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Cicada 3301: The most baffling of internet mysteries

By Mark Leiser

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Code breakers across the globe have worked in earnest to discover the secret behind the mysterious and ambiguous Cicada 3301 postings that begun springing up in various computer forums.

The strange yet alluring *Cicada 3301* mystery has everything for a burgeoning snoop: mystery, suspense, and the promise of something more without ever disclosing what that something is. It started when Joel Eriksson, a computer analyst from Uppsala, Sweden, was trawling through computer forums and stumbled across a weird message: "Hello," it said. "We are looking for highly intelligent individuals. To find them, we have devised a test. There is a message hidden in this image. Find it, and it will lead you on the road to finding us. We look forward to meeting the few that will make it all the way through. Good luck." The message was signed: "3301." The assumption has been that the image was left by one of the intelligence services who famously look for future employees in a type of live job trial. Solve the puzzle and we will give you a job. The puzzle is thought indeed to be a recruitment drive by the CIA, MI6 or the NSA as part of a search for highly talented cryptologists. How does one solve a puzzle of this kind? Well if you can break the code, revealing every 100th pixel, then a second image would appear completely different to the first image. Only in this case, the reveals were dummy images and fake crypto keys that sent the code-breaker down a wrong path adding to the mystique of the puzzle. *Cicada*

'solvers' were sent to other puzzles and challenges and as far as anyone can tell - it is still ongoing. Decryption tools have lead hackers onto sites like Reddit to search for other clues. Here encrypted lines from a book were being posted every few hours. But there were also strange symbols comprised of lines and dots that turned out to be Mayan numbers. Another clue led to a 130MB file full of prime numbers. Another clue lead to an MP3 file featuring a song featuring - cicadas. Twitter got involved too. An account began pumping out random numbers. Dr. Jim Gillogly, former president of the American Cryptogram Association, has been cracking similar codes for years and says it's a tried and tested recruitment tactic. "During the Second World War, the top-secret Government Code and Cypher School used crossword puzzles printed in The Daily Telegraph to identify good candidates for Bletchley Park," Gillogly said. "But I'm not sure the CIA or NSA is behind *Cicada*. Both are careful with security, the recent Snowden case notwithstanding. And starting the puzzle on [the anarchic Internet forum] 4chan might attract people with less respect for authority than they would want working inside." But that doesn't rule out other private corporations like Google or Microsoft or research mecca RAND Corp. There is also speculation that the *Cicada 3301* puzzle is actually a recruitment tool of the Internet collective, Anonymous. "Computer and data security is more important than ever today," said Gillogly. The proliferation of wireless devices, mobile telephones, e-commerce websites such as Amazon and chip-and-pin machines, means the demand for cryptologists has never been higher. "One of the more important components of security systems is the efficacy of the cryptography being used," Gillogly said, "which means cryptanalysts are in higher demand than ever before - no longer just with the intelligence services. It could just as easily be a bank or software company [behind *Cicada*]." We are no closer to

