

Cicada 3301: What the Heck and Who the Heck Is It?

By Kate Henderson on November 28, 2013 · 4 Comments



Cicada 3301, technology, u.s., cia, secret

The symbol of Cicada 3301

The mysterious global quest to seek out “highly intelligent individuals” has the cyber elite guessing about Cicada 3301. Cloaked in extreme secrecy, some say Cicada 3301 is a recruitment device for the CIA. Or it is a cult? Maybe it is the hacktivists group Anonymous? The complexity and depth of knowledge required to tackle the various challenges and quizzes calls for an exceptionally high IQ. The ability to crack codes seems to be a pre-requisite to proceed with the tasks. Who the heck has set this up and what the heck for?

So far, there are no answers as Cicada 3301 proceeds towards its third quest expected to be posted in January 2014.

Nobody has claimed responsibility for it, and neither is anybody making any money from it. Given the size and scale of the operation this adds considerably to the bafflement.

It all began in January 2012 with a message on a board called 4chan.

*Hello. We are looking for highly intelligent individual.
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.*

Challengers had a month to complete that one. The next came in January 2013 . “Hello again. Our search for intelligent individuals now continues.”

The image led to another which contained some verse.

*A book whose study is forbidden
Once dictated to a beast;
To be read once and then destroyed
OR you shall have no peace.*

The verse is from an Aleister Crowley book *Liber AL vel Legis*. Crowley was an occultist who founded his own religion, Thelema. He saw himself as a prophet who had to warn other humans we were entering the Aeon of Horus. He was often rumoured to have been recruited by British intelligence while at Cambridge University. To all events he was a highly controversial figure, once described as “the wickedest man in the world.” This association led many to sense a link to the occult via Cicada.

From a clue in the first line of the Crowley book, questers were able to unscramble the letters at the beginning of the poem and generate the address of a website. This in turn led onto another 1300mb image. This file then split to show a boot up running sequences of prime numbers up to the value of 3301.

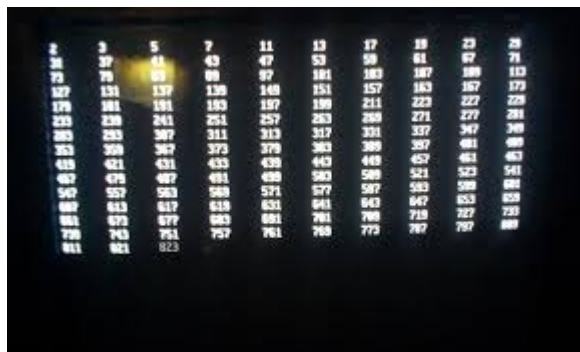
From hereon in the quest becomes fantastically intricate. It branches into what can only be described as a multi platform hunt, as clues appeared on lamp-posts, on Twitter, in phone numbers, in locations widely dispersed around the world and on the dark net, the vast and inaccessible part of the web not

available to conventional search engines. 14 cities including Sydney, Warsaw and Seoul were sites where clues were simultaneously dropped. Once again, this suggests an enormous organisation to have this capability.

One player who had become hooked by this stage was Joel Eriksson in Uppsala Sweden. When the GPS coordinates for the locations began to drop into the system, he was beside himself with excitement. Solvers went out into their cities and found the posters on the lampposts with the Cicada logo and a QR code. “It was exhilarating” says Eriksson, and he realised for the first time just how much effort was going into this. He was one of many who did not make it through in the last round. After being led to an address on The Onion Router (TOR) the quest ended with the curt message “We want the best, not the followers.” TOR is a gateway to the dark net.



The code alludes to something more.



Coding continues to baffle the public

The most common themes in the Cicada 3301 challenges are prime numbers. The next is classical literature but there is a distinct lean to the occult in texts chosen.

Other references are

wide-ranging; the ancient world, music, cryptology and coding. Digital stenography, the concealment of information most often in image files – is a key to solving and moving forward. This has a reputation in nefarious circles, concealing illegal pornography for example, and often, to work out the code there is a trick like changing the color of every 100th pixel.

So who is bothering to set this up? Are they on the right or the wrong side of the law? And who the hell are they? Could it really be the CIA?

They're not telling. Supposedly some people have already been chosen, but what for and who by, remains unknown. One "whistleblower" claims to have been a part of Cicada 3301 for the last ten years and has issued a warning: "This is a dangerous organisation. They are much like a think tank in that (their) primary focus is on researching and developing techniques to aid the ideas (they) advocate: liberty, privacy and security." This person says they are a secret society composed of dissatisfied academics, diplomats, and ex-military. He says they have no links to any government. The anonymous person says English is not his first language and that he used to be an officer. He did not agree with recruiting from the public and that only 1% of all who tried passed the first challenge. It was after his conversion to Christianity that he felt he had no choice but to leave.

It is not uncommon for intelligence agencies to use number puzzles in their recruiting processes, but they do not tend to draw on such a plethora of other (often obscure) references. The GCHQ (British spooks) found themselves outmanoeuvred when the answers to their maths test "Can You Find It?" were found on Google in 2011.

Dr Jim Gillogly of the American Cryptogram association is dubious it is a CIA or NSA recruitment drive as he does not think they would post on an anarchic site like 4chan. However, as cyber security becomes ever more important, there is every possibility it could be someone else recruiting. Maybe even a bank or a software company?

Another theory, less radical, is that Cicada 3301 is just an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) using the world as a stage to play out an elaborate narrative. These games can only evolve in real-time according to how the players respond. Although this is a possibility, ARGs are usually promotional in some regard, and support a product. With no attempts to monetize the Cicada 3301 concept whatsoever, it seems to cast doubt on the idea it may be a huge advertising or promotional campaign. In fact, it's probably fair to say that most would be terribly disappointed by now if that turned out to be true. The best known example to date of an ARG like this was the "I Love Bees" promoting the Xbox Halo 2 game.

Maybe the January 2014 test will reveal more about who the heck and what the heck Cicada 3301 really is. In the meantime we still have to ask, are they an intelligence agency, are they a secret society or are they a cult? Whoever the heck is behind this is still keeping many thousands of people guessing.



By Kate Henderson

Sources

Sydney Morning Herald

Channel 4 News

National Post

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