Army of Botnets

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Abstract

The trend toward smaller botnets may be more *dangerous than large botnets, in terms of large-scale attacks like distributed denials of service. We examine the possibility of "super-botnets," networks of independent botnets that can be coordinated for attacks of unprecedented scale. For an adversary, super-botnets would also be extremely versatile and resistant to countermeasures. As such, super-botnets must be examined by the research community, so that defenses against this threat can be developed proactively. Our simulation results shed light on the feasibility and structure of super-botnets and some properties of their command-and-control mechanism. New forms of attack that super-botnets can launch are explored, and possible defenses against the threat of super-botnets are suggested.*

1 Introduction

Big botnets are big news. Botnets involving over 100,000 zombie computers have been claimed [6, 8, 21], and there was even one case involving 1.5 million compromised computers [19]. However, from an adversary's perspective,[1] big botnets are bad from the standpoint of survivability: someone is likely to notice a big botnet and take steps to dismantle it.

The recent trend is toward smaller botnets with only several hundred to several thousand zombies [5]. This may reflect better defenses — the malware creating new zombies may not be as effective — but it may be a conscious decision by adversaries to limit botnet size, and try to avoid detection. It has also been suggested that the wider availability of broadband access makes smaller botnets as capable as the larger botnets of old [5].

We suggest that there is a new threat posed by smaller botnets: namely, an adversary can create a large number of small, independent botnets. By themselves, the smaller botnets can be exploited by the adversary in the usual way, such as being rented to spammers. The discovery and disabling of some of the adversary's botnets is not a concern, either, because the botnets are independent and numerous.

[1] In this paper, we generically refer to people creating and using botnets as adversaries.

The new threat arises if the botnets are designed to be coordinated into a network of botnets, which we call a *super-botnet*. For example, an adversary could command the super-botnet to launch a massive DDoS attack on a chosen target, or to pummel a critical piece of the Internet's infrastructure like the DNS. A super-botnet design potentially allows an adversary to surreptitiously amass enough machines for attacks of enormous scale.

In the remainder of this paper we explore super-botnets and potential defenses against them. Section 2 describes work related to super-botnets. Section 3 discusses the vulnerabilities inherent in traditional botnet design, to motivate why adversaries would utilize a super-botnet. Section 4 addresses whether it is feasible for adversaries to construct large super-botnets, and Section 5 discusses the communication mechanisms employed in such super-botnets. Section 6 discusses a new type of time-delayed attack that can be launched using a super-botnet. Section 7 discusses how defenders can combat both this new form of attack, and super-botnets in general. Finally, we conclude and discuss future research directions in Section 8.

2 Related Work

Many different command-and-control (C&C) mechanisms for botnets are being seen and suggested [5]. For example, an IRC server could be used to send commands to compromised machines; or, a zombie could even receive commands covertly by making a DNS request to a domain under the adversary's control [9]. There is continuous evolution of the control mechanisms used within a botnet.

Control mechanisms for co-ordinating *multiple* botnets have also been discussed in the literature. Nazario *et al.* talk about communicating worms that isolate themselves in small groups, to limit the impact of an infected machine being discovered [12]. The possibility of independent botnets being operated in a tree-like structure has also been suggested [16]. Dagon *et al.* classified different botnets structures into a taxonomy [6], and the super-botnet structure (described in detail in Section 5) constitutes a special case of a random graph botnet. Empirical studies have even been done on the different connectivity models of botnets [14].

Also described in Section 5, a super-botnet's communication structure can be formed through opportunistic data exchanges between individual botnets that occur during redundant infection attempts. A similar idea for worms was briefly mentioned in [18]. Other methods of exchanging information between infected hosts, such as Chen and Ji's client-server model [4], have also been discussed.

Because of the myriad of related botnet mechanisms already available to adversaries, super-botnets must be considered as a possible future evolution of today's botnets. As such, it is necessary to investigate what threat super-botnets will pose in the future, and what defenders can do proactively to protect themselves and others.

3 Vulnerabilities of Traditional Botnets

Before we consider why a trend toward super-botnets is dangerous, it is first important to understand some weaknesses exhibited by traditional botnets. By recognizing how the traditional botnets of old can be detected and disabled, it will become clearer why a decentralized super-botnet poses such a threat.

A traditional botnet uses some C&C channel to receive commands: for instance, an IRC server. Alternately, a botnet may periodically poll an information source that is unlikely to be blocked or raise suspicion, such as accessing a web site (perhaps located via a web search engine), or making a DNS request to a domain under the adversary's control [9].

It is this command-and-control mechanism that constitutes a weak point for defenders to target. There are five main goals that defenders could have:

1. Locate or identify the adversary. The adversary is vulnerable to detection when they issue commands to the botnet via this C&C channel. Defenders may not know the nature of the adversary's commands in advance, but assuming some of the zombies have been detected and analyzed, the source of the adversary's commands will be known and alarms can be triggered when commands are sent. For example, a defender may know that botnet commands will be found by periodically performing Google searches for "haggis gargling" and sifting through the avalanche of results for the adversary's commands. Monitoring when and where Google finds such a web site may provide a lead as to the whereabouts of the adversary. In turn, an adversary may try to obfuscate their trail by issuing botnet commands through proxies or anonymity networks like Tor [7].

2. Reveal all the infected machines. Again, if the zombies are polling a known location for the adversary's commands, then the polling activity will reveal infected machines. Meeting this goal and the previous one may require cooperation between law enforcement and the private sector.

3. Command the botnet. A defender could attempt to send a command to the botnet to shut it down. A related concern for the adversary is that *another* adversary may try to usurp control of the botnet. For these reasons, as pointed out by Staniford *et al.* [18],[2] the adversary must digitally sign or encrypt botnet commands using asymmetric encryption (described in Section 8.1 of Menezes *et al.* [11, p.283]), so that the compromise of an infected machine does not reveal a secret key. Generating a public/private key pair in advance, the adversary could send the public key along with the worm, solving the key distribution problem.

4. Disable the botnet. If a defender can shut down the C&C channel (along with any redundant channels), the entire botnet will be rendered useless in a single blow. With the zombies unable to receive commands, the botnet will cease to operate.

5. Disrupt botnet commands. If the C&C channel is one that cannot easily be shut down, such as Google, other defense methods can be employed. The adversary's commands can be intentionally garbled by a defender regardless of whether or not they are encrypted or signed — changing a few bits is sufficient to achieve this goal, leaving the adversary unable to control the botnet. This defense can be applied locally, e.g., by IPS/firewall rules, or globally if a defender has enough access to the botnet's command source.

Large traditional botnets are vulnerable to defenders because of the easily-targeted C&C channel. The benefits to the adversary of decentralizing their botnet into a super-botnet — a network of independent botnets — are clear. But, we must still explore whether it is feasible for an adversary to create a large super-botnet.

[2] Staniford *et al.* presented their work in the context of updating worms, but the technique could be applied to controlling botnets.

4 Super-Botnet Feasibility

Are large super-botnets feasible? To answer this question, we must consider how a super-botnet can be constructed. We begin by abstracting away some details:

1. For simplicity, we assume that the super-botnet is constructed using only one worm. This does not imply that the worm's code is uniform across infections, of course, because the worm could be polymorphic or metamorphic in nature.

   More than one worm may be involved in practice. A single adversary could create multiple worms, or worm variants; multiple adversaries could conspire to create multiple worms based on a common super-botnet specification. Neither possibility is farfetched. For some malware, creating variants is practically a cottage industry — Spybot, for example, has thousands of variants [3]. Adversaries have collaborated in the past on malware [20], and N-version programming [2] of worms by adversaries within a single organization is definitely possible in the context of information warfare. Implementation diversity can make worm detection more difficult for signature-based detection methods.

2. The infection vector(s) the worm uses are not relevant to the analysis and are not considered. We also ignore failures to propagate in our simulations. While these considerations are important in real worm propagation, we are only interested in the resulting super-botnet structure.

3. The exact C&C mechanism(s) used within *individual* botnets does not matter. We assume a centralized IRC-based C&C for concreteness, but it could just as easily be a peer-to-peer architecture or some other method.

One way to establish a super-botnet is with a two-phase process. In the first phase, a worm is released which makes every new infection a C&C machine for a new, independent botnet. In the second phase, after enough C&C machines have been created, new infections populate the C&C machines' botnets. This method is risky for an adversary, because the "backbone" of the super-botnet's C&C infrastructure is all established by direct infections; discovery of one C&C machine can easily lead to others using information from firewall logs, for example.

Instead, we use a tree-structured algorithm that is dependent on three constants: `BOTNETS`, `HOSTS_PER_BOTNET`, and `SPREAD`. This algorithm creates `BOTNETS` individual botnets, each consisting of `HOSTS_PER_BOTNET` zombies. As each zombie is infected, it learns how many additional zombies it will be responsible for adding to its botnet (to

```
DISTRIBUTE($x, y$)
1  ▷ Distribute $x$ fairly into $y$ slots
2  for $i \leftarrow 0$ to $y - 1$
3        do $L[i] \leftarrow x/y$
4  for $i \leftarrow 0$ to $(x \mod y) - 1$
5        do $L[i] \leftarrow L[i] + 1$
6  return L
```

```
PROPAGATE($nti, bts, cc$)
 1  ▷ $nti - 1$ is the number of new hosts to add to this
    ▷ botnet
 2  ▷ $bts$ is the number of new botnets that need to be
    ▷ started
 3  ▷ $cc$ is the IP address of the C&C server

 4  if $nti = 0$
 5     then ▷ Establish a new C&C server
 6          $bts \leftarrow bts - 1$
 7          Start IRC server
 8          $cc \leftarrow$ my IP address
 9          $nti \leftarrow$ HOSTS_PER_BOTNET
10     else ▷ Use existing C&C server
11          Connect to $cc$

12  $nti_{child} \leftarrow$ DISTRIBUTE($nti - 1$, SPREAD)
13  $bts_{child} \leftarrow$ DISTRIBUTE($bts$, SPREAD)

14  for $i \leftarrow 0$ to SPREAD $- 1$
15      do if $nti_{child}[i] = 0$ and $bts_{child}[i] = 0$
16            then continue
17          repeat $target \leftarrow$ a host chosen by a random
                   scan
18            until $target$ is a vulnerable, uninfected host
19          Infect $target$
20          $target$ runs PROPAGATE($nti_{child}[i], bts_{child}[i], cc$)
```

```
INITIAL-INFECTION()
1  ▷ The code run by the initial infection
2  PROPAGATE(0, BOTNETS, 0.0.0.0)
```

Figure 1. Worm pseudocode for super-botnet creation.

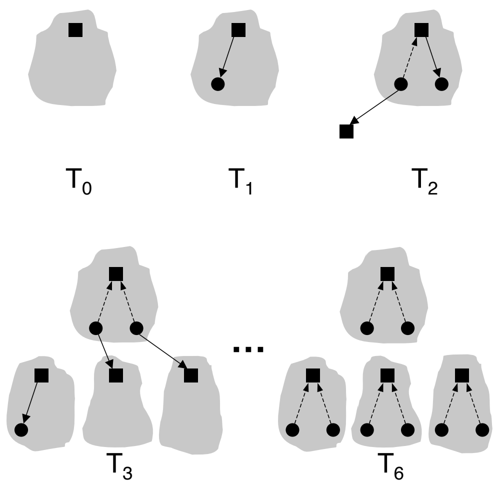


Figure 2. Worm infection pattern with 3 hosts/botnet, 4 botnets, and a spread of 2. Shown are C&C servers (■), non-C&C infected machines (•), new infections (solid arrows), links to C&C servers (dashed arrows), and botnets formed (grey blobs).

bring the size of its botnet up to HOSTS_PER_BOTNET), as well as how many C&C machines for new, independent botnets that it must infect (to bring the number of botnets up to BOTNETS). If a zombie is not a C&C machine for a new botnet, it also learns the location of its botnet's C&C server.

However, each zombie infects at most SPREAD new hosts, with priority given to adding zombies to its botnet. By choosing a smaller SPREAD value, the adversary can narrow the breadth of the tree-structured growth of the super-botnet, thereby reducing suspicious traffic and helping to avoid rate limiting defenses [17]. Since a given zombie may be responsible for adding many additional hosts to its botnet and starting many new botnets (i.e., performing more than SPREAD infections), the zombie delegates an equal amount of the remaining work to each of the (up to SPREAD) new hosts it infects.

When a new botnet/C&C server is created, all information about the previous botnet is discarded, leaving each botnet isolated. Furthermore, new C&C servers are placed as far away from one another as the balanced tree structure allows: for nontrivial values of HOSTS_PER_BOTNET, C&C servers are separated by at least $\lfloor \log_{\text{SPREAD}} \text{HOSTS\_PER\_BOTNET} - 1 \rfloor$ intermediate infections.

This behavior is described more formally in the pseudocode shown in Figure 1, and a small example of the growth is shown in Figure 2.

Intercepting a worm close to an initial infection can prune a large number of botnets in this pseudocode. Additionally, the adversary must have some estimate of the number of vulnerable hosts in order to choose an initial value for BOTNETS. However, these concerns are just limitations of the pseudocode. In practice, an adversary can seed multiple initial infections, and use well-studied worm self-stopping mechanisms [10] to control super-botnet growth instead of relying on information being propagated from worm to worm, thereby avoiding both of these issues. We chose to keep the spread algorithm simpler for exposition, so we could focus our study on the structure and use of super-botnets. However, as will become apparent, the situation looks bad for defenders, even under these simple circumstances. Future simulations of greater complexity could yield even worse results, from the perspective of a defender.

We simulated the worm pseudocode, allowing one scan per active machine per time step. Starting with a single seed, the simulation established 15,000 botnets with 100 machines apiece — a super-botnet 1.5 million strong. Figure 3 charts the growth of infections and C&C servers over time, both for a SPREAD value of 2 and a more generous value of 25. One interesting anomaly is that, even though the C&C growth curve is the least smooth for a spread of 2, a spread of 3 infects 1.5 million machines the fastest. In all cases, it is clear that a super-botnet can be established in short order.

One question remains, though: how can the adversary issue commands to some or all of the independent botnets, thereby leveraging the full power of the super-botnet? The adversary does not have a direct way to issue commands to the botnets and, as shown, the adversary will not even know how to locate individual botnets. In the next section, we explore advanced communication methods.

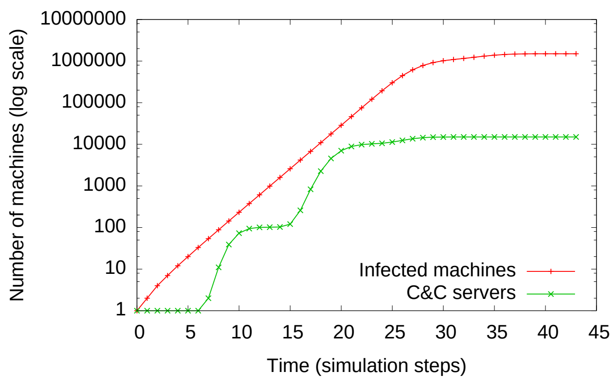
5 Inter-Botnet Communication

The adversary may try to send commands along the super-botnet itself, to avoid having externally-issued commands be subject to attack. In this section, we consider how this task is accomplished.

Following [18], we assume that an adversary will want to encrypt communications both within each botnet and between botnets. When a new C&C server is created during worm propagation, it can generate a new symmetric encryption key, as well as a new public/private key pair. The symmetric key is passed along to new infections within the botnet, and is used to encrypt communication within the botnet. The public key is used to asymmetrically encrypt messages sent to the botnet from *other* botnets, so the *routing information* needed for botnet A to talk to botnet B is the pair

$$(\text{public key}_B, \text{C\&C IP address}_B).$$

The adversary's problem: propagating routing information around the super-botnet. No one botnet can be allowed



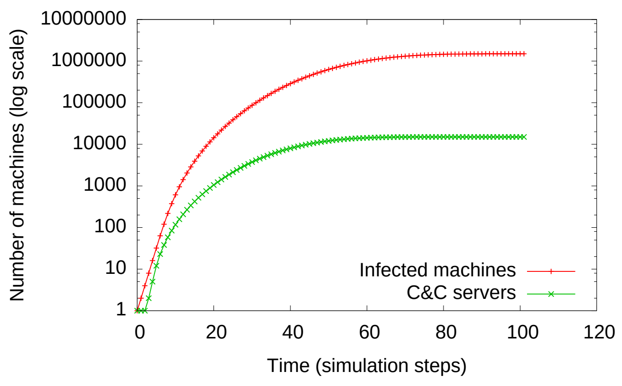


Figure 3. Worm simulation: spread of 2 (left) and spread of 25 (right).

to have complete information about the super-botnet, because the complete structure of the super-botnet would be revealed if a botnet with complete routing information were compromised by a defender. Each botnet can have partial routing information instead, and know how to contact a small finite set of its "neighbors." But how can partial information be gathered by a botnet?

One obvious time for a botnet to gather partial routing information is when its C&C server is created, from the botnet that infected it. One less-obvious time is when a worm tries to infect an already-infected machine. Normally this is considered something an adversary would want to avoid — worm contention is a waste of effort — but, for super-botnets, this is an ideal opportunity to exchange routing information. Such exchanges would presumably only occur while the super-botnet was being constructed, so that a defender could not trivially extract routing information later by pretending to be a worm, or flood the super-botnet with routing information pointing to a honeypot.

Note that we abstractly consider C&C servers to be performing the routing information exchange here. In practice, a C&C server's clients would be performing routing information exchanges too, and sending new information to their C&C server.

In the remainder of this section, we simulate and analyze a routing information-exchange algorithm over a population of 1.5 million vulnerable machines. The worm pseudocode from Figure 1 is used, assuming infection targets are chosen randomly, i.e., a random-scanning worm is simulated. Routing information exchange occurs in both of the above scenarios: creation of a new C&C server, and one infected machine locating another during its random scan. We denote botnet A's and botnet B's routing information by a and b, respectively.

Intuitively, our information-exchange algorithm mimics how children exchange sports trading cards; we refer to it as the *hockey card algorithm*. Each C&C server has M slots for routing information, and a newly-created C&C server

```
EXCHANGE($A, B$)
 1  if M $> 1$
 2     then $N \leftarrow$ random value $\in [1, $M$ - 1]$
 3     else  $N \leftarrow 1$
 4  $A$ randomly partitions $M_A$ into $X_A$ and $Y_A$,
    where $|X_A| = N$
 5  $B$ randomly partitions $M_B$ into $X_B$ and $Y_B$,
    where $|X_B| = N$

 6  ▷ $A$ and $B$ swap their chosen $N$ pieces of routing
    ▷ information
 7  $A$ sends $X_A$ to $B$
 8  $B$ sends $X_B$ to $A$
 9  $M_A \leftarrow$ the concatenation of $Y_A$ and $X_B$
10  $M_B \leftarrow$ the concatenation of $Y_B$ and $X_A$
```

Figure 4. Routing information exchange in the hockey card algorithm.

for botnet A begins with all its slots (M_A) initialized to a. Thereafter, when either of the two opportunities arise to exchange information between botnets A and B, the two botnets first agree on a random number N, then A and B each select N random slots and trade them as described in Figure 4. This code maintains M links to each botnet within the super-botnet. Although a botnet may end up with duplicates and self-links, our simulations showed that this does not have any negative effects.

We assume that the adversary knows the addresses of seed infections, and that they will want to communicate through the super-botnet as surreptitiously as possible. In other words, the adversary will not broadcast a command to all seeds, but will select one seed and send a super-botnet command through it. The important metric to the adversary is thus the amount of connectivity from some seed. That is, how many botnets will a command reach?

To evaluate this metric, we fixed three simulation parameters on the basis that the adversary would want a large, quickly-constructed super-botnet: 15,000 botnets, 100 seeds, and a spread of 3 — so, the initial code run by each seed, with reference to Figure 1, is `PROPAGATE(0, 150, 0.0.0.0)`. Two parameters were adjusted, however. First, the value of M was varied from 1 to 30 in increments to ascertain its effect on connectivity. Second, the number of hosts per botnet was varied in increments from 25 to 100 to study different probabilities of finding other botnets during propagation. All simulations were repeated five times to minimize the effects of randomness.

The results were dramatic. In every simulation run where M was greater than 1, the amount of connectivity from any single seed was 100%. An adversary would be able to command all the botnets comprising the super-botnet using any one seed.

M does play a role in the resistance of the super-botnet to defensive measures. In particular, a defender may try to prevent an adversary from commanding their super-botnet by reducing connectivity. Here we define the *degree* of a botnet to be the sum of its useful in- and out-degrees, which are the links remaining once self-links and duplicate links are removed.

Following research on attacks against both random and scale-free networks [1], we consider a defender who will try to disable a super-botnet using two different strategies. First, a defender may disable high-degree botnets first. This is an effort to reduce super-botnet connectivity more quickly than simply disabling botnets at random. It is important to stress that this is the absolute best case, where a defender has oracular knowledge of the super-botnet's connectivity. Second, a defender may disable botnets at random. This is perhaps a more likely case, where uncoordinated defenders would simply be shutting down botnets randomly upon discovery.

The results are shown in Figure 5, for both high-degree first targeting and random selection. We have only presented the data for 25 hosts per botnet here, because the results were almost identical for the different numbers of hosts per botnet we ran. Results were averaged over five runs to compensate for randomness.

The strategy used by the defender does not seem to matter. Once $M \geq 5$, a defender able to disable one-third of the botnets in a super-botnet still leaves the adversary able to contact one-third of their original botnets from some seed, on average. This is still enough for a sizeable attack to be launched with the super-botnet. Two conclusions can be drawn:

- The adversary would set M to at least 5. However, there is a tradeoff between robustness and disclosure. Too large a value for M would reveal the location of a large number of other botnets, if a defender discovers one botnet.

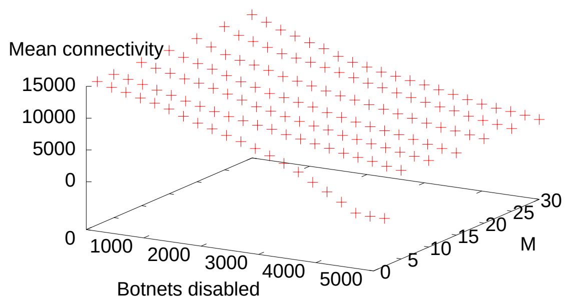
- Communication through a super-botnet is robust to a defender's countermeasures. Finding and disabling 5000 botnets, randomly or otherwise, would be a difficult task. The only defense that is deployed widely enough to feasibly do this is anti-virus software.

  This simulation also assumes that an adversary will only communicate through one of the initial seeds. Botnets could announce their (encrypted) routing information to an adversary instead; this would give the adversary many more communication endpoints to use at the risk of leaking information to a defender. An adversary may also use a small number of seeds for communication, rather than just one, or alternate which seed receives the command each time a command is sent. Either variation by the adversary should reduce the effectiveness of the defender's countermeasures.

These conclusions suggest that new, large-scale defenses are needed for the super-botnet threat. We discuss defenses against the super-botnet threat in Section 7. First, however, we discuss a novel application of the super-botnet's decentralized structure that allows for a new form of attack to be launched. Understanding how this new form of attack works will further reveal the methodology that must be used to defend against super-botnets.

6 Time Bombs

Even with the decentralized structure of the super-botnet, the adversary is still vulnerable to detection when a command is injected into the super-botnet. When the adversary gives the command, "Attack CNN's website" to a seed infection, the seed will pass the command on to other botnets,



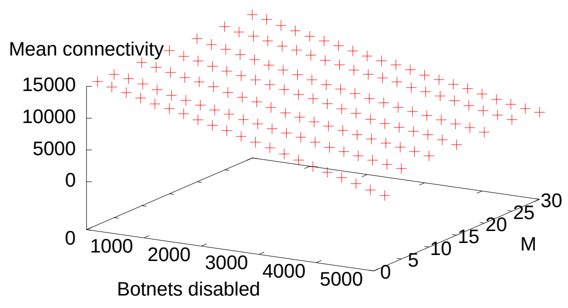


Figure 5. Mean connectivity decrease when high-degree botnets are targeted (left) and when botnets are randomly targeted (right).

and will then launch its part in the attack. Analysis of traffic logs will likely correlate the incoming message with the proceeding massive bandwidth usage.

Of course, the incoming message to a seed from the adversary will look no different than the message being passed along from one botnet to another. Be that as it may, the adversary may still worry about detection. In essence, the adversary would like to be "as far away as possible" from the super-botnet when the attack begins, to minimize the chance of detection.

It would be safer for the attacker to issue the command, "Attack CNN's website six hours from now" to the super-botnet. Though this method of commanding the super-botnet does not make the adversary impervious to detection — for example, a seed infection could have been disinfected and replaced with a honeypot, or a defender could capture this message at some point, wait for the attack to occur, then look back six hours in the logs for suspicious communication — it does increase the difficulty of correlating the communiqué to the resulting attack. Unfortunately, the attacker cannot simply sign this *time bomb* command with a private key (assuming the botnets possess the corresponding public key for the purpose of verifying commands) and release it into the super-botnet. If a defender compromises a single botnet, the time bomb would be discovered well in advance of the attack, and the future victim could be warned.

In this section, we describe a method which uses the super-botnet's structure to allow the adversary to inject time bomb commands into the super-botnet, with minimal risk that the command will be uncovered ahead of time by a defender.

Until now, we have implicitly assumed that the adversary has a public/private key pair (call the public key P and the private key S), and that every botnet in the super-botnet possesses P (which could have been, for example, included in the worm that infected the zombies). The adversary signs all commands with S, thereby ensuring that the botnets execute only the adversary's commands.

We now take the application of asymmetric encryption one step further. Let $C > 1$ be a constant, and let the adversary generate an *additional* C key pairs. That is, the adversary generates key pairs $\{P, S\}, \{P_1, S_1\}, \ldots, \{P_C, S_C\}$. Instead of including only P with the worm, the adversary includes $\{P, P_1, \ldots, P_C\}$. That is, each botnet receives and passes on $C + 1$ public keys. However, after a given botnet creates all of the new C&C servers that it is required to, it deletes all but one of the extra C public keys. Specifically, the botnet chooses a random number $i \in [1, C]$, and it saves P and P_i; all of the other public keys are wiped from that botnet.

Note that every botnet will be in possession of P. Therefore, if the adversary wishes to issue a command upon which the super-botnet should act instantly, the command should be signed with S.

The additional C key pairs are used for time bomb attacks. Assume that the adversary has some command, K, and desires that the super-botnet execute it after a delay of T time. First, the adversary uses a *secret splitting* scheme, as described in Section 12.7 of Menezes *et al.* [11, p.524], to divide K into C pieces: $K_1, \ldots, K_C$. Individually, any of the pieces are meaningless. In fact, even possessing $C - 1$ of the C pieces does not reveal K; all C pieces are needed to reconstruct K. We treat the secret splitting scheme as a black box; any scheme that meets the aforementioned requirements would suffice. One simple implementation, from Section 12.7.1 of Menezes *et al.* [11, p.525], would be to choose random values for K_i for all $i \in [1, C - 1]$, and set $K_C = K \oplus K_1 \oplus \ldots \oplus K_{C-1}$. A more general scheme, which could even allow K to be reconstructed from any N of the pieces, for some fixed $N \leq C$, was described by Shamir [15].

Regardless of what secret splitting scheme is used, the adversary constructs the following message after the command is split:

$$\{D_{S_1}(D_S(K_1)), \ldots, D_{S_C}(D_S(K_C)), D_S(T)\} ,$$

where $D_S(x)$ is a digital signature scheme with message recovery, using private key S on message x, that incorporates a suitable, non-multiplicative redundancy function. One example of such a scheme is RSA with ISO/IEC 9796 formatting, described in Section 11.3.5 of Menezes *et al.* [11, pp.442–444]. The redundancy function is necessary since the pieces of K look random; without it, it would be impossible to distinguish a valid signature from garbage [11, p.430].

This message is delivered into the super-botnet as usual, and each botnet decodes what part of the message it can. Since each botnet possesses only a single, randomly-chosen P_i, it can decrypt only the corresponding $D_S(K_i)$. That is, after the message has travelled through the entire super-botnet, each botnet will be in possession of a signed copy of T, and a signed copy of one of the C pieces of K.

After a delay of T has elapsed, each botnet floods its $D_S(K_i)$ into the super-botnet. Since K_i is signed by S, each botnet can confirm that any piece of K that it receives is, in fact, one of the original C pieces created by the adversary. After receiving and confirming all C pieces of K, each botnet can perform the command.

This scheme is highly resistant to attacks by individual defenders. There are two tasks that a defender may wish to accomplish against this scheme:

- Reconstruct the command before it is executed. To do so, the defender would require all C public keys, $P_1, \ldots P_C$. It would be difficult for a defender to capture all C public keys during the construction of the super-botnet. Each botnet deletes all but one of these values after it finishes spreading, and compromising a botnet to extract all C keys while it is still spreading would require either a honeypot capturing the worm while it spreads, or near-instantaneous response from a defender to an infection. Short of a honeypot capturing the worm, a defender's best chance for capturing all C keys (or, all C of the $D_S(K_i)$) is, for each public key, to compromise at least one botnet that knows that key. Then, the key can be extracted from the compromised botnet.

- Destroy at least one part of the command in the super-botnet, so that the command cannot be reconstructed and executed. To do so, a defender would have to disable each botnet that knows P_i for some $i \in [1, C]$.

Assuming that a defender does not have oracular knowledge about how to find botnets that match one of these two goals, and that botnets are compromised or disabled randomly (as they are found by the defender), how many botnets can the defender expect to have to locate and attack, on average, before accomplishing either of the goals?

We can answer these questions probabilistically. Computing an expected value for the number of botnets that a defender must compromise to reconstruct the command is the subject of Appendix A.1, and computing an expected value for the number of botnets that a defender must disable to destroy one part of the command is the subject of Appendix A.2. Numerical simulations support the results derived in the appendices.

As an example of the analysis in Appendix A.1 and Appendix A.2, let us assume that there are 15,000 botnets in the super-botnet, and that the command is split into 100 pieces (so, the values of R and C used in the appendices are 150 and 100, respectively). To reconstruct the command, a defender would have to compromise, on average, 509.38 botnets — roughly 3.4% of the entire super-botnet. This sizeable task would likely be beyond the capabilities of a single defender. Destroying a single piece of the command would require the defender to disable, on average, 14491.62 botnets — roughly 96.6% of the entire super-botnet. This number is so large that, in practice, the super-botnet structure would become so partitioned before the defender succeeded in eradicating one piece of the command, that the command could not be reassembled anyway.

Clearly, defending against creative uses of the super-botnet structure is beyond the capabilities of a single defender, or multiple defenders working without shared knowledge or co-ordination. To combat this new threat, new defenses must be developed.

7 Defense Against Super-Botnets

We now turn to defense. There would be no sense for an adversary to build a super-botnet for immediate use; a traditional worm would be more effective in that scenario. The strength of the decentralized super-botnet design is, after all, its resistance to defenders' attacks over time. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that super-botnets would be deployed in advance of an attack. Traditional anti-virus software would thus be useful against super-botnets, as anti-virus software would have time for updates and detection.

Aside from the obvious use of anti-virus software, what defenses can be constructed to specifically target super-botnets? As revealed by the resistance of the super-botnet's communication structure to the failure of individual botnets (discussed in Section 5), and the super-botnet's ability to distribute its attack plans beyond the reach of a single defender (discussed in Section 6), super-botnets cannot be disabled by a single defender.

One solution to the threat of super-botnets is centralized

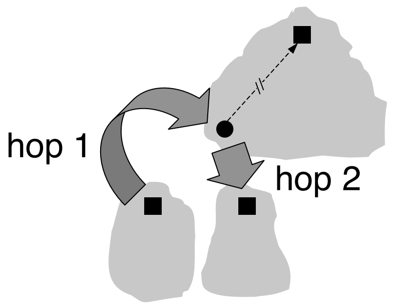


Figure 6. Tracking infections backwards: the two-hop weakness.

defense. When anti-virus software locates a super-botnet infection with routing information, it could pass the routing information along to a central defense location. Given enough disinfections, this tactic should reveal a sizeable portion of the super-botnet's structure. In fact, given enough information, a centralized defense location may be able to locate the adversary commanding the super-botnet. If communication logs are available from the disinfected C&C servers of the individual botnets, potential suspects to be the adversary are all those machines for which routing information has not been collected at the central defense location, but which have sent a super-botnet command to a disinfected machine. After all, a command sent by the adversary looks just like a command passed on to one individual botnet from another, except that no botnet has routing information pointing to the adversary.

Defenders should also not underestimate the value of studying the algorithm by which a given super-botnet implementation spreads. Our worm pseudocode, for example, spaces out C&C servers along the (tree-structured) infection path. If infections can be tracked backwards from a C&C server to the machine that infected it, then there are up to SPREAD − 1 other C&C servers two hops away (Figure 6). The adversary has a clear incentive to choose small spread values and to destroy any information that might link different botnets.

Aside from discerning the structure of the super-botnet, a centralized defense location would also aid attempts to decipher time bombs before they are executed. When a machine is disinfected, any public keys that are captured, as well as any un-executed time bombs, can be sent to the central defense. Capturing all of the public keys (thereby giving advance warning of all future time bombs sent into the super-botnet) is a less daunting task when all available defenders combine their knowledge.

In fact, revisiting the five goals for a defender described in Section 3, we see that a centralized defense mechanism can give defenders a starting point against the threat of super-botnets:

1. Locate or identify the adversary. The adversary may issue a command to the super-botnet in a wide variety of places. Only through central analysis of communication logs and captured routing information could the adversary's direct communications be identified.

2. Reveal all the infected machines. This goal is promising: by collecting routing information from disinfected machines, a central defense should be able to construct at least a partial image of the super-botnet's structure.

3. Command the super-botnet. Obviously, an adversary who signs or encrypts commands will effectively eliminate any possibility of defenders injecting their own commands into the super-botnet.

4. Disable the super-botnet. With its decentralized C&C structure, a defender simply cannot disable the entire super-botnet in a single stroke. There is no point at which the C&C mechanism can be attacked to prevent commands from reaching all of the botnets.

5. Disrupt super-botnet commands. Even if a defender compromises a botnet, garbling super-botnet commands is unlikely to work well. The same randomness that makes the super-botnet's communication structure so resistant to disabled individual botnets also makes it resistant to disrupted commands. There is no guarantee that the adversary's commands must travel through the compromised botnet, so the majority (if not all) of the super-botnet is likely to receive the adversary's commands intact.

Though a centralized defense does not aid defenders with all five goals, it will give defenders a much needed edge against this coming evolution in botnets. Unfortunately, it is impossible to predict all forms of future super-botnet; consequently, it is difficult to know if a centralized defense will always work. However, a centralized defense will be applicable against all forms of super-botnet in which individual botnets remember routing information, because this information can be extracted when a botnet is discovered, and delivered to the central defense. Hence, security vendors and organizations would be well-advised to prepare centralized defense mechanisms in the near future.

8 Future Work and Conclusions

Future work will focus on adding more features to our simulation, to explore how super-botnets behave in a more complex environment. This work includes studying how self-stopping mechanisms can be applied to super-botnets, and how network characteristics, such as the use of network address translation, can affect the spread of a super-botnet, possibly providing an additional line of defense [13]. We also wish to examine in more detail the relative strengths and weaknesses of a super-botnet design, relative to peer-to-peer botnets, both for the adversary and for defenders.

In any form, super-botnets provide adversaries with an enormous amount of virtual firepower that is easy to construct yet hard to shut down, as there is no single C&C channel for defenders to target. The loss of individual botnets (which can, by themselves, be farmed out for spamming and other traditional uses) is not catastrophic.

The trend toward smaller botnets can be seen as an evolutionary step leading to super-botnets. This means that attacks by millions of machines on the Internet's infrastructure can appear from nowhere, as multiple small botnets join forces. Super-botnets must be considered a serious threat that must be defended against with new centralized defense mechanisms.

9 Acknowledgments

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Appendix A Statistical Algorithms

Assume that there are B individual botnets in a super-botnet, and that a secret is split into C pieces, with each botnet knowing one random piece of the secret. How many botnets would a defender have to compromise, on average, to learn the entire secret? How many botnets would a defender have to disable, on average, to destroy one piece of the secret entirely?

So long as which piece of the secret each botnet knows is chosen randomly, there are approximately $R = B/C$ botnets that know each piece of the secret.

As such, the problems of how many botnets need be compromised or disabled reduce to more easily-stated problems. Namely, assume that there are C different colors of marbles, and R marbles of each color are placed into a bag. What is the expected number of marbles that would have to be drawn from the bag, without replacement, until at least one of each color of marble has been drawn? Similarly, what is the expected number of marbles that would have to be drawn from the bag, without replacement, until all the marbles of one color have been drawn?

While one could analyse both of these problems using a geometric distribution, that form of analysis assumes that each marble is placed back into the bag after being drawn. So, while using a geometric distribution would provide a good approximation to the expected number of marbles that would have to be drawn, the following methods are more accurate. We have confirmed the analysis with two independently-coded simulations of drawing marbles from a bag without replacement.

Appendix A.1 One of Each Color

First, we investigate the problem of how many marbles one would expect to draw in order to have drawn at least one of each color. We present a solution to this problem, a non-trivial variant of the collector's problem [22].

Imagine that, instead of stopping drawing marbles from the bag once one of each color has finally been drawn, the marbles are drawn one at a time from the bag and placed on a table from left to right, until there are no marbles left in the bag. Denote the first color of marble that is drawn as color 1. One may or may not draw additional marbles of color 1 before drawing a different color. Denote this next color as color 2. Continue as such, denoting the final new color of marble that is drawn as color C.

Using this notation, we have a way of describing T, the total number of marbles drawn before we have at least one of each color. Namely, T is the number of marbles drawn up to and including the first time a marble of color C was drawn.

Obviously, $T \geq C$, since we need to draw at least one marble of each color. The question is: how many *extra* marbles of colors $1 \ldots C-1$ are drawn before the first marble of color C? We denote the number of *extra* marbles of color i drawn as e_i. Hence:

$$T = C + \sum_{i=1}^{C-1} e_i$$

where $e_i \geq 0 \; \forall i \in [1, C-1]$.

To compute the expected value of T, denoted $E(T)$, we need only compute the expected values for the e_i, $E(e_i)$. We start by computing $E(e_{C-1})$.

Envision the marbles lying on the table, sorted from left to right in the order they were drawn. Now, take away all of the marbles except those of color C and the leftmost marble of color $C-1$. If we were to put the $R-1$ missing marbles of color $C-1$ back on the table where they were just lying, where would we *expect* to find them?

Since all $R-1$ of those marbles must have been drawn from the bag after the first marble of color $C-1$, all of the missing marbles must appear to the right of the lone marble of color $C-1$. However, as demonstrated by Figure 7, there are $R+1$ distinct placement positions (relative to the remaining marbles of color C) to the right of the lone marble of color $C-1$ into which any of the missing marbles of color $C-1$ could be placed (note that multiple missing marbles may occupy a single placement position once they are returned to the table). Namely, a missing marble will be placed to the left of λ marbles of color C, where $\lambda \in [0, R]$.

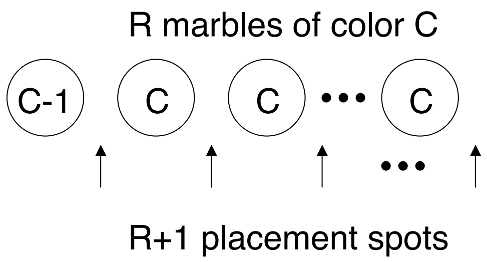

Figure 7. Marble placement spots for the missing marbles of color C-1.

Note that only one of those $R+1$ positions is to the left of all of the marbles of color C. So, we expect that $\frac{1}{R+1}$ of the missing marbles will appear to the left of the marbles of color C. Since there are $R-1$ missing marbles, we conclude:

$$E(e_{C-1}) = \frac{1}{R+1} \cdot (R-1) \; .$$

A similar argument can be made to compute the value of $E(e_{C-2})$ (for expository purposes, we assume $C \geq 3$). This time, when we start with all of the marbles on the table, sorted from left to right by draw order, we take a slightly different course of action. We take away all of the marbles except those of colors C and $C-1$, and the leftmost marble of color $C-2$. Where would we expect to find the missing $R-1$ marbles of color $C-2$ were they replaced? This time, there are $2R+1$ possible placement locations for the missing marbles. But, how many of them lie to the left of the first marble of color C?

Obviously the location directly to the right of the lone marble of color $C-2$, as well as the location directly to the right of the first marble of color $C-1$ both meet this criteria. Do not forget, however, that we expect to find $E(e_{C-1})$ extra marbles of color $C-1$ to the left of the marbles of color C; the locations directly to the right of those marbles are also on the left side of the marbles of color C. As such, $2 + E(e_{C-1})$ of the possible $2R+1$ placement locations for the $R-1$ missing marbles are located to the left of the first marble of color C, yielding:

$$E(e_{C-2}) = \frac{2 + E(e_{C-1})}{2R+1} \cdot (R-1) \; .$$

```
COMPUTE-ET($C, R$)
1  $sum \leftarrow 0$
2  for $i \leftarrow 1$ to $C - 1$
3      do $sum \leftarrow sum + (sum + i)(R - 1)/(iR + 1)$
4  return $sum + C$
```

Figure 8. A fast algorithm for computing E(T).

The general form of the above argument yields:

$$E(e_{C-i}) = \frac{i + \sum_{j=1}^{i-1} E(e_{C-j})}{iR + 1} \cdot (R - 1) \ .$$

Inserting the now-computable values for the $E(e_i)$ into

$$E(T) = C + \sum_{i=1}^{C-1} E(e_i)$$

yields the final solution to our problem. A fast pseudocode algorithm for computing $E(T)$ is included in Figure 8.

Appendix A.2 All of One Color

Next, we investigate the problem of how many marbles one would expect to draw in order to have drawn all of the marbles of one color. The solution is, in fact, quite similar in form.

Again, imagine that the marbles are drawn one at a time from the bag and placed on a table from left to right, until there are no marbles left in the bag. We number the colors from 1 to C; however, this time we use a different scheme to assign the numbers. Denote the first color of marble for which we succeed in drawing all R marbles as color 1. The next color of marble for which we drew all R marbles is denoted color 2. Continuing as such, the color of the last marble drawn is denoted as color C.

Using this numbering scheme, we want to describe S, the total number of marbles drawn before we have all the marbles of one color. Namely, S is the number of marbles drawn up to and including the last time a marble of color 1 was drawn.

As before, we have an obvious lower bound: $S \geq R$, since there are R marbles of color 1. The question is: how many marbles of colors $2 \ldots C$ are drawn before the last marble of color 1? We denote the number of marbles of color i drawn before the last marble of color 1 as x_i. Hence:

$$S = R + \sum_{i=2}^{C} x_i$$

where $x_i \geq 0 \ \forall i \in [2, C]$.

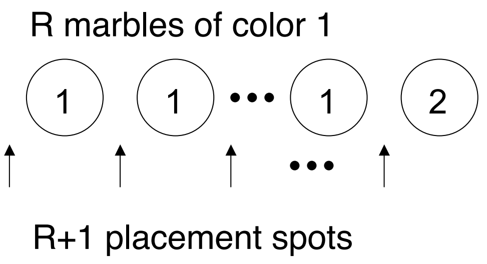

Figure 9. Marble placement spots for the missing marbles of color 2.

Similar to before, we wish to calculate $E(S)$ by computing the $E(x_i)$. We start with $E(x_2)$.

Envision the marbles lying on the table, sorted from left to right in the order they were drawn. Now, take away all of the marbles except those of color 1 and the rightmost marble of color 2. If we were to put the $R - 1$ missing marbles of color 2 back on the table where they were just lying, where would we *expect* to find them?

Since all $R - 1$ of those marbles must have been drawn from the bag before the last marble of color 2, all of the missing marbles must appear to the left of the lone marble of color 2. However, as demonstrated by Figure 9, there are $R + 1$ distinct placement positions (relative to the remaining marbles of color 1) to the left of the lone marble of color 2 into which any of the missing marbles of color 2 could be placed (as before, multiple missing marbles may occupy a single placement position once they are returned to the table). Namely, a missing marble will be placed to the left of λ marbles of color 1, where $\lambda \in [0, R]$.

Note that all but one of those $R + 1$ positions is to the left of some of the marbles of color 1. So, we expect that $\frac{R}{R+1}$ of the missing marbles will appear to the left of a marble of color 1. Since there are $R - 1$ missing marbles, we conclude:

$$E(x_2) = \frac{R}{R + 1} \cdot (R - 1) \ .$$

Unsurprisingly, a similar argument can be made to compute the value of $E(x_3)$ (as before, for expository purposes, we assume $C \geq 3$). This time, when we start with all of the marbles on the table, sorted from left to right by draw order, we take away all of the marbles except those of colors 1 and 2, and the rightmost marble of color 3. Where would we expect to find the missing $R - 1$ marbles of color 3 were they replaced? This time, there are $2R + 1$ possible placement locations for the missing marbles. But, how many of them lie to the left of the last marble of color 1?

Obviously, the locations directly to the left of any of the marbles of color 1 meet this criteria. Do not forget, however, that we expect to find $E(x_2)$ marbles of color 2 to the left of the last marble of color 1; the locations directly to

```
COMPUTE-ES($C, R$)
1  $sum \leftarrow 0$
2  for $i \leftarrow 1$ to $C - 1$
3      do $sum \leftarrow sum + (sum + R)(R - 1)/(iR + 1)$
4  return $sum + R$
```

Figure 10. A fast algorithm for computing E(S).

the left of those marbles are also on the left side of the last marble of color 1. As such, $R + E(x_2)$ of the possible $2R + 1$ placement locations for the $R - 1$ missing marbles are located to the left of the last marble of color 1, yielding:

$$E(x_3) = \frac{R + E(x_2)}{2R + 1} \cdot (R - 1) .$$

The general form of the above argument yields:

$$E(x_i) = \frac{R + \sum_{j=2}^{i-1} E(x_j)}{(i - 1)R + 1} \cdot (R - 1) .$$

Inserting the now-computable values for the $E(x_i)$ into

$$E(S) = R + \sum_{i=2}^{C} E(x_i)$$

yields the final solution to our problem. A fast pseudocode algorithm for computing $E(S)$ is included in Figure 10 (the `for` loop has been changed from $i \in [2, C]$ to $i \in [1, C - 1]$ to simplify the $i - 1$ into an i inside the loop).