

MIT Mystery Hunt

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The **MIT Mystery Hunt** is an annual puzzlehunt competition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As one of the oldest and most complex puzzlehunts in the world, it attracts about 1,000 people annually and has inspired similar competitions at Microsoft, Stanford University, Melbourne University, University of Limerick, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as well as in the Seattle, San Francisco, Miami, Indianapolis and Columbus, Ohio metropolitan areas.^{[1][2]} Because the puzzle solutions require knowledge of esoteric and eclectic topics, the hunt is often conflated with popular stereotypes of MIT students.^{[3][4]}

The hunt begins at noon on the Friday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day when the teams assemble in the lobby of Building 7 to receive the first puzzles and concludes with a runaround to find a “coin” hidden on MIT’s campus. Each puzzlehunt is created and organized by the winning team of the previous year, which can lead to substantial differences in the rules and structure. While early hunts involved a few dozen linear puzzles, recent hunts have increased in complexity, some involving as many as 130 distinct puzzles arranged in rounds, hidden rounds, and metapuzzles. Recent hunts have also revolved around themes introduced as a skit by organizers at the opening ceremony.

Structure

The objective of the hunt is to solve a set of puzzles in order to locate a coin hidden on the MIT campus. Participants can organize into teams of any size and are not required to be physically present.^[5] The hunt and the puzzles comprising it are organized and created by the team that won the event the previous year, ensuring that no hunt will be run (or won) consecutively by the same people; each year’s writers are free to change any aspects of the internal structure of the Hunt.^[5] At noon on the Friday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, the teams gather in the lobby of MIT’s Building 7 where the organizers present a skit describing the hunt’s theme, the initial round of puzzles, as well as rules and other administrative matters. The teams can locate their headquarters anywhere and, over the course of the Hunt, check in with the organizers to verify the answers to individual puzzles.^[5] After the Hunt concludes, the organizers typically hold a wrap-up meeting at which the solutions to all the metapuzzles and the overall structure of the Hunt are revealed.

While the puzzles comprising the early hunts were either linear (after solving one puzzle, a new puzzle would be revealed) or released en masse, since 1998 the puzzles have been released in rounds. Successive rounds can be released at predetermined times, based upon completing a requisite number of puzzles in a previous round, or another metric entirely. The distinguishing feature of the present-day Mystery Hunt is employing the solutions to all the puzzles in a round to solve a metapuzzle, usually lacking any instructions. Once a team has solved all the metapuzzles, it may begin the runaround phase to find the hidden coin. The entire hunt usually lasts approximately 48 hours, although the 2003 hunt required 67 hours.^[5] Although the hidden prize is always called “the coin”, in recent years a greater variety of items have been used as the “coin”, including a compact disc, a fragment of a meteorite, a snowglobe, and a lump of charcoal.

The mystery hunt employs a wide range of puzzles including crosswords, cryptic crosswords, logic puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, anagrams, connect-the-dots, ciphers, riddles, paint by numbers, sudokus, and word searches. Solutions to these classic puzzles are further complicated by employing arcane or esoteric topics like quantum computing,^[6] stereoisomers, ancient Greek,^[7] Klingon,^[8] Bach preludes,^[9] coinage of Africa,^[10] Barbie dolls^[11] and steganography. Puzzles might also employ pictures, audio files, video games, physical objects, locations within MIT or the Boston area.^[2] The hunt also assumes extensive familiarity with MIT’s campus, culture, and lore.

History

The Mystery Hunt was started in 1980 by then-graduate student Brad Schaefer.^[12] The first Hunt consisted of 12 subclues on a single sheet of paper including a Vigenere cipher, a short runaround, and an integral. The answers to the subclues detailed the location of an Indian Head penny hidden on campus. The individuals who found the coin were allowed to take their pick of a \$20 gift certificate to the school bookstore, a \$50 donation to the charity of their choice, and a keg of beer. The hunt was organized for the next two years by Brad Schaefer and after he graduated, and the winners were given the honor of writing the hunt the next year.^[12]

Over the next several years the hunt became longer and more involved as the number of participants increased. The earliest recorded theme is Captain Red Herring’s Mystery Island in 1992. The 1984 Hunt had 22 clues, and the 1987 Hunt had 19 clues and a final runaround. The Mystery Hunt has continued to grow, with the 2005 Hunt containing 114 puzzles, 12 metapuzzles and a 6-puzzle final runaround.

Though metapuzzles have existed in some form for many Mystery Hunts, the structure regarding how the puzzles combine into metapuzzles and how puzzles are released varies. For example, in the 2006 Hunt, “antepuzzles” provided access to new rounds, whose answers were derived from pieces of information attached to the round puzzles, but otherwise irrelevant to them (for example, the colors in which the puzzle titles were printed^[11]); in the 2009 Hunt, apart from the shorter introductory rounds, each main round had a unique structure and way of releasing new puzzles. In some Hunts, such as 1999’s and 2008’s, solvers are not told which sets of puzzles must be combined to create metapuzzles; figuring out the correct groupings is part of the puzzle.

Past Mystery Hunt Themes

- 2009: A sci-fi themed hunt based around *Escape from Zyzlvaria*, an invented science fiction board game^[13]
- 2008: a whodunit murder mystery
- 2007: Hell and the Seven Deadly Sins
- 2006: the espionage genre