Afterword

What now? You have learned everything there is to know about classical cryptography. Just kidding. Keep learning. There are still more ciphers we have not covered; many can be found on the American Cryptogram Association's website at www.cryptogram.org/resource-area/cipher-types. When you feel the urge, find one that is new to you. Study it, understand it, and implement it. Find a weakness, then a way to break it. Sometimes, the best you can do is a brute-force attack, but for classical ciphers that is still an achievement when you have modern computers to help you. Furthermore, new classical ciphers are invented still, usually as challenges to other enthusiasts. Several of the ciphers in the section on miscellaneous ciphers were invented for that reason.

After the classical era comes the mechanical era, characterized by rotor machines that use a collection of rotating disks to encipher messages. The disks each contain a wire maze that redirects an electric current as it passes from one disk to the next. Some have reflectors that redirect the current back through the set of disks. Enigma was one such machine. It had three or four disks and a reflector. The disks could be removed and replaced in different order, and the reflector could be swapped out for a different one. By using a reflector, Enigma could never encipher a letter to itself. This weakness helped to break its cipher. The Bombe was a device that, together with a crib, was used to recover the key for messages encrypted with Enigma. Other rotor machines include Lorenz, Purple, and Fialka (which is another shade of purple).

We have not mentioned *Kerckhoffs's principles* yet. He summarized some basic properties of a good cryptographic system, such as its ease of use and portability. His second principle is that the security of the system should not depend on the secrecy of the algorithm (or mechanical device), but rather on the secrecy of the keys. One's enemy can often find and steal the details of the system or device, so we should not rely on keeping them hidden. Instead, the system should be strong enough that an enemy cannot break it without knowing the keys. As you know by now, none of the classical ciphers are secure in this light. Furthermore, when a new classical cipher comes along, we can often figure out the scheme and break it without prior knowledge of it. In the modern era, however, Kerckhoffs's second principle is taken very seriously.

The modern era is characterized by the use of computers. With them comes a level of complexity that makes it impossible to break modern cryptographic systems with pen and paper. But on the other hand, new structures and uses for them arise. The ideas that you should carry forward from the classical into the modern era are substitution, transposition, and fractionation; these ideas are used, albeit in more complicated ways. Here are some of the major differences you will see as you study the cryptography of the modern era:

- Algorithms are far more complex, and therefore...
- We must use computers
- Algorithms are publicly known. In fact, there are competitions for new algorithms. The current standard, *AES* ("*Advanced Encryption Standard*") employs the algorithm that won a competition held by the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Such competitions take years to complete, as the community evaluates each algorithm and tries to find its weaknesses. Since everyone knows the algorithms, security rests in the secrecy of the keys (Kerckhoffs's second principle).
- *Asymmetric* (*public-key*) ciphers now allow someone to encrypt a message for a recipient s/he has never met before. Such a cipher has two keys; one locks it, and the other unlocks it. The recipient published his/her locking key (the public key) for anyone to use. Messages meant for the recipient are encrypted with the public key, and only the recipient can decrypt with the other, private, key.
- Public-key cryptography also allows us to digitally sign messages. If a message is encrypted with a private key, then anyone can use the public key to decrypt it, thereby proving that it was written by the individual holding the private key. To make this process easier, we only need to encrypt a shorter text, which is a secure digest of the message; this brings us to...
- *Hash functions*: these are functions that take a message and produce a large number, called the *digest* of the message. These functions are special in that it is easy to find the digest of a message, but nearly impossible to recover the message from the digest. For this reason, they are called *one-way functions*.
- The security of a cryptographic system is demonstrated by reducing it to a hard mathematical problem. For example, the *RSA* public-key system uses the difficulty of factoring large integers as the basis of its security.

The quantum era is now beginning. Quantum computers will allow us to solve some classically difficult mathematical problems easily. For example, once a quantum computer can be built that is large enough (really no larger in terms of memory and processing than computers that we now have), it will be able to factor large integers almost instantly. This will mean the death of RSA. Therefore, we need new algorithms, algorithms that are resistant to quantum computing. There is currently a competition at NIST for such things. Stay tuned.

Just keep learning.

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Exercises

1. Find a cipher you have never used before and learn how it works. A good place to start is www.cryptogram.org/resource-area/cipher-types. Can you find a weakness in the cipher? Can you modify an attack that you have to break this cipher? Give it a try.

2. Repeat Exercise 1 as often as you like.

3. Read about the rotor machines from the mechanical cryptographic era, about modern ciphers and hash functions, and about quantum key distribution.

Index

Numbers refer to units, not to pages. Numbers in italics refer to the location of a term’s definition. Items in `monospaced typerwriter font` are programming items.

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