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What is Cicada 3301?

November 25, 2013 9:56 PM [Subscribe](#)

On January 5th 2012, **an image** was uploaded to various image boards. It contained two messages. One was obvious & easy to read. In white letters on a black background it said:

Hello. 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. 3301

As promised there was another message hidden inside the image. It was the start of a bizarre, as yet unexplained chain of complex hidden messages leading those who could solve them on a journey across the Internet and around the world towards a destination none of them could predict with certainty. Is it a highly evolved ARG? Is it a recruitment campaign for the NSA? Welcome to the mystery of **Cicada 3301**.

posted by [scalefree](#) (44 comments total) [54 users marked this as a favorite](#)

For our more linear minded readers, here's an article on it from the Telegraph: **The internet mystery that has the world baffled.**

posted by [scalefree](#) at **10:17 PM** on November 25, 2013

The best kind of ARG is the one where there is a setup but no game. Then the apophenia runs wild.

A recent example of this was the so-called Chiliad Mystery in Grand Theft Auto V, wherein people were convinced that there was a hidden easter egg hunt *beyond* the three ufos that Rockstar hid in the game. Despite the fact that people have decompiled the code and found nothing, **the true believers are still searching for a jetpack which almost certainly doesn't exist.**

posted by [empath](#) at **10:25 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[4 favorites](#)]

Kinda like that TV show "Lost" -- really interesting and different at first. Then a bunch of nonsense, mirrors, and smoke (intended).

I think Cicada season 2 just ended. We'll have to wait until next year for Season 3....

posted by [CrowGoat](#) at **10:26 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[2 favorites](#)]

It's always nice to have some real mysteries that aren't quickly solved, and which have yet to be adequately explained. I hope no answer is forthcoming soon, it keeps things interesting.

posted by [blahblahblah](#) at **10:41 PM** on November 25, 2013

As long as it isn't advertising a ski resort.

posted by [Canageek](#) at **10:54 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[6 favorites](#)]

Ya know - if the people who are playing these games are occupying there time looking for non-existent jet-packs in GTAV, I think I would much rather that than faulty pattern recognition malarky spewing online radio rants about global conspiracies and dmt elves and the elite and ALEX JONES IS AN ANGRY MAN!

...

These are some interesting things. Right away when I read "What Happened part 2 2013" in the wiki, I thought that those seemed very much related to quines. In fact what's even more disturbing is the other day on my way home from work I was thinking about quines. And here... it is mentioned further down that page regarding the TCP server they are to build.

...

This is.. interesting.

posted by [symbioid](#) at **10:58 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[1 favorite](#)]

if i squint it kinda looks like someones flippin me the burd

posted by [not_on_display](#) at **11:07 PM** on November 25, 2013

Let's go skiing!

posted by [PenDevil](#) at **11:34 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[2 favorites](#)]

This sounds so fun, I wish I knew more more about programming so I could join in.

I love the emails the solvers got in 2013, with logic/philosophical puzzles like "What does the word 'it' refer to in this sentence: It is dark outside?" and demanding the solvers put together a program that included running Zen koans. Good sense of humor.

My favorite of the logic puzzles:

Two people are standing by a lake. One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?*

Did anyone read the book *Paradoxes* by R. M. Sainsbury? It talks about how to think through a bunch of different types of mind-blowing puzzles like those. I could practically feel my brain wrinkling up as I was reading it, but that meant I could read about 5 pages in a sitting.

Anyway, do you guys find it unbelievable that 3301 is an organization like Anonymous or even like M-16? If you do, why? I don't think that it's anything from the US gov't, because of the aforementioned sense of humor, but I can buy that it's a recruitment tool for a pretty major group. To me, it seems too restrained to be a hoax and too polished to be something totally fly-by-night.

*By the way, because picking at stuff like this is addictive...does anyone have an answer? I'm usually terrible at logic puzzles, because I try to justify whichever answer sounds best to me instead of thinking through the set-up properly. I *want* to say neither is lying -- no two people can stand in the same spot/see the same thing, so they either both have to be lying or neither can be lying (in other words, it makes sense that their answers as to what they're seeing are different), and I think that neither are lying because the answer to an earlier puzzle in the set is that "all things are true." But -- other thoughts?

posted by [rue72](#) at **11:38 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[2 favorites](#)]

Oh heck no. You start out following the obscure hints, then you find the safe houses, then they teach you magic, then everyone gets killed by some French animal god. I'm going to go rule Narnia like a normal person, thank you very much.

posted by [ormondsacker](#) at **11:46 PM** on November 25, 2013 [[52 favorites](#)]

Two people are standing by a lake. One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?

I would say that the first one is lying, because the reflection is on the water not in it. I like your answer too though, since the reflection guy isn't *lying*, he is just phrasing what he sees in a commonly used but imprecise way. You could also argue both are lying, because what does it really mean to be within the water? Technically the fish and rocks are just surrounded by water, not actually within it.

"What does the word 'it' refer to in this sentence: It is dark outside?"

By "it" I usually mean "everything" when I use that phrase.

posted by **Mayhembob** at **11:50 PM** on November 25, 2013

They're both lying because they're facing away from the lake.

posted by **empath** at **11:56 PM** on November 25, 2013 [**5 favorites**]

Despite the fact that people have decompiled the code and found nothing,

L IS REAL 2401

BELIEVE

This is the year!

posted by **23** at **11:58 PM** on November 25, 2013 [**2 favorites**]

Holy shit this is awesome.

posted by **bradbane** at **12:18 AM** on November 26, 2013

The first person is lying, the second person is standing.

posted by **NMcCoy** at **12:35 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**38 favorites**]

Oh heck no. You start out following the obscure hints, then you find the safe houses, then they teach you magic, then everyone gets killed by some French animal god.

Look at you, dropping the Lev Grossman references like a boss!

posted by [Justinian](#) at [12:54 AM](#) on November 26, 2013

*Two people are standing by a lake. One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?**

The reflection of one is lying on the water?

posted by [mannequito](#) at [1:02 AM](#) on November 26, 2013 [[1 favorite](#)]

I usually hate HATE this kind of thing, but then I played Fez, deciphered the cryptogram from the Hexahedron's initial speech without great difficulty, deciphered the Tome on my own (aided by a short Python script I wrote), and even got one of the Red Cubes before finding all the Anti-Cubes (though it turns out that was semi-accidental -- I was testing out the pattern of red dots in the Observatory as if it was a code, and in the process just happened to enter the code the dots were trying to tell me through another method). And I rather enjoyed all of that.

It makes me *more* suspicious of this kind of thing, though, knowing if I let myself I could immerse myself in this pretty deeply. Because more than I like solving puzzles, I hate jumping through arbitrary hoops for some marketing end, and similar to my extreme negative reaction when I found out horse_ebooks was a sham, I know I would boil over with rage if I spent two hours trying to crack a code only to discover it spelling out some version of REMEMBER TO DRINK YOUR OVALT--

posted by [JHarris](#) at [1:19 AM](#) on November 26, 2013 [[6 favorites](#)]

Two people are standing by a lake. One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?

Both - no words are true.

posted by [Drexen](#) at [2:59 AM](#) on November 26, 2013 [[3 favorites](#)]

Speaking of FEZ, I had no idea that the **way you were supposed to figure out the Black Monolith code** had been cracked. That is super obscure.

posted by **Elementary Penguin** at **3:08 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

Anyway, do you guys find it unbelievable that 3301 is an organization like Anonymous or even like M-16? If you do, why?

Those groups actually want to find people, usually with applicable skills. An impossibly hard series of logic puzzles would be a pretty ineffective way of meeting recruiting goals.

Besides, to think of this as some kind of recruiting tool is to misunderstand the value of the internet. This problem will be solved, not by a lone genius, but by a group of people working together. That's how big problems are solved these days.

posted by **heathkit** at **4:04 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**4 favorites**]

As one of the participants this year, I can say the whole thing ended pretty anticlimactic. After the initial puzzles, we were instructed to write a simple server and set it up behind an .onion address, and this had to be done within a week. Some of our servers were tested by Cicada, but without giving any of us the next part of the puzzle chain. This was the end of January.

Then, it was complete silence for over a month. In the beginning of March we got a recruitment offer we were asked to respond to (It was basically **this** but without the spelling errors). After sending my reply as instructed, there was no response.

I shut down the server over half a year ago (Used up my free Amazon tier). I still check the anonymous mail account created during the game, hoping to see a new mail pop up, but so far it has been silence.

I don't think Cicada will be back in 2014.

posted by **ymgve** at **4:32 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

> I hate jumping through arbitrary hoops for some marketing end, and similar to my extreme negative reaction when I found out horse_ebooks was a sham...

Not meaning to split hairs here, but you're upset when something that doesn't look like marketing ends up being marketing, and you're upset when something that looks like marketing ends up not being marketing?

posted by **ardgedee** at **4:44 AM** on November 26, 2013

I love the emails the solvers got in 2013, with logic/philosophical puzzles like "What does the word 'it' refer to in this sentence: It is dark outside?"

The only correct answer to this is that **it doesn't refer to anything.**

posted by **one more dead town's last parade** at **5:21 AM** on November 26, 2013

You get to work for Penny Arcade for free.

posted by **Artw** at **6:12 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**4 favorites**]

ormandsacker: *I'm going to go rule Narnia like a normal person, thank you very much.*

Until the talking sheep appears out of nowhere to kick you out.

posted by **dr_dank** at **6:20 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

Drexen: *"Two people are standing by a lake. One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?"*

Both - no words are true."

If we're talking boolean logic here, the correct answer is "Yes".

"Which one is lying..." Which implies an "OR" statement. Is A lying or B lying. In this context then regardless of if A or B is lying, one of them must be lying. If one of them is lying (as implied by the question, and assuming they are not misleading us by claiming one is lying when neither are), and since it's not an XOR (that is, which one is lying, and only which one is lying, which then presents the problem most of you are thinking of it as), then we can confidently say "YES". If it's presented as an XOR and they are saying ONLY ONE is lying and we can't with confidence say "yes" because it might be that both are lying and if both are lying then it's not an exclusive case of one person lying.

So the answer is yes. Logically. If they want us to return the result, well, I leave that to the reader.

.....

As for what gets dark, I thought that interesting. At first I'm like, hmm... Then I thought "the sky" then think "the light" (the light goes dimmer and dimmer). But I think the answer above makes most sense - everything gets darker.

posted by [symbioid](#) at **7:02 AM** on November 26, 2013

Well there was a time before time zones when people didn't know that the sun set at different times, and 'it' would have just meant 'the world'.

posted by [empath](#) at **7:08 AM** on November 26, 2013

Reading over these, the second one tastes different from the first. The first was looking for crypto people. The second one was looking for a certain *kind* of crypto person. A crypto person with a side speciality in majgickq (the more spurious consonants you spell it with, the better), to be precise.

Also when I saw the reflection/bottom of the pond answer I knew that if I was doing this puzzle and had gotten this far, I would be very sorry to not have a way to merely give [M.C. Escher's "Three Worlds"](#) as a reply.

posted by [egypturnash](#) at **9:00 AM** on November 26, 2013

It just seems like a bunch of MIT undergrads having fun, especially given that MIT servers were used to host information and the January 4th start date is around winter break. The posters in towns were probably put up by the group of students at home for the holidays. None of the puzzles are shockingly difficult, making a simple TCP server accessible thru a .onion is something a MIT undergrad would do in their spare time (and at the correct skill level for that age group), and the philosophy combined with logic screams "hyper-intelligent artistic spiritual computer science student".

It's awesome, and if one of the group is reading this: do you have a slightly older, single brother looking for a girlfriend? I'm kind of cute at times and really good at cooking. I also like snowboarding, making music, dogs, and old school video games.

posted by [semaphore](#) at **9:22 AM** on November 26, 2013 [[6 favorites](#)]

lolol ok ok what if the goal of Cicada 3301 were actually for some Crypto Ph.D. student to find a suitable wife, but none of the finalists were women

posted by [semaphore](#) at **9:34 AM** on November 26, 2013 [[6 favorites](#)]

The reflection of one is lying on the water?

The one who is standing sees the reflection. The one who is lying on their stomach is looking more directly down and sees through the water's surface to the stuff in the lake.

posted by [hattifattener](#) at **10:27 AM** on November 26, 2013

When this gets solved and we know the exact reason why this was done will some one memail me a link or something?

posted by [Our Ship Of The Imagination!](#) at **10:28 AM** on November 26, 2013 [[1 favorite](#)]

Hello. We are looking for highly intelligent individuals.

No. The design of your puzzle filters out most intelligent individuals from jump street.

What you are looking for is *programmers*.

posted by [Herodios](#) at **10:49 AM** on November 26, 2013 [[6 favorites](#)]

One says, "That's a lovely reflection in the water." The other says "I see no reflection, but it's a fascinating assortment of fish, plants and rocks within the water." Which one is lying?

I'm totally on board with the standing/lying-down response. That's obviously the right answer.

But.

The first statement is an opinion, not a fact, and therefore not something that could be lied about. A statement regarding his own belief could be a lie, like, "I think that reflection in the water is lovely," when in fact he finds it to be unpleasant. But loveliness itself is not a factual property, so the original statement cannot be a lie.

By the same logic, there is no factual way to determine whether the assortment of stuff in the water is fascinating or not, so that portion of the second person's statement cannot be a lie either. The only part that could be a lie is if he *does* see a reflection and still claims not to see one.

We don't have enough information to determine whether person #2 sees a reflection or not, but the original question implies that one of the two people must be lying. Since it can't be the first guy, it must be the second. This solution is significantly less fun than the wordplay of the real solution, but still seems valid to me.

I guess I don't get to marry the rich, secretive genius behind Cicada 3301. I imagine he's basically Christian Grey except instead of a room full of whips and chains he has a state-of-the-art server room with a huge wall full of monitors and some insanely-fast connection directly to the internet backbone.

posted by **vytae** at **10:53 AM** on November 26, 2013

"Two people are standing by a lake"

The first person is lying, the second person is standing.

"Two people are *standing* by a lake"

The one who is standing sees the reflection. The one who is lying on their stomach is looking more directly down and sees through the water's surface to the stuff in the lake.

"Two people are standing by a lake"

I'm totally on board with the standing/lying-down response. That's obviously the right answer.

"Two people are **standing** by a lake"

posted by **Herodios** at **11:21 AM** on November 26, 2013 [**8 favorites**]

We don't have enough information to determine whether person #2 sees a reflection or not

Sure we do. All visual perception is a reflection of light off of an object and then into your eyes. If you claim to see anything, you are seeing a reflection rather than 'directly' seeing the object - it's all shadows on the wall of Plato's cave. Ergo, to claim to see anything without seeing reflection is a lie, unless the speaker is omniscient and completely removed from the human experience, whereupon all statements made would likely operate simultaneously as truths and falsehoods and everything breaks down.

posted by **FatherDagon** at **12:02 PM** on November 26, 2013

Feh. The whole thing smacks of programmers who think they're smart because they've had a bit of undergrad crypto and read Gödel, Escher, Bach. In the **recruitment offer ymgve linked**, they sound like pretty standard crypto-anarchist types.

semaphore: *"It just seems like a bunch of MIT undergrads having fun"*

I'd expect **better from MIT students**.

posted by **Wemmick** at **12:13 PM** on November 26, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

lolol ok ok what if the goal of Cicada 3301 were actually for some Crypto Ph.D. student to find a suitable wife, but none of the finalists were women

But but but what if the goal were for a PhD candidate to find a suitable *husband* but none of the finalists were *men*?

posted by **incessant** at **2:56 PM** on November 26, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

Elementary Penguin: *"Speaking of FEZ, I had no idea that the **way you were supposed to figure out the Black Monolith code** had been cracked. That is super obscure"*

Last I'd heard, it wasn't really "the way you were supposed to figure it out" so much as "some guy worked hard to make the solution fit a bunch of arbitrary knowns," numerology style.

posted by **DoctorFedora** at **2:02 AM** on November 27, 2013 [**2 favorites**]

Last I'd heard, it wasn't really "the way you were supposed to figure it out" so much as "some guy worked hard to make the solution fit a bunch of arbitrary knowns," numerology style.

Yeah, looking at it more closely, the shadow doesn't look like it is actually the shadow. I guess we'll never know, unless Phil Fish decides to give away his secrets.

posted by **Elementary Penguin** at **2:37 AM** on November 27, 2013

Apparently it's supposed to be a "four-dimensional shadow," which I guess means, just... whatever he wants it to?

posted by **DoctorFedora** at **5:18 AM** on November 27, 2013 [**1 favorite**]

It's possible that the code to the monolith was something to be revealed or hinted at later.

posted by [JHarris](#) at **1:43 PM** on November 27, 2013

After sending my reply as instructed, there was no response.

Maybe it was just some MIT hackers having fun. But you never know, maybe it was someone looking for people who answered the "Do you believe that information wants to be free and everyone should have privacy" questions the opposite of the way you thought they wanted you to.

posted by [sfenders](#) at **5:40 PM** on November 27, 2013

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