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Cicada 3301

Cicada 3301 is a name given to an organization that on six occasions has posted a set of puzzles and alternate reality games to possibly recruit codebreakers/linguists from the public.[1] The first internet puzzle started on January 4, 2012, and ran for approximately one month. A second round began one year later on January 4, 2013, and a third round following the confirmation of a fresh clue posted on Twitter on January 4, 2014.[2][3] The stated intent was to recruit "intelligent individuals" by presenting a series of puzzles which were to be solved. No new puzzles were published on January 4, 2015. However, a new clue was posted on Twitter on January 5, 2016.[4][5] In April 2017 another PGP signed message was found: *Beware false paths. Always verify PGP signature from 7A35090F.*[6] That message explicitly denies the validity of any unsigned puzzle, as recently as April 2017.

Cicada 3301 logo

The puzzles focused heavily on data security, cryptography, and steganography.[1][7][8][9][10]

It has been called "the most elaborate and mysterious puzzle of the internet age"[11] and is listed as one of the "top 5 eeriest, unsolved mysteries of the internet" by *The Washington Post*,[12] and much speculation exists as to its function. Many have speculated that the puzzles are a recruitment tool for the NSA, CIA, MI6, a "Masonic conspiracy"[13] or a cyber mercenary group.[1][8] Others have claimed Cicada 3301 is an alternate reality game, but the fact that no company or individual has taken credit or tried to monetize it, combined with the fact that no known individuals that solved the puzzles have ever come forward, has led most to feel that it is not.[11]

Contents

Purpose

The stated purpose of the puzzles each year has been to recruit "highly intelligent individuals", though the ultimate purpose remains unknown.[1] Some[14] have claimed that Cicada 3301 is a secret society with the goal of improving cryptography, privacy and anonymity.[15] Others[16] have claimed that Cicada 3301 is a cult or religion. According to statements made to winners of the 2012 puzzle, 3301 typically uses non-puzzle-based recruiting methods, but created the Cicada puzzles because they were looking for potential members with cryptography and computer security skills.[14]

Resolution

The ultimate outcome of all three rounds of Cicada 3301 recruiting is still a mystery. The final known puzzles became both highly complex and individualized as the game unfolded. Anonymous individuals have claimed to have completed the process, but verification from the organization was never made and the individuals making the claim have not been forthcoming with information.[8][9][17] According to one person who completed the 2012 puzzle, those who solved the puzzles were asked questions about their support of information freedom, online privacy and freedom, and rejection of censorship. Those who answered satisfactorily at this stage were invited to a private forum, where they were instructed to devise and complete a project intended to further the ideals of the group.[14]

Types of clues

The Cicada 3301 clues have spanned many different communication media including internet, telephone, original music, bootable Linux CDs, digital images, physical paper signs, and pages of unpublished cryptic books. In addition to using many varying techniques to encrypt, encode, or hide data, these clues also have referenced a wide variety of books, poetry, artwork and music.[1] Each clue has been signed by the same GnuPG private key to confirm authenticity.[10][18]

Among others these reference works include:

Literary and artistic references:

- *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* a poem by William Gibson
- *The Ancient of Days*, a design by William Blake
- Anglo-Saxon Rune alphabet
- Johann Sebastian Bach
- Cuneiform
- M. C. Escher
- Francisco Goya
- *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, a book by Douglas Hofstadter
- Kōans
- *Liber AL vel Legis* by Aleister Crowley
- *The Lady of Shalott*, a painting by John William Waterhouse
- The Mabinogion, a series of pre-Christian Welsh manuscripts
- Mayan Numerology
- *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a book by William Blake
- *Nebuchadnezzar*, a design by William Blake
- *Newton*, a design by William Blake
- *Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson
- *Song of Liberty*, a poem by William Blake

Philosophical references:

- Collective consciousness and collective intelligence
- Ego death
- Esotericism
- Gematria
- Carl Jung
- Kabbalah and Hermetic Qabalah
- Søren Kierkegaard
- Friedrich Nietzsche
- Grigori Rasputin
- Jean-Paul Sartre
- Robert Anton Wilson
- Zen Buddhism

Cryptographic, mathematical, and technological references:

- Atbash cipher
- Book ciphers
- Caesar cipher
- Diffie–Hellman key exchange
- Factorization

    - General number field sieve

- Kurt Gödel and his incompleteness theorems
- GNU Privacy Guard (GnuPG or GPG)
- Francis Heylighen
- GNU/Linux
- Magic squares
- Number theory
- Prime numbers
- Pretty Good Privacy
- RSA Encryption Algorithm
- Self-reference
- Shamir's Secret Sharing Scheme
- Steganography in digital images, text, and network protocols
- Strange loops
- The Onion Router (Tor)
- Transposition ciphers
- Vigenère Cipher

Physical locations of clues

Throughout the testing, multiple clues have required participants to travel to various places to retrieve the next clue. These clue locations have included the following cities:

- Annapolis, Maryland, US
- Chino, California, US
- Columbus, Georgia, US
- Dallas, Texas, US
- Erskineville, Australia
- Fayetteville, Arkansas, US
- Flushing, New York, US
- Granada, Spain
- Greenville, Texas, US
- Haleiwa, Hawaii, US
- Little Rock, Arkansas, US
- Los Angeles, California, US
- Miami, Florida, US
- Moscow, Russia
- New Orleans, Louisiana, US
- Okinawa, Japan
- Paris, France
- Portland, Oregon, US
- Seattle, Washington, US
- Lincoln, Nebraska, US
- Seoul, South Korea
- Warsaw, Poland
- Mexico City, Mexico

Speculation that the Cicada 3301 organization is large and well-funded is supported by the existence of clues in a large number of locations, all quite distant from one another, appearing at the same time.[8][9]

Allegations against the group

Allegations of illegal activity

Authorities from the Los Andes Province of Chile claim that Cicada 3301 is a "hacker group" and engaged in illegal activities. Cicada 3301 responded to this claim by issuing a PGP-signed statement denying any involvement in illegal activity.[19][20]

In July 2015, a group calling themselves "3301" claimed to have hacked Planned Parenthood[21] however, the group appears to have no connection to Cicada 3301.[22] Cicada 3301 later issued a PGP-signed statement stating they "are not associated with this group in any way" and also stated that Cicada 3301 does not "condone their use of our name, number, or symbolism".[23] The hacker group later confirmed that they are not affiliated with Cicada 3301.[24]

Claims of being a cult

As the group has gained notoriety and public attention, many have asserted that the puzzles are an introduction to occult principles, and possibly even recruitment for a cult. Dr. Tim Dailey, a senior research fellow with the conservative Christian Family Research Council, analyzed the teachings of Cicada 3301, and stated, "The enigmatic Cicada 3301 appears to be drawing participants inexorably into the dark web of the occult a la Blavatsky and Crowley. At the heart of the enchantment is the counterfeit promise of ultimate meaning through self-divination."[16][25]

Dailey analyzed the puzzles and the Cicada 3301's book *Liber Primus* and summarized some of the groups' core beliefs:[16]

- There is no inherent meaning in anything, and all is "empty and meaningless"
- Within each person is an ideal state akin to Nietzsche's Übermensch
- The existence of an emergent god-like global brain made up of all living things and technology, as described by cyberneticist Francis Heylighen
- There is no need for salvation because there is nothing from which we must be saved
- There is no "real" reality, and what we perceive as reality may be a simulation
- Their use of the term "intelligence" rather than "person" throughout the *Liber Primus* seems to indicate belief, or at least concern for, sentient artificial intelligence
- Many of their writings and beliefs focus on ego death
- *Liber Primus* and other Cicadian texts adhere to an internal Qabalah system based around Cicada 3301's Gematria Primus

Others have claimed that the Cicada 3301 puzzles are a modern and technological equivalent to the enlightenment journey within Western esotericism and Mystery schools.[25]

In popular culture

The [United States Navy](#) released a cryptographic challenge based on the Cicada 3301 recruitment puzzles in 2014 calling it Project Architeuthis.[26][27]

The plot of "Nautilus", the [September 30, 2014 episode](#) of the TV show *Person of Interest*, featured a large-scale game very similar to the Cicada 3301 puzzles. Both feature a series of worldwide cryptographic puzzles, but as the title implies, these feature the image of a [nautilus](#) shell instead of a cicada logo.[28] *Person of Interest* creator [Jonathan Nolan](#) and producer [Greg Plageman](#) stated in an interview that Cicada 3301 was the inspiration for the episode: "Episode 2, I'm particularly fascinated by the subject underneath it. Look up Cicada 3301 on the internet. It's a very interesting concept out there that we then put into a larger story that connects to our show."[29] The game is eventually revealed to have been created by Samaritan, a malicious [artificial intelligence](#) that serves as the main antagonist of the show's fourth season, as a means of recruiting operatives.

Music

There is almost always music accompanying the Cicada video clues. None of these pieces are part of the standard repertoire and neither the composers nor performers are identified. Certain patterns have emerged that indicate that the music itself may be a clue and Cicada is attempting to establish a musical cryptogram in parallel with its other embedded information. TechGeek365 analyzed the structure of a number of the pieces and discovered that there are certain dyads (two notes sounding simultaneously) which, when corresponded with letters and numbers, reveal hidden messages.[30][31]

Artists [Rick Steff](#) and Roy Berry of the band [Lucero](#) included a Cicada 3301-inspired song on their side-project album *Superfluidity*. The video, directed by Charlie Fasano, featured artwork taken from the *Liber Primus* book by Cicada 3301.[32]

See also

- [11B-X-1371](#)
- [Cicada](#)
- [Mass collaboration](#)
- [Secret society](#)

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External links

- Cicada 3301 on Twitter