Cicada 3301: The Mysterious Internet Puzzle That Has the Whole World Guessing

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My sophomore year of college, for about a half a semester, I had picked up an unofficial minor in Digital Sherlocking. A friend had turned me onto my first "internet riddle game," and for a few good weeks, it was the reason I was up far too late at night and not paying attention in my classes during the day; I was too busy exploring the vast netherworlds of the internet for anything that might be my next clue clue.

For those unaware, an "internet riddle game" (for lack of a better term) is a game comprised of a series of riddles found on various sites, images, and codes scattered throughout the internet. They can range in difficulty from fairly simple to practically unsolvable and becoming more and more popular. Progressive marketing companies are continuously using these "Alternate Reality Gaming" techniques to create buzz for a brand, but the more-esteemed ones are simply an entertaining test-of-wits for the world's best online cryptographers. Some of the most famous ones are named things like Notpron, Torment, and The Stone.

But yesterday, The Telegraph published a story about Cicada 3301, a particularly enigmatic internet game that has been leading curious code-crackers down a deep rabbit hole for the past two years. What separates this from the majority of these games, though, is not just its difficulty, but its purpose:

It is, essentially, a recruitment tool...only no one knows for who.

Think-thanks, government agencies, and the like have occasionally used games like these to recruit potential employees and have for years — with its origins dating back to WW2 when the Government Code and Cypher School used crossword puzzles printed in The Daily Telegraph to identify good candidates — but with computer and data security becoming more and more important, it's almost impossible to determine who is going through such great lengths to find this kind of talent.

And these are indeed great lengths.

A knowledge of things like hexadecimal characters, reverse-engineering, prime numbers, cyberpunk literature, Victorian occult, and Mayan numerology are all put to the test, with only the most resourceful finding solutions in the murky waters of the internet's Deepweb.

Eventually though, after a designated number of solvers visited a particular TOR address, the website shut down and left only the message: "We want the best, not the followers." Those "best" received personal emails (the details around which remain incredibly secret), and those "followers" were left with just the many, many hours of effort they had put into helping crack the codes.

Fortunately, it looks on January 4th of 2014, a new set of riddles begins, and there are many who can't wait for the holiday season to fly by so they can get another chance to begin again.

If you want to sharpen your skills in preparation of being recruited by a secret board of shadowy figures to help stop the Matrix, you can find a list of a few of these types of games (with varying difficulties) here.

Enjoy the red pill and seeing how far the rabbit hole goes.