

Tech

Cicada 3301: The dark net treasure trail reopens

By Jane Wakefield
Technology reporter

🕒 9 January 2014



OTHER

"Epiphany is upon you" reads the opening message of this year's puzzle

A global internet puzzle that requires advanced computer skills to solve has reopened online.

It is the third year running that the mysterious Cicada 3301 has appeared, with no clues as to who is behind the puzzle.

Some believe it is a recruitment process for a government spy agency, while others believe it could be the work of a bank.

The puzzle takes people on a treasure trail around the so-called dark net.

This year's competition was announced via a **Twitter account** to which was attached an image file with the following message: "Hello. Epiphany is upon you. Your pilgrimage has begun. Enlightenment awaits. Good luck. 3301."

Thousands of fans have been drawn into the competition and have eagerly awaited its relaunch.

This year's iteration already appears to be fiendishly difficult, requiring understanding of OutGuess, a complex steganography tool.

Steganography hides data inside images, and is often used for nefarious purposes by terrorists and paedophiles.

Anglo-Saxon runes



The puzzle takes in the work of Aleister Crowley

Computer scientist Prof Alan Woodward is one of those who has previously taken part in the competition.

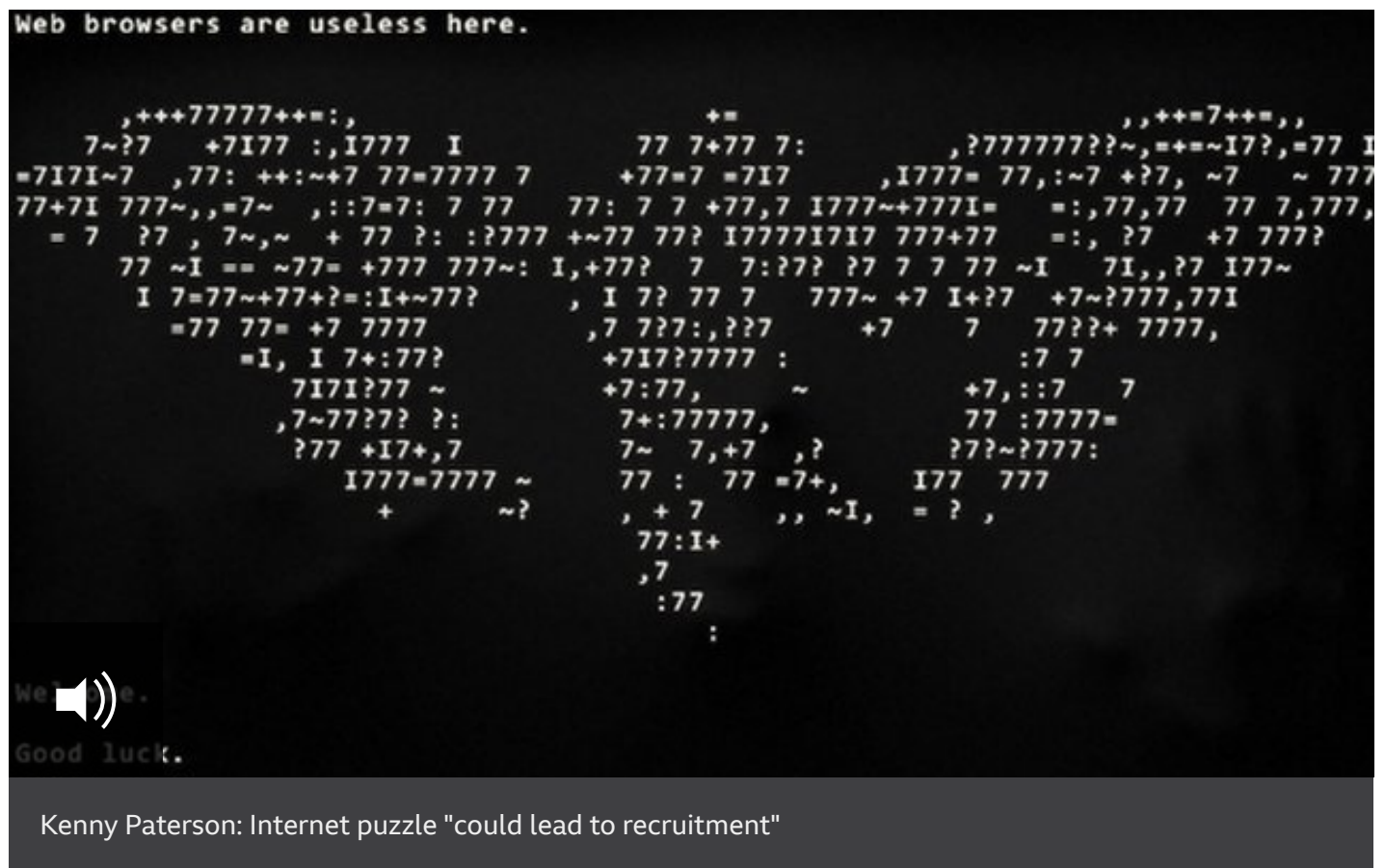
"The puzzles are very complicated and require knowledge of steganography, cryptography as well as obscure existential texts," he told the BBC.

Previous competitions have taken people on both a mental and physical journey, encompassing cyber-punk literature, Anglo-Saxon runes and the work of occultist and magician Aleister Crowley.

Last year, part of the treasure trail also required people to travel to physical locations to decode QR codes posted on telegraph poles dotted around the US.

Now that the competition is widely known about there has been a spate of fakes but for those with the necessary knowledge it is easy to spot the real thing.

"The group uses a PGP signature and put up a key signed with this," explained Prof Woodward.



Spy recruits?

Speculation about who is behind the puzzle has been gaining momentum as the competition attracts more publicity.

"It could be a criminal organisation looking for recruits or it could be a start-up looking to set up a new crypto-currency, possibly even a bank," said Prof Woodward.

"Lots of people think it could be a government agency and that looks reasonably likely as whoever is being recruited isn't telling anybody afterwards," he added.

It is similar to an online competition posted annually by UK agency GCHQ, as part of its recruitment process.

Its 2013 competition consisted of 29 blocks of five letters which had to be deciphered. Those who successfully completed the initial test were invited to take part in a hunt around the net, which they had six weeks to finish.

Cicada is far more complicated though.

"Whoever is behind it has put an enormous amount of effort into it. It is someone with quite a lot of resources or a lot of time on their hands," said Prof Woodward.

Cicada wiki

The puzzle has intrigued so many people since it opened in 2012 that some have started to crowdsource answers.

It has led to the creation of a **Cicada wiki** on which puzzle solvers are invited to post significant leads and clues.

Already solvers have unlocked the first clue to this year's mystery and posted the riddle they have uncovered.

"The work of a private man who wished to transcend. He trusted himself to produce from within."

Prof Woodward himself has never solved the Cicada puzzles.

"Frankly I got bored with it, especially when it started getting into Irish poems I knew nothing about," he said.

An unknown number completed the first two tests which eventually led to an address on the dark net.

The competition organisers later posted a message which read: "We have now found the individual we sought."

round the individuals we sought."

More on this story

GCHQ launches competition for jobs

12 September 2013

How do terrorists communicate?

2 November 2013

How to hide data in plain sight

27 August 2012

From Around the Web

Promoted content by Outbrain



Bruce Springsteen DWI: Singer charged with...

BBC News



Trump allowed back onto Twitter

BBC News



I saved dad's business with a single tweet

BBC News



US actress Mary Tyler Moore dies aged 80

BBC News



US military drops 'mother of all bombs' on IS' in...

BBC News



Man and his dog beaten for binning poo bag in...

BBC News

Top Stories

Myanmar troops on the streets as internet cut off

Army vehicles appear in several cities and shots are fired in one, amid signs of an impending crackdown.

🕒 1 hour ago

Democracy is fragile, warns Biden, as Trump cleared

🕒 9 hours ago

'Overjoyed' Harry and Meghan expecting second child

🕒 48 minutes ago

Features



Your guide to avoiding eye trouble through lockdown



Director 'was afraid' to tell story of ski abuse



Does yoga have a conspiracy theory problem?

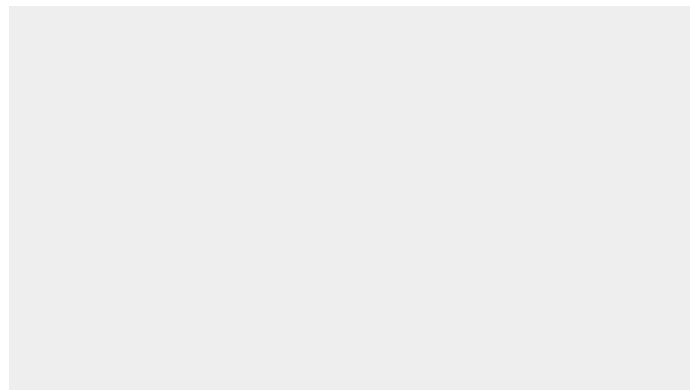


Where are Cape Town's great white sharks?

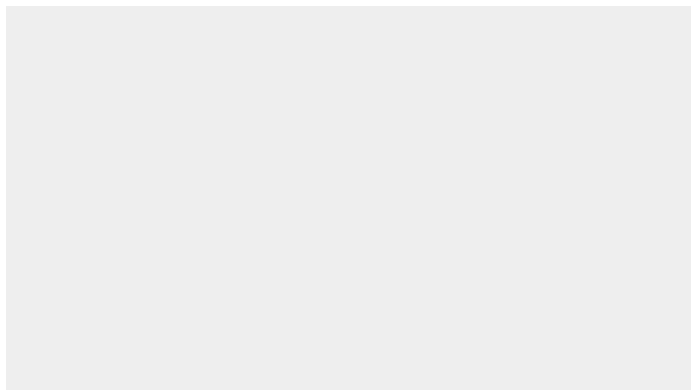
Your pictures on the theme of 'shelter'



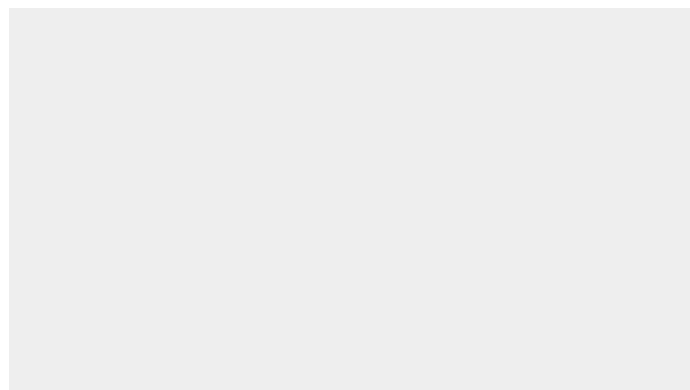
Britain's 'forgotten' battle that changed the course of WWII



The mind-altering effects of the 'God molecule' banned in the US

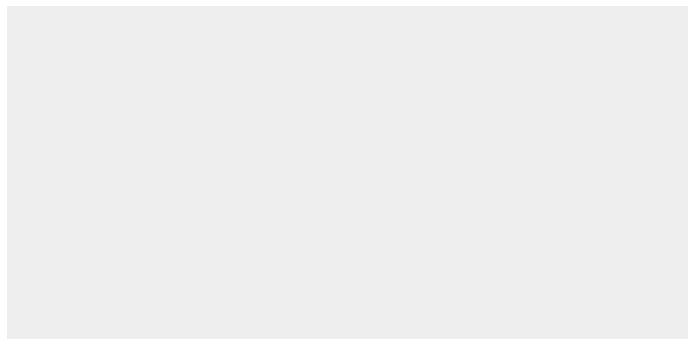


What verdict means for Trump, Biden and America



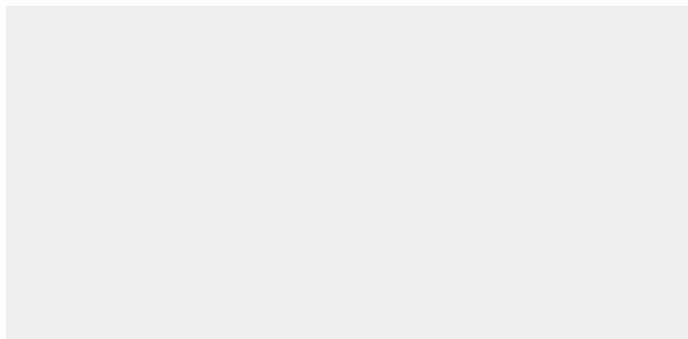
The hero mountaineer who never came back from K2

Elsewhere on the BBC



Lyrics quiz

Have you been getting these songs wrong?



Feeling hot

What happens to your body in extreme heat?

Most Read

- | | |
|--|----|
| 'Overjoyed' Harry and Meghan expecting second child | 1 |
| Myanmar troops on the streets as internet cut off | 2 |
| Why is it so cold in Texas? | 3 |
| Guinea declares Ebola epidemic after deaths | 4 |
| 'Significant milestone' as 15m get Covid jab in UK | 5 |
| Democracy is fragile, warns Biden, as Trump cleared | 6 |
| Johnson: US democracy strong after Trump 'kerfuffle' | 7 |
| Malala: 'Birmingham has become a second home' | 8 |
| UAE space mission returns first image of Mars | 9 |
| Director 'was afraid' to tell story of ski abuse | 10 |

[On your mobile](#)[On smart speakers](#)[Get news alerts](#)[Contact BBC News](#)[Home](#)[Sport](#)[Worklife](#)[Future](#)[Music](#)[Weather](#)[News](#)[Reel](#)[Travel](#)[Culture](#)[TV](#)[Sounds](#)[Terms of Use](#)[About the BBC](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Cookies](#)[Accessibility Help](#)[Parental Guidance](#)[Contact the BBC](#)[Get Personalised Newsletters](#)[Why you can trust the BBC](#)[Advertise with us](#)[AdChoices / Do Not Sell My Info](#)

© 2021 BBC. The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. [Read about our approach to external linking.](#)