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# EVOLUTION OF EXPLOIT KITS

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Exploring Past Trends and Current Improvements

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# INTRODUCTION

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An exploit kit, or exploit pack, is a type of hack toolkit that cybercriminals seem to have favored in the last few years to perform Web-based attacks to distribute malware. Several kits have since been developed then sold or rented out like commercial products in underground markets. The earliest hack toolkit made available in the crimeware market on record was seen sometime in 2006. [1]

A typical exploit kit usually provides a management console, a bunch of vulnerabilities targeted to different applications, and several add-on functions that make it easier for a cybercriminal to launch an attack.

The rise of exploit kits in underground markets pushes exploit kit developers to improve the stealth and efficiency of their product. Currently, there are 70 different exploit kits in the wild that take advantage of more than a hundred vulnerabilities. In this paper, we will discuss what an exploit kit is, how it works, and how it has changed over time.



## EXPLOIT KIT ATTACK SCENARIO

One of the things that make an exploit kit effective is that a lot of its routines are executed automatically. To better illustrate how an exploit kit works, we deconstruct a typical attack scenario and explain its stages.

### Contact

Contact is the beginning of infection, where an attacker attempts to make people access the link of an exploit kit server. Contact is often done through spammed email, wherein recipients are tricked into clicking a link through social engineering lures. [2]

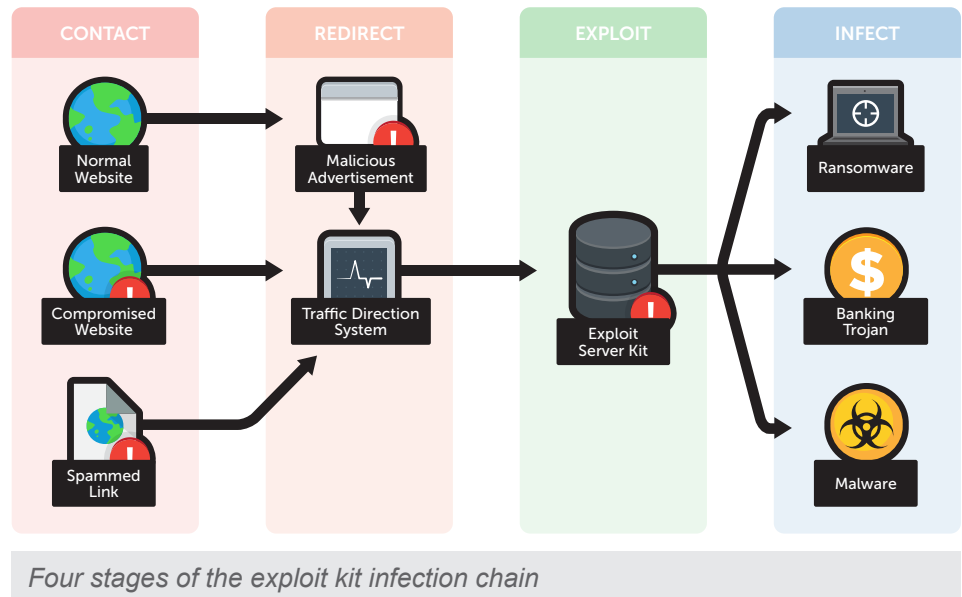
Aside from spammed emails, compromised websites are also widely used as a contact path. Attackers would inject malicious code that, in turn, will redirect website visitors to the exploit kit. Malvertisement is another form of advanced attack, wherein the Web advertisement redirects website visitors to the exploit kit server. [3–4] This technique makes any website that displays the malicious advertisement a possible infection vector.

### Redirect

Traffic redirection system refers to the capacity with which the exploit kit operator can screen through victims based on certain condition sets. This is done through a traffic direct system, such as SutraTDS or KeitaroTDS, for aggregating and filtering redirect traffic before accessing the exploit kit server. [5] The source of traffic redirection isn't always directly managed by the exploit kit operator but by the traffic provider who sells the traffic in underground markets. The traffic subscriber, who, in this case, is the exploit kit operator, can specify their target and filter out victims who don't meet certain requirements. For example, an exploit kit operator can target a specific country by filtering client IP address by geolocation.

### Exploit and Infect

Once users are successfully tricked into clicking the link of an exploit kit server in the contact stage and filtered in the redirect stage, they will be directed to the exploit kit's landing page. The landing page is responsible for profiling client environment and in determining which vulnerabilities should be used in the ensuing attack.





Once the vulnerable applications are identified, the page will send requests to the exploit kit server to download the exploit files that would attack the targeted applications. The vulnerabilities found in Web browsers, Java™, Adobe® Flash® Player, and Adobe Acrobat® and Reader® are the ones most targeted by exploit kits.

After successfully exploiting a vulnerability, the attacker can now download and execute the malware in the victim's environment. We've seen various types of malware downloaded in exploit kit attacks, the most notable ones being online banking malware and ransomware. [6-7]

## EXPLOIT KIT EVOLUTION

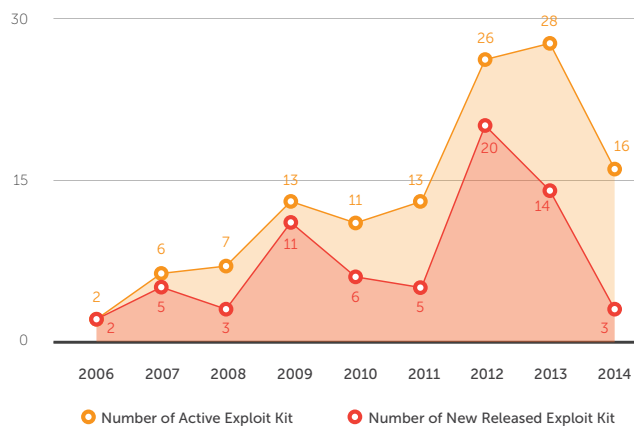
### Early Versions

The first recorded exploit kit attack could be traced back in 2006, which used the WebAttacker kit. This was the first exploit kit found in the Russian underground market. It came with technical support and was sold for US\$20. The redirect link of WebAttacker was distributed via spam and compromised websites. It targeted multiple vulnerabilities found in Microsoft™ Windows®, Mozilla Firefox®, and Java applications to distribute malware in wild.

The second exploit kit, Mpack, was developed by three Russian programmers sometime in the middle of 2006. The first complete version was released December that same year and was sold for

US\$1,000. Compared to WebAttacker, the control panel of Mpack provided a more detailed statistics on its victim, such as their location.

More than 3,000 compromised websites had the redirect links of Mpack. Several exploit kits were also released in 2007 in underground markets, namely, NeoSploit, Phoenix, Tornado, and Armitage exploit kits, but Mpack was seen as one of the serious exploit kit threats that year. [8-9] Fiesta, AdPack, and FirePack exploit kits emerged in 2008, and the infamous Blackhole Exploit Kit surfaced in 2010. The success of earlier-released exploit kits led to the subsequent creation and release of other kits that have been hitting legitimate businesses hard.



Timeline record of exploit kits

Figure 2 shows the number of active exploit kits found in the wild and the number of new ones seen each year since 2006. It can be observed that this threat was on an upward trend from 2006 to 2013, with 20

new ones identified in 2012 alone. This, however, slowly dropped in 2013 and sharply declined in 2014. The number of active exploit kits also decreased in 2014. The arrest of Paunch, the author of Blackhole Exploit Kit, in October 2013 might have sent a strong message in underground cyber markets, given the radical changes in the statistics of exploit kits. Note that Blackhole was the widely used exploit kit in 2012 and 2013, posing a major threat to users.

## Evolution

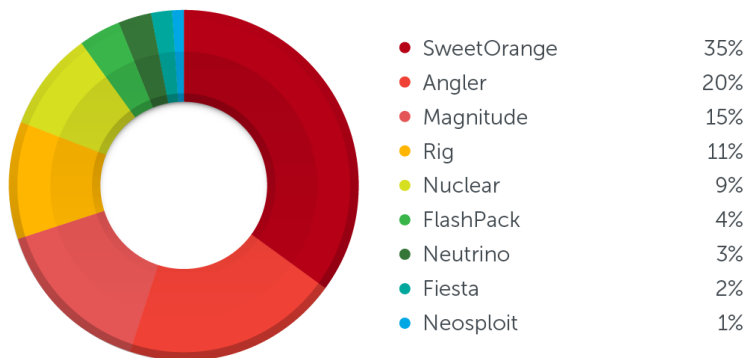
Despite the decrease in activity, the threats exploit kits pose upon users have not changed. Several exploit kits were still in use in 2014, some of which were Fiesta, Nuclear, SweetOrange, Styx, FlashPack, Neutrino, Magnitude, Angler, and Rig. [10–12]

Fiesta is the newer version of NeoSploit identified in 2013. Nuclear was identified in 2010 but was upgraded to version 3 with new exploits in 2013. SweetOrange, Styx, and FlashPack were first used in attacks in 2012. Neutrino, Magnitude, and Angler were identified in 2013; Rig was first seen in April 2014.

## CURRENT TRENDS IN EXPLOIT KITS

### Top Exploit Kits

One can say that Blackhole Exploit Kit took a back seat in underground markets when its creator, Paunch, was arrested. Several exploit kits then emerged and took its place in the spotlight, so to speak. Figure 3 shows the distribution of exploit kit attacks seen in 2014.



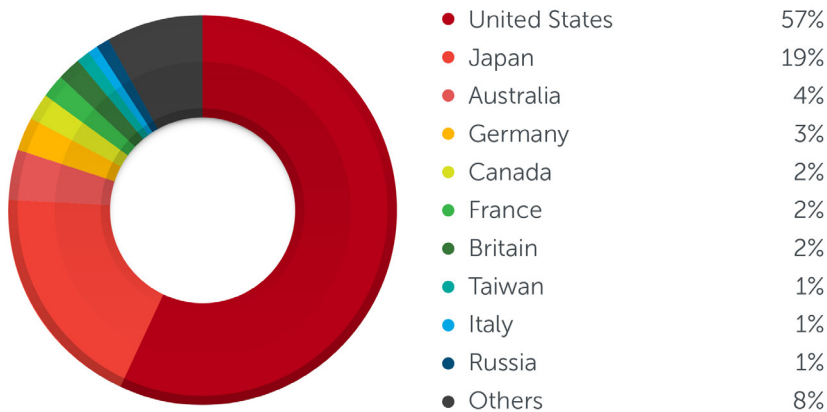
*Distribution of exploit kit attacks*



Figure 3 shows the distribution of exploit kit attack we identified in 2014. SweetOrange, used in malvertisement attacks that distributed ransomware, took more than a third of the exploit kit preference share. The Angler Exploit Kit was also widely used and remains to be one of the most active to date.

## Top Targets

In terms of impact, the U.S. is the most affected because it was the target of almost 60% of attacks that use exploit kits, as shown below.



*Distribution of top 10 countries attacked in 2014*

## Used Exploits

The effectiveness of exploit kits depends on the exploits they utilize. An exploit for a new vulnerability can lead to more malware infections because, most likely, the vulnerability is yet to be patched by the user. This means that in order to keep the high infection rate of an exploit kit, exploit kit owners need to continuously update their exploits. Infection rate is important to exploit kit developers because it serves as a key feature. Developers use it to showcase the tenacity of their product in underground markets, which would eventually lead to more business.



Vulnerabilities Used in 2014 Exploit Kit Attacks									
	Nuclear	SweetOrange	FlashPack	Rig	Angler	Magnitude	Fiesta	Styx	HanJuan
Internet Explorer	CVE-2013-2551	CVE-2013-2551 CVE-2014-0322 CVE-2014-6332	CVE-2013-2551 CVE-2013-3918 CVE-2014-0322	CVE-2013-2551	CVE-2013-2551	CVE-2013-2551	CVE-2013-2551	CVE-2013-2551	
Microsoft Silverlight	CVE-2013-0074			CVE-2013-0074	CVE-2013-0074		CVE-2013-0074	CVE-2013-0074	
Adobe Flash Player	CVE-2014-0515 CVE-2014-0569 CVE-2014-8439 CVE-2015-0311	CVE-2014-0515 CVE-2014-0569	CVE-2013-0634 CVE-2014-0497 CVE-2014-0515 CVE-2014-0569	CVE-2014-0569 CVE-2015-0311	CVE-2014-0515 CVE-2014-0569 CVE-2015-0311	CVE-2014-0515	CVE-2014-0497 CVE-2014-0569 CVE-2015-0311	CVE-2014-0515	CVE-2015-0313
Adobe Acrobat/Reader	CVE-2010-0188						CVE-2010-0188		
Oracle Java	CVE-2012-0507		CVE-2013-2460 CVE-2013-2471		CVE-2013-2465		CVE-2012-0507 CVE-2014-2465		
XMLDOM ActiveX	CVE-2013-7331			CVE-2013-7331	CVE-2013-7331			CVE-2013-7331	

There have been more than a hundred vulnerabilities found integrated in exploit kits since 2006, which includes more than 10 different applications.

Adobe Reader and Java exploits were popular targets in 2008; Java exploits was the top targeted application used by exploit kits in 2013. However, we found that PDF Reader and Java vulnerabilities were no longer updated in exploit kits since 2014. By contrast, 5 exploit kits used Microsoft Silverlight toward the end of 2013 all the way to 2014, making it the top target by exploit kits.

Internet Explorer® exploits were also considered a primary attack vector. Things changed, however, after Microsoft released a major Security Bulletin, which included a significant improvement for mitigating UAF (User After Free) vulnerability. [13] After that, only one Internet Explorer exploit was included in exploit kits, CVE-2014-6332, which Microsoft immediately patched. This change seems to have driven attackers toward Adobe Flash Player. This soon became the main targeted application with which the following exploits were found in exploit kits in just a short period: CVE-2014-0497, CVE-2014-0515, CVE-2014-0569, CVE-2014-8439, CVE-2015-0311, and CVE-2015-0313.

## EVASION TECHNIQUES: ANTIVIRUS/VIRTUALIZATION PRODUCT DETECTION

A new feature we saw added into exploit kits is the ability to detect installed security software. This means that if certain specific security products are installed, the exploit kit will stop itself from running. The security products mentioned here include both anti-virus products and virtual machine software.





Antivirus Products Detected in Exploit Kits				
Exploit Kit	Angler	Nuclear	Rig	Styx
Evasion target (antivirus or virtualization software)	Kaspersky	Kaspersky	Kaspersky	Kaspersky
	Trend Micro	Trend Micro	Trend Micro	ESET
	VMWare			
	VirtualBox			
	Parallels Desktop			

## EVASION TECHNIQUES: FILE OBFUSCATION

Obfuscation is a common technique used in several kinds of attacks to prevent the detection of the malicious payload. Through obfuscation, the payload is changed to have a different appearance in static but recovers during execution. Exploit kits regularly use various techniques to obfuscate their exploit file. In 2014, some exploit kits were changed to use new obfuscation techniques. In the cases that we've seen, attackers used legitimate tools to obfuscate their files.

For example, Angler Exploit Kit now uses Pack200 format to perform obfuscation on Java exploits. Pack200 is the archive format developed by Sun (Java's original developers) for compressing JAR files significantly. The tool to decompress these obfuscated files can be found in the original Java development kit. However, not all security products can fully support these formats, making detection possible to be missed.

Another example is the technique used by FlashPack and Magnitude exploit kits for Flash player exploits. This involves a commercially available tool called DoSWF to hide their files. This tool allowed developers to hide the ActionScript contents of their Flash file from people who would copy or pirate the contents. Unfortunately, it can also work against the detection of a security software. Aside from landing page and exploit file obfuscation, most exploit kits now have the ability to obfuscate their payload/malware. It means the payload can be transferred to a stream on the Internet with encryption. Therefore, the exploit kit can deliver its payload/malware in the victim's machine without being detected since it

This behavior is done through a vulnerability in Internet Explorer (CVE-2013-7331). This vulnerability allows an attacker to check for the presence of files and folders in an affected system. It was first reported to Microsoft in February 2014 but was only patched in September that same year as part of MS14-052.

Below is an example for anti-virus product checking:

```
function chavs(a) {
  var xmlDoc = new ActiveXObject("Microsoft.XMLDOM");
  xmlDoc.async = true;
  xmlDoc.loadXML('<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0 Translation//EN" "res://c:\Windows\System32\drivers\'+ a + ">');
  if (xmlDoc.parseError.errorCode != 0) {
    var err = "Error Code: " + xmlDoc.parseError.errorCode + "\n";
    err += "Error Reason: " + xmlDoc.parseError.reason;
    err += "Error line: " + xmlDoc.parseError.line;
    if (err.indexOf("-2147023083") > 0) {
      return 1;
    } else {
      return 0;
    }
  }
  return 0;
}

if (chavs("kll.sys") || chavs("tmncieec.sys") || chavs("tmttdi.sys")
|| chavs("tmactmon.sys") || chavs("TMBEC32.sys") || chavs("tmeext.sys")
|| chavs("tmcomm.sys") || chavs("tmevtmgr.sys")) {
  exit();
}
```

Sample code of CVE-2013-7331 in detecting antivirus software

doesn't look like an executable file through network traffic. There is no "MZ" magic code inside the surface of network traffic payload and it is also not an official PE file format. The exploit kit will decrypt the payload in memory by shellcode only after it was downloaded into the victim's machine.



Payload encryption and decryption

Figure 6 shows both the appearance of the payload in network traffic and the payload after decryption. The encryption can simply prevent the detection of most signature-based IDS/IPS system. After decrypting, some exploit kits will still drop the payload to the disk. However, Angler and Hanjuan exploit kits don't write their payload in the disk but can directly run in the memory to prevent anti-virus scan on a file system. The technique is now commonly referred to as fileless infection. The



table below shows which exploit kits use payload encryption and fileless infection.

for a much more dangerous threat because this will automate the delivery and will have the ability to affect a bigger set of users in a shorter amount of time.

## SOLUTIONS FOR EXPLOIT KITS

Exploit kits pose a multicomponent threat that requires a multicomponent solution. Users will need to utilize security strategies that provide protection from all threat components:

Behavior-based solutions traces routines found in exploits and block them proactively can serve as the primary defense against exploit kits, especially those that include zero-day exploits in their arsenal. An example of this is the Sandbox with Script Analyzer engine, which is part of Trend Micro Deep Discovery.

Web-based detection, through a Web-based solution like the Browser Exploit Prevention feature in our endpoint products such as Trend Micro™ Security, Trend Micro™ OfficeScan™, and Trend Micro™ Worry-Free™ Business Security, blocks the exploit once the user accesses the URL it is hosted in. A Web reputation service can also add another layer of security to make sure that the redirection chains are blocked even before the malicious payload is downloaded into the system.

File-based detection ensures that any payload successfully downloaded into the system will not be able to execute its routines.

Payload Evasion Summary		
	Payload (PE) Encryption	Fileless Infection
FlashPack	x	x
Rig	✓	x
Magnitude	✓	x
Nuclear	✓	x
Fiesta	✓	x
Angler	✓	✓
SweetOrange	x	x
GongDa	x	x
Styx	x	x
HanJuan	✓	✓

## EXPLOIT KITS IN 2015

An exploit kit is now one of the most popular types of Web attack toolkits in underground markets and we can expect more activities related to this in 2015. Barely two months into the year and we already saw two Adobe Flash Player zero-day vulnerabilities (CVE-2015-0311 and CVE-2015-0313) in the wild delivered via exploit kit. [14–15] It's not rare for exploit kits to include zero-day exploits, and we think that this is a trend that we will see more of in 2015. The inclusion of zero-day exploits in exploit kits will make

# APPENDIX

Identified Exploit Kit List		
Year	Old Exploit Kits	New Exploit Kits
2006		MPack WebAttacker Kit
2007	MPack	Armitage Exploit Pack IcePack Exploit Kit NeoSploit Exploit Kit 1.0 Phoenix Exploit Kit Tornado Exploit Kit
2008	IcePack Exploit Kit NeoSploit Exploit Kit 2.0/3.0 Phoenix Exploit Kit Tornado Exploit Kit	AdPack Fiesta Exploit Kit FirePack Exploit Kit
2009	Phoenix Exploit Kit 2.0 Tornado Exploit Kit	CrimePack 1.0 Eleonore Exploit Kit Fragus Exploit Kit Just Exploit Kit Liberty Exploit Kit Lucky Sploit MyPoly Sploit Neon Exploit System SPack Siberia Exploit Pack Unique Sploits Exploit Pack Yes Exploit Kit 1.0/2.0
2010	CrimePack 2.0/3.0 Eleonore Exploit Kit Phoenix Exploit Kit 2.0 Siberia Pack Yes Exploit Kit 3.0	Blackhole Exploit Kit 1.0 Bleeding Life Exploit Kit 1.0/2.0 Dragon Pack Nuclear Exploit Kit 1.0 Papka Exploit Pack SEO Sploit Pack
2011	Blackhole Exploit Kit 1.1/1.2 Bleeding Life Exploit Kit 3.0 Eleonore Exploit Kit NeoSploit Exploit Kit 4.0 Nuclear Exploit Kit 1.0 Phoenix Exploit Kit 2.0 SEO Sploit Pack Siberia Pack	Best Pack G01Pack Exploit Kit Katrin Exploit Pack OpenSource Exploit Kit Sava Exploit Kit



Identified Exploit Kit List		
Year	Old Exploit Kits	New Exploit Kits
2012	Blackhole Exploit Kit 2.0 G01Pack Exploit Kit Hierararchy/Eleonore Exploit Kit NeoSploit Exploit Kit 4.0 Nuclear Exploit Kit 2.0 Phoenix Exploit Kit 3.0	Alpha Pack CK Exploit Kit Cool Exploit Kit CrimeBoss Exploit Kit CritXPack GrandSoft Exploit Kit Impact Exploit Kit KaiXin Exploit Pack Kein Exploit Pack NucSoft Exploit Pack ProPack RedKit Exploit Kit Sakura Exploit Kit Serenity Exploit Pack Sibhost/Glazunov Exploit Kit Styx Exploit Kit 2.0 SweetOrange Exploit Kit Techno XPack Yang Pack ZhiZhu Exploit Kit
2013	Blackhole Exploit Kit 2.0 CK Exploit Kit CrimeBoss Exploit Kit Fiesta/NeoSploit Exploit Kit FlackPack Exploit Kit G01Pack Exploit Kit GrandSoft Nuclear Exploit Kit 3.0 Phoenix Exploit Kit 3.0 RedKit/Goon Exploit Kit Sakura Exploit Kit Sibhost/Glazunov Exploit Kit Styx Exploit Kit SweetOrange Exploit Kit	Angler Exploit Kit Anonymous Exploit Kit DotkaChef Exploit Kit GongDa Exploit Kit Hello/LightsOut Exploit Kit HiMan Exploit Kit Magnitude/PopAds Exploit Kit Neutrino Exploit Kit Private Exploit Pack Red Dot Exploit Kit Safe Pack White Lotus Exploit Kit WhiteHole Exploit Kit Zuponcic Exploit Kit
2014	Angler Exploit Kit DotkaChef Exploit Kit Fiesta/NeoSploit Exploit Kit FlackPack Exploit Kit GongDa Exploit Kit Hello/LightsOut Exploit Kit RedKit/Infinity Exploit Kit Magnitude Exploit Kit Neutrino Exploit Kit Nuclear Exploit Kit 3.0 Styx Exploit Kit SweetOrange Exploit Kit Zuponcic Exploit Kit	CottonCastle/Niteris Exploit Kit Rig Exploit Kit HanJuan Exploit Kit



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