

Spy Games (Secret Solution)

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As part of solving the puzzle, 17 blue and red cards in total are identified in each of 8 Codenames grids. This leaves 8 remaining cards that are neutral (neither blue nor red) in each grid—data that is entirely unused in the main puzzle. If reading left-to-right and top-to-bottom, taking the first neutral card from each grid yields a secret instruction: **NEUTRAL INITIALS ARE EIGHT CRYPTEX DIALS SPELLING DECIPHER.**

Cryptexes are cylindrical ciphers popularized by the novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Following the instruction, we can take the 8 neutral cards from each grid to be a cryptex dial, forming a stack of 8 dials:

| | | | | | | | |
|----------|------------|---------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| NEUTRAL | THANKS | ALMOST | DAPPER | LIGHTBULB | EVENING | GAUNTLET | SOAPBOX |
| INITIALS | PIZZA | FOOLISH | SYMBOL | ORDINARY | ALLOWANCE | MINERAL | EAVESDROP |
| ARE | UMBRELLA | WASTREL | NASHVILLE | BANTER | COLORS | NAPPING | RUN |
| EIGHT | BAFFLING | CUBICLE | SERENADE | SANTA | ONTARIO | INSTINCT | KINDNESS |
| CRYPTEX | USEFUL | WINNERS | FORGIVE | PHOTOGRAPH | ECCENTRIC | APPENDICES | UNLESS |
| DIALS | DREAMS | LUNCH | EDGY | BILLION | ECHOES | GIN | HACKER |
| SPELLING | MICROSCOPE | REGRET | OBLIVIOUS | EUROPE | KNACK | IRONY | OFTEN |
| DECIPHER | RANDOM | EARLY | NEITHER | ULTIMATUM | SMILE | IMAGINE | LEFT |

It is possible to rotate each dial (horizontally in this representation) so that the initials of one column spell out DECIPHER per the instruction.

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| [D]APPER | [L]IGHTBULB | [E]VENING | [G]AUNTLET | [S]OAPBOX | [N]EUTRAL | [T]HANKS | [A]LMOST |
| [E]AVESDROP | [I]NITALS | [P]IZZA | [F]OOLISH | [S]YMBOL | [O]RDINARY | [A]LLOWANCE | [M]INERAL |
| [C]OLORS | [N]APPING | [R]UN | [A]RE | [U]MBRELLA | [W]ASTREL | [N]ASHVILLE | [B]ANTER |
| [I]NSTINCT | [K]INDNESS | [E]IGHT | [B]AFFLING | [C]UBICLE | [S]ERENADE | [S]ANTA | [O]NTARIO |
| [P]HOTOGRAPH | [E]CCENTRIC | [A]PPENDICES | [U]NLESS | [C]RYPTEX | [U]SEFUL | [W]INNERS | [F]ORGIVE |
| [H]ACKER | [D]IALS | [D]REAMS | [L]UNCH | [E]DGY | [B]ILLION | [E]CHOES | [G]IN |
| [E]UROPE | [K]NACK | [I]RONY | [O]FTEN | [S]PELLING | [M]ICROSCOPE | [R]EGRET | [O]BLIVIOUS |
| [R]ANDOM | [E]ARLY | [N]EITHER | [U]LTIMATUM | [S]MILE | [I]MAGINE | [L]EFT | [D]ECIPHER |

Starting with the column spelling DECIPHER and reading off all eight columns yields a full message, **DECIPHER LINKED KEEP READING FABULOUS SUCCESS NOW SUBMIT ANSWER LAMB OF GOD**, giving us the secret answer, **LAMB OF GOD**.

Construction notes

A Codenames puzzle was attractive because it contains so much data that could be used to hide a secret answer. I wrote the main puzzle first without using the neutral cards, leaving me an effectively unconstrained 8×8 set of words. With the espionage theme from Codenames, a mechanic around a cryptex/cylindrical cipher felt like a fun and thematic follow-on.

This puzzle ended up being incredibly challenging to tune. It went through six rounds of testsolving—everyone who was available at the time on the writing team, plus two external testsolvers.

The initial version of the cryptex worked differently in a way that turned out very problematic. The initial step was the same—reading the first neutral card from each grid gave an instruction about forming cryptex dials. However, solving the rotations directly used the

words on the cards for alignment rather than just the initials. The final state had a leftover column unused in aligning the dials with a clue phrase message **BEGIN MESSAGE DIVINE YOUNG SHEEP WITH CHRISTMAS BIRTHDAY** for the final answer.

Unfortunately, it turned out that having the secret path visible early made the main puzzle much more difficult. The phrases were super conspicuous—testsolvers kept clocking them immediately while solving the main puzzle. This meant they had these extra phrases before finding the cryptex dial instruction and didn't know what to do with them. Then, if they ran into any friction on the main puzzle, they would get stuck with a bunch of confusing data that didn't go together.

Using initials instead addressed this very effectively. You can't find anything with the initials out of order—there's nothing to spot unless you've already found the secret instruction to form the cryptex dials and were working on aligning the dials. Since the secret solve path also proceeds fairly linearly until one gets the secret answer, it is much less likely for a solver to get stuck with partial progress.

Constructing the cryptex dials was still pretty challenging, because the final message reads across dials and also needs to include the letters of the **NEUTRAL INITIALS ARE ...** message. I was fairly committed to having the full message read naturally-ish and be somewhat goofy. There were a lot of thesaurus, Nutrimatic, and Qat lookups involved.

We then had a version where the initial instruction message was **NEUTRAL ARE EIGHT CRYPTEX DIALS INITIALS SPELL SECRET**, where SECRET had a double-meaning as a signpost for secret content and as an alignment aid. It only spanned the first six dials, and solvers would need to just tinker and make the rest of it work to spell out a full message using all cards. It was cute, but multiple testsolvers got stuck with this version because they didn't get the aha of using SECRET as a literal alignment aid. This led to changing to DECIPHER being used instead, where it read much more clearly as an alignment aid.

We finally had a version of the puzzle where the secret path flowed smoothly and didn't interfere with the main puzzle. In fact, our full testsolve team found and completed the secret path before even solving the main puzzle, and this was the first secret answer they found. We decided that this was a feature rather than a bug, since it served as a good on-ramp for stumbling across the secret content. Indeed, we observed many other teams during the hunt finding the secret answer before the main answer with this as the first secret discovery.

Many thanks to this puzzle's editor, Eshan Mitra, and to the testsolvers on the writing team—Chris Yu, Alex Walker, Sara Walker, and Zach Barnett—who had to deal with me constantly asking them for feedback on new iterations for several weeks.