Inventor offers $100,000 to puzzle solver

By Bert S. Kaliski

It's the "puzzle item of the year," and a "sophisticated pet rock," says Warren Holland, inventor of "Decipher," a game which carries a $100,000 prize for the person who discovers its secret message.

"Decipher" is "a puzzle within a puzzle," Holland explains. To solve it, one must first put together a two-sided jigsaw puzzle. But that's the easy part.

On each side of the jigsaw puzzle are many one- to four-digit numbers, separated by commas. To win the prize, one must decode the secret message which the numbers represent.

The code, Holland explains, is a multiple substitution cipher in which more than one number may represent the same letter, but no number corresponds to more than one letter.

Holland claims the "key" for the cipher — about 1,000 words of text — is in the public domain. Take this key, the game's instructions say, and write it down one letter at a time, skipping spaces and punctuation. Then write down numbers, starting at one, next to each letter.

Take the sequence of numbers in the puzzle, and use the list just made to find the corresponding letter. Put in some spaces and punctuation, and you have the secret message. And the prize money.

Of course, finding the key will not be easy. Holland says he will wait until March 1984, then enter the bank vault in which the solution is stored and determine who has the correct answer. If no one is correct, either the prize will increase or Holland will give clues, until someone solves the cipher.

Nonetheless, Holland says he expects there will be two winners. Winners will divide the prize equally, he says.

Holland, a graduate of Virginia Tech and a former construction manager, became "disenchanted" with his work several years ago, he says. He read about treasure-hunters who tried to solve a cipher made by Thomas Jefferson Beale to hide gold in the Virginia backwoods.

He decided to create his own puzzle, one in which the puzzle-solver "wouldn't have to go dig up somebody's property" to find the prize, he recalls. He spent just a few hours making the cipher, but needed two years to bring the game on the market.

Lloyd's of London wouldn't insure the prize, because Scotland Yard said the code could be broken, Holland says. But he found a domestic firm to insure the prize, and an American distributor for the game.

The company has already sold about 50,000 games at about $12 each, Holland estimates, probably more than enough to cover the prize money.

The game is available in finer stores, he adds.

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**Feature**

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