

http://www.collegiatetimes.com/lifestyle/tech-student-featured-in-rolling-stone/article_d877bf32-abe0-11e4-b7f0-fb83458fe1d2.html

Tech student featured in Rolling Stone

Cassie Keene, lifestyles staff writer

Feb 3, 2015



Marcus Wanner

Zack Wajsgas / Collegiate Times

Marcus Wanner, a freshman engineering student, was recently featured in an article in Rolling Stone magazine.

Written about an incident that occurred in 2012, Wanner didn't expect the outcome of the article: an emerging fanbase and a disinterest in the press.

The article discusses Wanner's stint with an online group known as Cicada 3301, an organization known for posting mysterious puzzles on Internet sites like 4chan. They claim to be searching for individuals capable of deciphering cryptography.

While the organization keeps an anonymous profile, Wanner certainly has not.

"Basically, I find this puzzle on the Internet. I work all the way through it. I'm really interested in the lower level stuff, where you have to really understand how computers and the Internet works to solve them, so that's what drew me to that puzzle. They gave us sort of an online forum to work on and told us to find a project. And so we came up with a project and started doing it," Wanner said.

The project, which related to Internet privacy, dealt with one of the most important issues to Cicada 3301 — the freedom of information — an especially relevant topic concerning recent events involving the WikiLeaks scandal with Chelsea Manning.

"We were like, 'What if someone had something that really should be public but that people didn't want to publish for commercial or policy reasons?' So we were trying to come up with a way for people to do that safely, without having to take anyone else into their confidence," Wanner said.

However, the Cicada 3301 project was never concluded.

"It sort of fizzled. I was still trying to work on the project, but the scope of it was so big that I couldn't do it myself. That's why I went ahead and released it," Wanner said.

Even after Wanner ended his involvement, he never learned about the organization or the people with whom he was working.

"I still don't know what their names are," Wanner said. "They say, 'We don't have any name, we don't have any membership rosters.' It's more of a group of friends who have some kind of structure."

Wanner was secretive during the process, claiming that his parents and even his girlfriend didn't know about his online endeavors.

"I was vaguely aware of Cicada," said Sarah Showalter, a sophomore HNFE major and Wanner's girlfriend. "After he had started to solve it, he really started to tell me about it and introduced me to people that had done the puzzle with him. Reading the article, there were some details that I wasn't very aware of that I thought were really interesting."

One of the most mysterious and arguably creepiest aspects presented in the Rolling Stone article was an anonymous message posted to future members of Cicada.

It warned that the organization thought of itself as a type of God and that they had beliefs similar to that of cults. However, Wanner shrugged this off when asked about it.

"The kind of people that 3301 was looking for are the 'don't trust anybody' kind of people," Wanner said. "And so if you apply the 'don't trust anybody' mindset to that paste bin, it kind of reframes it to, 'Here's some information about the organization, here's a bunch of other information about the organization, now sort them into real and not real.' There was no indoctrination or cult-like behavior. They were trying to teach us how to write better code and how to think more clearly and efficiently. There was no religious aspect to it."

Wanner says it's odd to be in the public eye but that all of the email he has received after the publication has been supportive. As for the article itself, Wanner isn't so sure he was portrayed in the best light.

"It's like a badly dramatized movie of my life. It's like that's kind of cool, but that's not how it was," Wanner said.

Showalter says she doesn't know a lot about coding but doesn't find any fault in the article herself.

"I told some of my friends about it," Showalter said. "It's completely unbelievable. It was really exciting and it's like I'm dating a big shot."

Wanner did not seem discouraged, however, by this apparent over-dramatization of his life and plans to continue developing his skills in the Virginia Tech engineering program.

“Reading the article was interesting for me,” Wanner said. “Somebody from a really pop culture magazine is interviewing somebody they see as a total nerd, so I’m not really sure what kind of story I was expecting them to write, but you get what you get.”