1. But there were complicating factors to Cicada. For one, the organisers were actively working against the participants. One "solver”, a female known only as Wind from Michigan, contributed to the quest on several messageboards before the community spotted she was deliberately disseminating false clues. Other interference was more pointed. One long, cautionary diatribe, left anonymously on the website Pastebin, claimed to be from an ex-Cicada member – a non-English military officer recruited to the organisation "by a superior”. Cicada, he said, "was a Left-Hand Path religion disguised as a progressive scientific organisation” – comprising of "military officers, diplomats, and academics **who** were dissatisfied with the direction of the world”. Their plan, the writer claimed, was to transform humanity into the Nietzschen Übermensch.
2. "This is a dangerous organisation,” he concluded, "their ways are nefarious.” With no other clues, it was also asssumed by many to be a recruitment drive by the CIA, MI6 or America’s National Security Agency **(**NSA**)**, **as** part of a search **for** highly talented cryptologists. It wouldn’t have been the first **time** such tactics had been used.
3. Back **in** 2010, **for** example, Air Force Cyber Command – the United States’ hacking defence force, based at Fort Meade **in** Maryland – secretly embedded a complex hexadecimal code **in** their new logo. Cybercom **head** Lt Gen Keith Alexander **then** challenged the world’s amateur analysts to crack it **(**it took them three hours**)**. And **in** September this year, GCHQ launched the "Can You Find It?” initiative – a series of cryptic codes designed to root out the best British cryptographers. As GCHQ’s head of resourcing Jane Jones said at the time, "It’s a puzzle but it’s also a serious **test** – the **jobs** on offer here are vital to protecting national security.”
4. GCHQ's 'Can You Find It?' puzzle
5. 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.
6. "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,” he says. "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.”
7. But that doesn’t rule out other organisations. "Computer and data security is more important than ever today,” says Dr Gillogly. The proliferation of wireless devices, mobile telephones, e-commerce websites like Amazon and chip-and-pin machines, means the demand for cryptologists has never been higher. (Something the UK government acknowledged last year when it announced it was setting up 11 academic "centres of excellence” in cyber security research.)
8. "One of the more important components of security systems is the efficacy of the cryptography being used,” says Dr Gillogly. "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].”
9. Eriksson himself agrees. As a regular speaker at Black Hat Briefings – the secretive computer security conferences where government agencies and corporations get advice from hackers – he knows certain organisations occasionally go "fishing” for new recruits like this. But to him the signs point to a recruitment drive by a hacker group like Anonymous.
10. "I can’t help but notice,” he says, "that the locations in question are all places with some of the most talented hackers and IT security researchers in the world.” Either way, their identity would prove irrelevant. When the QR codes left on the lamp posts were decoded, a hidden message pointed the solvers towards a TOR address. TOR, short for The Onion Router, is an obscure routing network that allows anonymous access to the "darknet” – the vast, murky portion of the internet that cannot be indexed by standard search engines. Estimated to be 5,000 times larger that the "surface" web, it’s in these recesses where you’ll find human-trafficking rings, black market drug markets and terrorist networks. And it’s here where the Cicada path ended.
11. After a designated number of solvers visited the address, the website shut down with a terse message: "We want the best, not the followers." The chosen few received personal emails – detailing what, none have said, although one solver heard they were now being asked to solve puzzles in private. Eriksson, however, was not among them. "It was my biggest anticlimax – when I was too late to register my email at the TOR hidden service," he says. "If my sleep-wake cycle had been different, I believe I would have been among the first." Regardless, a few weeks later, a new message from Cicada was posted on Reddit. It read: "Hello. We have now found the individuals we sought. Thus our month-long journey ends. For now." All too abruptly for thousands of intrigued solvers, it had gone quiet.
12. Except no. On January 4 this year, something new. A fresh image, with a new message in the same white text: "Hello again. Our search for intelligent individuals now continues." Analysis of the image would reveal another poem – this time from the book Liber Al Vel Legis, a religious doctrine by the English occultist and magician Aleister Crowley. From there, the solvers downloaded a 130Mb file containing thousands of prime numbers. And also an MP3 file: a song called The Instar Emergence by the artist 3301, which begins with the sound of – guess what – cicadas.
13. Analysis of that has since led to a Twitter account pumping out random numbers, which in turn produced a "gematria": an ancient Hebrew code table, but this time based on Anglo-Saxon runes. This pointed the solvers back into the darknet, where they found seven new physical locations, from Dallas to Moscow to Okinawa, and more clues. But that’s where, once again, the trail has gone cold. Another select group of "first solvers" have been accepted into a new "private" puzzle – this time, say reports, a kind of Myers-Briggs multiple-choice personality test.
14. But still, we are no closer to knowing the source, or fundamental purpose, of Cicada 3301. "That’s the beauty of it though," says Eriksson. "It is impossible to know for sure until you have solved it all." That is why for him, and thousands of other hooked enthusiasts, January 4 2014 is so important: that’s when the next set of riddles is due to begin again. "Maybe all will be revealed then," he grins. "But somehow, I doubt it."

17. Share
18. 6K
19. Facebook
20. 6K
21. Twitter
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24. Email
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48. Share
49. 6K
50. Facebook
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