Rapid Deployment of Confidential Cloud Applications with Gramine

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ABSTRACT

Gramine is a leading open-source tool for securely porting unmodified Linux applications onto Intel® SGX [67]. Gramine implements the "lift-and-shift" model of confidential computing-where one simply runs an entire, legacy application in a trusted execution environment (TEE), such as Intel SGX. Gramine was initially released as an artifact of the 2014 EuroSys Paper [96], and over the subsequent ten years has evolved into a production-ready, open-source community project, deployed commercially by multiple companies. Gramine has been used by over one hundred peer-reviewed papers to facilitate confidential computing research: in some cases, it is the benchmark against which other systems or TEE design choices are measured; as a baseline for security analysis or attacks and, in others, a building block for quick prototyping of applications in domains including health care, machine learning, genome analysis, speech processing, networking, autonomous vehicles, IoT management, and database systems. This short paper describes the Gramine project and its impact on industry and research.

1 INTRODUCTION

Gramine is an open-source tools for securely deploying unmodified Linux applications on Intel® SGX [67] and other trusted execution environments (TEEs). Gramine implements the "lift-and-shift" model of confidential computing—where one simply runs an entire, legacy application in the TEE. Figure 1 overviews the Gramine architecture [96] and how it is deployed in SGX, specifically. Gramine reimplements the Linux system call table in a user space library (hence the name **library OS**). The heavy black box indicates the boundary of the trusted code running inside the TEE (enclave). At the top is an unmodified application binary, followed by supporting libraries. Some system calls are implemented entirely within the Library OS, and some request (and dynamically check) functionality from the untrusted host kernel. A rare feature of Gramine is multi-process support, including fork(). Multiple processes are implemented using multiple separate host address spaces and passing encrypted, signed messages between enclaves. Although message passing in user-space is slower than an in-kernel implementation of inter-process communication primitives (IPC), this design choice avoids placing functionality and trust in the host kernel.

Gramine is designed for **Platform Independence**; it is implemented against a small, simple ABI (fewer than 50 calls) called the **Platform Adaptation Layer (PAL)**. The PAL ABI includes abstractions for memory, threads, files, and devices. In principle, if one reimplements the PAL ABI on a new host, the rest of Gramine and supported applications should "just work."

Although Gramine does not require application code changes or recompilation, each application does need a signed **manifest** file to specify what data should be loaded into the enclave. The manifest includes hashes of trusted files, as well as other virtualization parameters.

For running on an untrusted host, as in the SGX threat model, Gramine adds a **shielding layer** to the TEE interface (i.e., ecalls on SGX). Although there are minor differences between the enclave and PAL ABI, we expect these to consolidate in the future.

Gramine is compatible with multiple remote attestation frameworks. In the past, Gramine has supported Intel Attestation Service (IAS), and several protocols based on Intel Data Center Attestation Primitives (DCAP). As IAS is reaching end of life in 2025, Gramine is retiring IAS support at the time of writing.

We welcome and encourage contributions of useful changes to Gramine itself. Gramine is licensed under the LGPL, which does require users publish modifications to Gramine itself. However, our understanding in adopting the LGPL is that anyone is free to Michał Kowalczyk, Dmitrii Kuvaiskii, Paweł Marczewski, Borys Popławski, Wojtek Porczyk, Donald E. Porter, Kailun Qin, Chia-Che Tsai, Mona Vij, and Isaku Yamahata

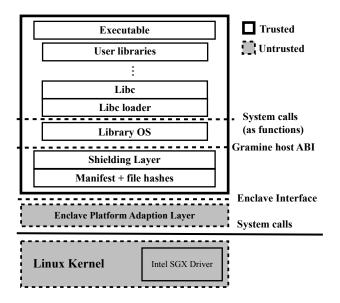


Figure 1: The Gramine architecture. The executable is position-dependent. The enclave includes an OS shield, a library OS, Glibc, and other user binaries.

use Gramine without sharing any code outside of Gramine; the obligation to share code stops at the boundary of the library OS. For instance, using unmodified Gramine to deploy a closed-source application incurs no obligation to share source code, nor does it prevent use with code under a different license.

1.1 Container Integration

In order to facilitate application deployment on Gramine, Gramine includes two tools to automate construction of containers that use Gramine to run on SGX.

The first feature, called **Gramine Shielded Containers** (gsc), automatically converts a Docker image into a version of the image that can run in Gramine on SGX. Containers, such as Docker, are now a very common way to package and deploy software. A dockerfile, which describes how to build an application image; a Gramine manifest has a similar goal of describing the runtime requirements of an application, and is perhaps one of the most challenging steps in adopting Gramine.

GSC automatically generates a Gramine manifest from a docker image, and then creates a new Docker image that includes the manifest, Gramine, and other required SGX runtime support. GSC also has the ability to sign the manifest and run the container in SGX.

The second tool is called **Scaffolding for Gramine (SCAG)**, and leverages a language runtime or other framework to generate a Docker image with Gramine. Unlike GSC, SCAG does not require an initial Docker Image. SCAG is currently compatible with Python, Flask, Node.js, Express.js, Koa.js, Java JAR files, Java with the Gradle build system, and .NET. SCAG also automatically adds SSL/TLS to plaintext networking apps. These two tools indicate that most of the information that Gramine requires to run an application is already present in most deployment tools.

2 GRAMINE'S IMPACT

Gramine has been a key enabling technology for confidential computing research and practice to-date. Specifically, Gramine (1) is the first open-source, lift-and-shift framework; (2) is mature enough to run a significant number of real-world applications; (3) has a broad user base; and (4) has a growing contributor community. Gramine has been used by over one hundred peer-reviewed papers to facilitate confidential computing research: in some cases, it is the benchmark against which other systems or TEE design choices are measured [13, 19, 22, 27, 32, 34, 37, 47, 48, 50, 60, 83, 84, 90, 91, 94]; a baseline for security analysis or attacks [3, 4, 17, 18, 23, 24, 39, 49, 56, 63, 72, 81, 88, 95, 98, 99, 103]; and, in others, a building block for quick prototyping of applications in domains including health care, machine learning, genome analysis, speech processing, networking, autonomous vehicles, IoT management, and database systems [2, 5, 6, 12, 14-16, 25, 26, 33, 36, 38, 40-43, 45, 51-53, 57-59, 61, 62, 64-66, 68, 71, 74, 77-79, 85-87, 93, 97, 100-102, 104-108].

On the industry side, Gramine had its first production release in late 2021 and we are aware of *at least six companies* developing products built on Gramine. We keep a list of Gramine users online¹. One example of Gramine's utility is IBM's ePrescription system, which is used by the German Ministry of Health to track prescriptions across the entire German population. Several cloud service providers have built solutions for SGX involving Gramine, including Tencent, JD Cloud, ByteDance, and Microsoft. Several start-ups use Gramine in their solutions; for instance, Edgeless [92] uses Gramine to secure blockchain infrastructure for banks. Gramine is used internally at Intel for validating and benchmarking SGX CPUs, and for internal services.

One major class of applications where Gramine has gained traction is in secure machine learning infrastructures. The OpenFL federated learning project has been built using Gramine [85]. The BigDL large language model framework integrates standard machine learning tools, such as Tensorflow and Pytorch, with system security features such as SGX and Gramine [9]. Simiarly, the OpenVINO machine learning toolkit for AI inference includes a set of security add-ons that also include SGX support, facilitated by Gramine [20]. ByteDance's support for securing Federated Learning on SGX in their Fedlearner project is also built upon Gramine [29].

Researchers and developers from Intel and Invisible Things Lab have joined the leadership team for the project, and Gramine has received significant code contributions from companies including IBM and Alibaba Cloud. Gramine has been adopted by the Linux Foundation's Confidential Computing Consortium (CCC), which helps the project with infrastructure, visibility, and mentorship to build a robust developer community. Gramine is the only project to go from the incubation to graduation stage [1]. Gramine is also the only CCC project to date to receive the OpenSSF's Security Best Practices Badge [76]. Gramine is a featured open-source enabler in Microsoft's Azure Confidential Cloud Services [70].

¹https://gramine.readthedocs.io/en/latest/gramine-users.html

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The overall maturity and utility of the project is also reflected in various metadata statistics. On github at the time of writing, the code has 607 stars, 201 forks, and 27 watchers. The original Graphene repository, now archived, still has 771 stars, 260 forks, and 51 watchers. The ATC paper describing SGX support in Gramine has 714 citations.

2.1 Evolving with SGX

SGX has evolved substantially since its first version, which made a number of simplifying assumptions about the workloads. For instance, the first version of SGX did not allow the program to dynamically create new mappings inside of a host enclave. This is a simplification not just for implementation, but reasoning about security. For instance, the intersection of exception handling and scheduling controlled by an untrusted host require careful reasoning about race conditions in how the TEE code is invoked; the recent AEX-Notify feature in SGX supports more efficient exception handling and can be used to help enclave code defend itself from side-channel attacks that leverage interrupts [21].

Gramine has both ongoing and completed efforts to stay abreast of new SGX versions. In the case of dynamic memory management, Gramine has basic support for the Enclave Dynamic Memory Management (EDMM) feature, and work is in progress to optimize performance of dynamic mappings in Gramine. Work is in progress to merge AEX-Notify support. Gramine has also merged support for using ioctl to communicate with computational accelerators in order to offload computation [54].

2.2 TEEs Beyond SGX

Although the Gramine project has focused supporting applications on SGX, the original design of Gramine predates SGX. Gramine was originally designed to simplify *porting* code from one platform to another. Gramine has a modular architecture that encapsulates most host-specific (or TEE-specific) code into a platform adaptation layer (PAL), which is designed for ease of implementation. In principle, to support a new TEE, one only need to implement a suitable PAL for the new TEE. Even if SGX were to fall out of usage, Gramine can be viewed as a general-purpose Linux compatibility layer, which can be still useful in deploying legacy Linux code on future TEE platforms.

For instance, in recent years, the confidential VM abstraction has grown in popularity, and is a better fit than the enclave model for some use cases. Intel's new TDX feature follows the confidential VM model.

A recent CCS paper [55] describes how Gramine has been ported to run applications on Intel TDX. The core Gramine library OS was not modified for TDX, only a TDX-specific PAL need be implemented, totaling about 17 kLoC. This PAL looked very different than the SGX PAL, implementing I/O abstractions over simple virtio drivers on TDX, whereas the SGX PAL implements these abstractions on host OS file handles. Gramine on TDX retains compatibility with many Linux applications, but an order-of-magnitude smaller TCB and an order of magnitude fewer inputs to check than running Linux inside of a confidential VM on TDX.

Gramine on TDX is currently an experimental feature, which we intend to continue maturing. We also note that IBM has also contributed patches to port Gramine to the IBM Power architecture. These porting efforts show both the generality of Gramine, and engineering investments in the core Gramine library OS may accelerate research and development future TEEs and other hardware platforms.

3 SIMILAR PROJECTS

Gramine shares much of its design and modular architecture with Drawbridge [80], a similar library OS created by refactoring the Windows kernel. The Haven library OS was the first project to demonstrate the power of a library OS for portability in a TEE [11], built upon Drawbridge. Drawbridge is now in production in Microsoft Azure cloud [30]. Haven was the inspiration to port Gramine to SGX, effectively creating an open-source alternative to closedsource Haven for researchers and developers.

Since Haven and Gramine, several other projects have created liftand-shift frameworks. Key differentiating features include whether the project is open-source, the implementation language, and whether the application binaries must be recompiled. Within Linux/Unix compatibility layers, another key difference is whether fork() is supported, as well as whether processes run in one or multiple address spaces.

Gramine is implemented in C (Gramine predates the Rust language) and does not require recompilation. Gramine supports fork() and runs processes in separate address spaces, except when run on Intel's TDX, which is still in development. Gramine implements about 170 out of roughly 360 Linux system calls. Gramine also supports portions of the /dev, /proc, and /sys pseudo-file systems.

Occlum [91] (open-source) is a lightweight library OS that runs legacy code inside an enclave, but requires recompilation. Unlike Gramine, which implements multiple processes using multiple address spaces, Occlum uses Intel's Memory Protection eXtension (MPX) [35] hardware or Software Fault Isolation (SFI) to isolate regions within a single, shared address space. Occlum's library OS is the first libOS in Rust, and has implemented 200 out of 325 Linux system calls.

Scone [7] (closed-source) is another library OS that runs legacy Linux application binaries inside enclaves. Unlike Gramine, which virtualizes at the system call table, Scone virtualizes and shields at the C library interface, and requires cross-compilation. Scone also now advertises support for forking new processes.

Mystikos [73] (open-source) is a porting framework for confidential computing that packs each application with its libraries, a file-system image, and a library OS, into a single, encrypted image. The Mystikos kernel has implemented 95 Linux system calls, including experimental support for forking.

SGX-LKL [81] (open-source) is a port of the Linux Kernel Library (LKL) [82] as an open-source library OS to run inside enclaves. SGX-LKL reuses portions of the existing Linux source code (sometimes called a Rump kernel [46]), facilitating bug-for-bug compatibility. SGX-LKL does not support fork, multi-processing, or inter-process communication, since LKL is designed to be loaded into a single address space. For IO, SGX-LKL operates on raw disks and network devices; running the complete IO stacks in the enclave. SGX-LKL includes an *oblivious external I/O* feature to hide sensitive I/O patterns. Michał Kowalczyk, Dmitrii Kuvaiskii, Paweł Marczewski, Borys Popławski, Wojtek Porczyk, Donald E. Porter, Kailun Qin, Chia-Che Tsai, Mona Vij, and Isaku Yamahata

Development Frameworks. Outside of the "lift-and-shift" model, a number of frameworks and software development kits (SDKs) include tools for writing *new* application software for TEEs. Intel provides an Intel's SDK and Platform Software (PSW) [44] for writing SGX in C/C++ applications. Open Enclave SDK [75] is another SDK which aims to be universal for multiple platforms, currently supporting Intel SGX, with preview support for OP-TEE OS and ARM TrustZone.

Apache Teaclave [10] and Fortanix's EPD [31] are frameworks for writing TEE code in Rust. More recent development frameworks target portability across multiple TEE platforms, including Microsoft Confidential Consortium Framework [69], Google Asylo [8], and Enarx [28].

SGX-RA-TLS [89] is a communication framework that simplifies SGX application development by integrating SGX remote attestation into the Transport Layer Security (TLS) protocol. The SGX remote attestation requires remote entities to verify the certificates signed by the target enclaves, with an Intel-owned or cloud-owed attestation service. SGX-RA-TLS further embeds the secrets negotiated during TLS handshake into the certificates attestation, to prevent person-in-the-middle attacks, and can transparently do so in Gramine, SGX-LKL, or Scone.

4 CONCLUSION

Gramine has matured over ten years from a research prototype to a production-quality framework for deploying unmodified application binaries on SGX. Gramine has helped over a hundred research projects build SGX prototypes more quickly, and is in production use by multiple start-ups and cloud service providers. We expect Gramine to continue to add missing system calls and other OS features over time, we hope to completely match Linux's features for unprivileged user applications in future work. Early experience with TDX indicates that Gramine is likely to be useful on additional TEEs.

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