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Cicada 3301 update: the baffling internet mystery is back

A third instalment of the infamous internet puzzle appeared over the weekend, this time featuring William Blake, Masonic stars and a promise of 'enlightenment'

By Chris Bell

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Wanted: willing puzzle fans to help solve the internet's most complicated and enduring mystery. Only those conversant in hexadecimal cryptography, medieval Welsh poetry and

classical music theory – among many others – need apply.

After a 12 month hiatus, Cicada 3301 – a complex collection of anonymously-set puzzles, without apparent purpose, that have nevertheless held thousands of amateur web sleuths rapt – has made a reappearance.

When the Telegraph [first reported on the underground phenomenon last November](#), global interest intensified in the shadowy organisation – and the elaborate series of cryptographic puzzles apparently aimed at recruiting expert programmers.

And the Cicada's re-emergence is exactly on schedule, too. The first set of puzzles, identified by images of the insect, appeared on January 5th 2012.

A message left anonymously on notorious website 4Chan simply read: "We are looking for highly intelligent individuals. To find them, we have devised a test..."

After a series of increasingly complex riddles – ranging from cyberpunk literature to voicemail messages to posters affixed to streetlights around the globe – the mysterious organisation behind the tests went quiet. Only for another set of teasers to appear exactly one year later, on January 4th 2013.

Again, solvers were faced with another formidably eclectic range of subjects – from ancient Hebrew code tables to Anglo-Saxon runes to Victoria occultist Aleister Crowley. Within a few weeks the puzzles stopped, with only a select few allowed through to a hallowed "inner sanctum" of Cicada.

And, of course, no-one was left any the wiser as to the source or ultimate purpose of the puzzles. Were they part of an elaborate PR campaign for a new Alternate Reality Game? A recruitment drive by the CIA, NSA or MI6? Or just a bit of fun?

But while another set of posers was anticipated during the first week of 2014, this year was different. Such widespread coverage had led some commentators to wonder if, like the insect itself, the organisation might be scared back underground.

Worse, some feared it might lead to widespread "trolling" – hoaxers trying to pass off their own puzzles as legitimate Cicada tests, further muddying the water.

Indeed, the first week of January has seen [dozens of messages](#) appearing on messageboards purporting to be from Cicada – some of which were elaborate enough to be believable. And yet all of which have been proved fake.

Until, that is, just before 11pm on January 5th. A [Twitter account](#) previously used by the Cicada organisation released [a message](#), bearing the faint image of a cicada, to its 700 followers.

"Hello," it read. "Epiphany is upon you. Your pilgrimage has begun. Enlightenment awaits. Good luck. 3301."

Enthusiasts have since confirmed the message has the necessary [PGP signature](#) – a common encryption method used for privacy – to prove it is legitimately from Cicada 3301.

And so the hunt is underway once more. Already, a debate has begun online into the relevance of “Epiphany”, as January 6 is the Christian feast day known as Epiphany.

But by examining the image for steganography – a technique used to hide data inside images, sometimes used by paedophiles or terrorist organisations – solvers have already revealed a quote: "The work of a private man/ who wished to transcend,/ He trusted himself, / to produce from within."

Further analysis with a program called Outguess has revealed a link to [Self-Reliance](#), a treatise on transcendentalism by American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

When run through a cipher, the excerpt reveals the phrase “For Every Thing That Lives Is Holy” and [a new image](#) – a collage of artworks from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, by the English poet and painter William Blake.

Specifically, it features a collage of his works Nebuchadnezzar, The Ancient Of Days and Newton – with a faint marking of a cicada tucked into the bottom of the picture.

But the images are arranged in such a way that some solvers are now debating whether the image is supposed to represent a [Thelema star](#) (a hexagram developed by Aleister Crowley) or an image of a [Masonic Square](#).

Either way, the pursuit of a solution continues. Enthusiasts wishing to join in the debate can access [an internet chat relay](#) – while [a Wiki](#) is constantly updating and sharing progress, with

helpful explanations.

And after three years, who knows – perhaps, in terms of determining the purpose and source of Cicada 3301, we may be finally getting closer to what that initial image promises: “enlightenment”.



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