearchy
impact of both
CS
problem and
BWW
in both under- and
over-committed scenarios. Figure 6 (t:d) shows that the performance of eCS
is similar to PVM and HVM, while decreasing the number of preemptions by 98.4–100% (refer (n:d)). We do not
observe any performance gain in this scenario because
of preemptions by 98.4–100% (refer (n:d)). We do not
observe any performance gain in this scenario because
1) these preemptions may not be too critical to affect the
application scalability, and 2) the overhead of our APIs,
which do not provide any gains even after decreasing
the preemptions. Similar to the other workloads, LHP
dominates the preemption, followed by RP, ICP, and RRP.

In summary, our APIs not only reduce preemptions by 85–100%, but also improve the scalability of applications that use these synchronization primitives up to 2.5×, while no observable overhead on these applications. Moreover, we found that these preemptions occur for almost every type of primitives, specifically in the case of blocking synchronization primitives, read locks (Metis and Pbzip2), and interrupts (e.g., TLB operations, packet processing etc.). In addition, most of the workloads still suffer from the BWW problem because of them being non-work conserving. We partially address this problem with the help of our eSchnSpin approach. One point to note is that we do not observe too many preemptions, as shown by prior works [42], because the current Linux kernel has dropped the FIFO-based Ticket spinlock and has replaced it with a highly optimized unfair queue-based lock [20] that mitigates the problem of LHP and LWP.

6.3 Performance in an Under-committed Case

We evaluate our eCS approach against PVM and HVM configurations in which a VM is running to show the impact of both APIs and eSchnSpin approach. We also include bare-metal configuration (Host) as a baseline
(Figure 5). We observe that eCS addresses the BWW problem, and outperforms both PVM and HVM in the case of Apache (1.2× and 1.2×), Psearchy (1.6× and 1.9×), Metis (1.2× and 1.3×), and Psearchy (1.2× and 1.4×), while having almost similar latency for the Apache workload (Figure 4 (a)). Likewise, eCS performance is similar to that of bare-metal, except for the Psearchy workload.

For Apache, our APIs act as a back-off mechanism to improve its scalability, as the system is heavily contended. The throughput degrades after 30 cores because of the overhead of process scheduling, socket overhead, and inefficient kernel packet processing. Besides this, both Psearchy and Metis suffer from the BWW problem, which we improve with our eSchnSpin approach that results in better scalability as well as reduction in the idling of VMs. In particular, we decrease the idle time of Psearchy and Metis by 25% and 20%, respectively, by using our approach. One point to note is that blocking locks are based on the TAS lock, whose throughput severely degrades with increasing core count because of the increase cache-line contention, which we observe after 40 cores for Psearchy for all configurations. We also find that the Host is still 1.4× faster than eCS because eSchnSpin only partially mitigates the BWW problem, while introducing excessive cache-line contention, which we can circumvent with NUMA-aware locks [16]. For Pbzip2, we observe that eCS performs equivalent to the Host, while outperforming PVM and HVM after 60 cores, because Pbzip2 spends the least amount of time in the kernel space (5%), and starts to suffer from the BWW problem only after 60 cores, which our eSchnSpin easily tackles.

6.4 Addressing BWW Problem via eCS

We evaluate the impact of the BWW problem on Psearchy in both under- and over-committed scenarios. Figure 6 (a) shows that our scheduling-aware spinning approach (marked as eCS + SchnSpin) improves the throughput of Psearchy by 1.5× and 1.2× at 40 and 80 cores, respectively, in an under-committed scenario. SchnSpin approach allows a blocking waiter, both reader and writer, to actively spin for the lock if the number of tasks in the run queue is one, else the task schedules itself out. This approach is similar to the scheduling-aware parking/wake-up strategy [16], which we applied to the stock mutex and rwsem.
We now evaluate whether we are able to achieve even-fairness in a VM when more than one task are in the run queue; otherwise, the waiter is scheduled out when more than one task are in the run queue of the VM, whereas the waiter parks itself if it is unable to acquire the lock. With our approach, we try to mitigate this performance anomaly and allow the applications to scale further. Unfortunately, the scheduling-aware approach is inefficient in the case of the over-committed scenario, as shown in Figure 6 (b). The reason is that current waiters are guest OS agnostic, which leads to wasting CPU resources and resulting in more LHP and LWP problems, thereby degrading the scalability by almost 4.4 × (marked eCS + SchdSpin in (b)) against a simple eCS configuration that still suffers from the BWW problem. We overcome this issue by using our is_pcpu_overcommitted() API that allows the SchdSpin approach to spin only when there is no active task on the pCPU’s run queue; otherwise, the waiter is scheduled out when more than one task are in the run queue of the pCPU. By using our API (marked eCS + eSchdSpin), we outperform the baseline eCS approach by 1.8 × and the eCS + SchdSpin approach by 8 ×.3

6.5 System Eventual Fairness

We now evaluate whether we are able to achieve eventual fairness while allowing eCS annotated VMs to obtain an extra schedule followed by local vCPU penalization. To evaluate the fairness, we run a simple micro-benchmark in two VMs (marked VM1 and VM2). VM1 is a non-annotated VM, whereas VM2 is an eCS annotated one. This micro-benchmark indefinitely reads the content of a file that involves read side of rwsem and spends around 99% of the time in the kernel without scheduling out the task, thereby prohibiting the guest OS from doing any halt exits. Figure 7 (a) shows the time difference between two VM runtimes that we measure at every 100 ms window for each VM as well as the number of preemptions for VM2 in that window. Figure 7 (b) shows the cumulative runtime of the VMs. We observe from Figure 7 (a) that even after allowing for extra schedules, the CFS scheduling policy balances out these extra schedules, which does not affect the runtime difference between VM1 and VM2. For example, at the end of one second window, marked 10, we observe that the number of extra schedules that the hypervisor granted VM2 was 34 (34 milliseconds of extra time), but the runtime difference between VM1 and VM2 is 7.8 ms, which becomes -1.9 ms at the end of two seconds, while VM2 received a total of 54 extra schedules (54 milliseconds). Hence, the extra schedule approach followed by our local vCPU penalization ensures that none of the tasks running on that particular physical CPU suffers from the fairness issue, also referred as eventual fairness. Moreover, Figure 7 (b) shows that both VMs get almost equivalent runtime in a lockstep fashion with both VMs getting almost 4.95 seconds at the end of 10 seconds.

7 Discussion

Our eCS approach addresses the problem of preemptions and BWW in both under- and over-committed scenarios by annotating all synchronization primitives and mechanisms in the kernel space. However, besides these primitives, kernel developers have to manually annotate a critical section if they want to avoid the preemptions while introducing their own primitives. One approach could be that the hypervisor can read the instruction pointer (IP) to figure out an eCS, but the guest OS must provide a guest OS symbol table to resolve the IP. In addition, the current design of eCS only targets the kernel space of a guest OS, and it is still agnostic of the user space critical sections such as pthread locks. Hence, we would like to extend our approach to the user space critical sections to further avoid the preemption problem, as we believe that eCS is a natural fit for multi-level scheduling. However, we need to communicate the scheduling hint down to the lowest layer effectively, which requires designing of the eCS composability extensions.

Our annotation approach does not open any security vulnerability because our approach is based on the paravirtualized VM, and it is similar to other approaches that share the information with the hypervisor [4, 19]. By using our virtualized scheduling-aware spinning ap-
approach (eSchdSpin), we partially mitigate the BWW problem. However, our Hypervisor → VM APIs expose scheduling information of the pCPU, but they only tell if a pCPU is overloaded or a vCPU is preempted. In addition, a VM cannot misuse this information as it will be later penalized by the hypervisor. There is also very slight possibility of priority inversion problem with our extra schedule approach. However, the window of that hypervisor-granted extra schedule is too small to incur priority inversion and performance, unlike co-scheduling approaches [41, 45] in which the scheduling window is in the order of several milliseconds.

8 Related work

The double scheduling phenomenon is a recurring problem in the domain of virtualization, which seriously impacts the performance of a VM. There have been comprehensive research efforts to mitigate this problem.

Synchronization primitives in VMs. Uhlig et al. [44] demonstrated the spinlock synchronization issue in a virtualized environment, which he addressed with synchronous hints to the hypervisor, and was later replaced by para-virtual hooks for the spinlock [8] for notifying the hypervisor to block the vCPU after it has exhausted its busy wait threshold. Meanwhile, other problems such as LWP [32], the BWW problem [5, 39], and RCU readers preemption problems were found. Gleaner [5] that addressed the BWW problem implemented a user space solution to handle tasks among a varying number of vCPUs, by manipulating tasks’ processor affinity in the user space, which is difficult to maintain at runtime as it must accurately track each task launch and deletion. However, our eSchdSpin approach is user agnostic and mitigates the problem to certain extent for large core count.

Taebe et al. [42] addressed the LHP/LWP issue by exposing the time window from the hypervisor to the guest OS, which leverages this information that enables a waiter to either spin or join the waiting queue. However, their solution is not applicable to CFS [27] scheduler of Linux as it does not expose the scheduling window information. Their solution is orthogonal to our approach as we want the hypervisor to take a decision than the VM. Wainman Long [20] designed and implemented qspinlock that inherently overcomes the problem of LWP by exploiting the property of the TAS lock in the queue-based lock. It works by allowing the other waiters to steal the lock before joining the queue without disrupting the waiters’ queue. However, qspinlock is still prone to LWP. Meanwhile, by annotating various locks as cCS, we confirm these problems, and further identify new sets of problems such as RP and ICP, and provide a simple solution to address the double scheduling phenomenon.

Partial handling of scheduling overhead in VMs. There have been several studies on virtualization overhead because of the software–hardware redirection [1, 39] and co-scheduling issues [17, 41, 45]. For example, VMware relies on relaxed co-scheduling [45] to mitigate double scheduling problem, in which vCPUs are scheduled in batches and the stragglers are synchronized within a predefined threshold. Besides this, other works have proposed balanced vCPU scheduling [41] or even IPI based demand scheduling [17]. However, these co-scheduling approaches suffer from CPU fragmentation. On the contrary, our approach neither introduces any CPU fragmentation nor it needs to synchronize the global scheduling information for all the vCPU of a VM because each vCPU is locally penalized by the hypervisor rather than synchronizing them among other vCPUs.

Song et al. [40] proposed the idea of dynamically adjusting vCPUs according to available CPU resources, while allowing guest OS to schedule its tasks. They used the approach of vCPU ballooning, which avoided the problem of double scheduling and was later extended by Cheng et al. [3] by designing a lightweight hotplug vCPU mechanism. Although their approach is effective in case of small VMs, it is complementary to our approach and may not scale effectively for large SMP VMs because of the overhead of migrating tasks from one vCPU to another as well as the frequent rescheduling of the targeted vCPUs. cCS, on the other hand, does not suffer from any explicit IPI and migration-specific tasks, as it only adds an overhead of a simple memory operations for a scheduling decision.

9 Conclusion

Double scheduling phenomenon is a well-known problem in the domain of virtualization that leads to several symptoms in the form of LHP, LWP, and BWW. We identify that it not only is limited to non-blocking locks, but also is applicable to blocking locks and reader side of locks. We present a single shot solution with our key insight: if a certain key component of a guest OS is allowed to proceed further, the guest OS will make forward progress. We identify these critical components as synchronization primitives and mechanism such as spinlocks, mutex, rwsem, RCU, and even interrupt context, which we call enlightened critical sections (cCS). We annotate cCS with our lightweight APIs that expose whether a VM is executing a critical section, which the hypervisor uses to provide an extra schedule at the scheduling boundary, thereby allowing the guest OS to progress forward. In addition, by leveraging the hypervisor scheduling context, a VM mitigates the effect of BWW problem with our simple virtualized spinning-aware spinning strategy. With cCS, we not only decrease the spurious preemptions by 85–100% but also improve the throughput of applications up to 1.6× and 2.5× in an under- and over-committed scenario, respectively.
References


