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LIFE

Cicada 3301: The hunt continues in 2014

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It was just after midnight on January 6, 2014 when my Internet went crazy.

"Cicada!" the posts started flying in, filling up my chat room window. "They're back!"

Having written about Cicada 3301, the mysterious Internet-based puzzle involving cryptic messages and an obscure end-goal, I had spent the past two days practically glued to my computer screen, alongside hundreds of other Cicada hunters.

Cicada's new-found notoriety meant fake puzzles had steadily streamed in since early January. Regardless of how clever, all were eventually declared the work of "trolls" and cast-aside. As Jan. 5 came and went, a consensus started to emerge: Cicada wasn't returning. The mysterious hunt had been killed by widespread media coverage. 2013 was the last we'd see of 3301.

And then, a sign. A Twitter account associated with last year's puzzle suddenly posted an image after being inactive for almost a year.

"Hello. Epiphany is upon you. Your pilgrimage has begun. Enlightenment awaits," the image read. "Good luck."

Signed, 3301.

Using a stenographic tool called Outguess, Cicada's unique signature, along with a clue, were confirmed.

Cicada was back.

The hidden message led would-be solvers to the book, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose text was used to find a TOR web address featuring a collage of altered William Blake paintings.

Once again using Outguess, a 130-digit number was unearthed, as well as an encrypted message. The cicada community determined the semi-prime number needed to be factorized for decryption.

Although a relatively straightforward process, factorization was time-consuming. Work was distributed between as many as 87 computer cores (approximately 30 people), and took around eight hours. To be fair, it was way faster than it used to be — in 1994, a 129-digit semi prime was factored by 600 people in eight months.

Once factorized, the message was decrypted using two specific prime factors to reveal "cu343l33nqaekrnw.onion," another TOR address. This one had a steadily growing list of characters. Every few minutes, two more were added to the end. And so we waited.

And we waited.

For about 23 hours, we waited. Many clue hunters went back and scoured through previous messages, hoping to discover more information. Some tried to determine the pattern of the characters, testing methods to predict the next set. Until finally, it stopped. Total character length: 512. And then it disappeared from the site (we're still not certain what it's for), and it was replaced by this.

More than 360,000 characters long, this new string was eventually converted into three separate images that each contained hidden messages, along with two rows of scrambled letters and numbers:

IDGTK UMLOO ARWOE RTHIS UTETL HUTIA TSLLO

UIMNI TELNJ 7TFYV OIUAU SNOCO 5JI4M EODZZ

Let's slow things down for a second. This was a ton of information for clue hunters, and it all came in very quickly. Suddenly, the main chat room I was in was overwhelmed with ideas as around 300 people tried to contribute. Many of the 300 people had come to the chat room having heard about Cicada through the news and, in short, had no idea what they were doing.

Drowned in ideas and questions, puzzle solvers seemed to overthink what was in front of them. It took more than half a day to decipher the above lines, when it likely should have taken no more than a couple of hours. A relatively simple re-arrangement process involving columns eventually revealed:

GOOD WORK

ULTIMATE TRUTH IS THE ULTIMATE ILLUSION

JOIN US AT FV7LYUCMEOZZD5J4ONIO

The last "n" on "onion" was assumed to have been omitted, and hundreds of people converged on the website.

This is where it got a little weird. The first visitors were greeted with a blank page. Not to be thwarted, many clue-hunters tried various tools on the site to try to find hidden information. One managed to unearth a system status page that we're not sure was supposed to be discovered. For one, it contained IP addresses of all the visitors — very un-Cicada-like.

Shortly after the server status page was discovered, however, the content changed and led solvers back to previous puzzle images.

In the meantime, the content on the main page also changed. Every few minutes, two new characters were added. It was another growing string.

As of Friday afternoon, it hadn't stopped. And so we wait. We think about previous clues, we try to discover other hidden information, but for the most part we wait.

The hunt continues.

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