Friday, Dec. 6, 2024 / The truth about Y2K

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Auld Lang Wine (D) - APM>  
  
SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Twenty-five years ago, if you were alive, you or someone close to you was wondering what would happen when the clocks struck midnight on New Years’ Eve.

Would the power go out? Would planes crash? Would ATMs start spitting out money all over the world? But then …

SCORING OUT  
  
SEAN: … nothing happened.

PARTY BLOWERS ARE BLOWNNnnnnn…

SEAN: But what if something did?

SCORING BACK IN

KYLE MOONEY (Baby Yoda): I was 15 when Y2K happened. And for those of us who were alive during Y2K, it was, it was a letdown and nothing really happened. And I think I've always been sort of minorly obsessed with that. So one day the idea kind of struck me to make up a movie about, teenagers go to a party and Y2K actually happens.

SEAN: On *Today, Explained*, Kyle Mooney is gonna tell us about his new movie *Y2K*. And then we’re gonna hear why Y2K *didn’t* happen.

[THEME]

*CROWD: 3, 2, 1 … Today, Explained!*

SEAN: Sean Rameswaram, you might know me from *Today, Explained*. Kyle Mooney, you might know from his pitch perfect *Inside SoCal Quick Hits*:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_qG4JNzP_k)*> INSIDE SoCAL QUICK HIT “Love Is”: Alright, love is your boys. Without them you are weak. They give you strength and believe in you and are always down to let you be who you are – even if, even if sometimes you’re not down to drink and smoke. But let’s face it, you’re always gonna be down to drink and smoke.*

SEAN: Or from his flexing Baby Yoda on *Saturday Night Live*:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW5XJ7LHaWY)*> SNL’s WEEKEND UPDATE: Baby Groot, do me a favor: Keep my name out your little tree mouth before I snap you like a twig!*

SEAN: Or maybe you heard he made a movie called *Y2K* that opens in theaters today.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4f9gCTLhYs)*> Y2K TRAILER:*

*<power cuts out>*

*GUY: Y2K is real!*

*<tech glitchy sfx>*

SEAN: We asked Kyle what *he* was doing on New Year’s Eve 1999.

KYLE: I hung out with my friend Mark. We, we watched the MTV New Year's Eve special. So I would have, I guess, been enjoying Carson Daly riffing with Kathy Griffin.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-B7RvfT5-w)*> Carson Daly: Carson Daly with Kathy Griffin.*

*Kathy Griffin: Hello.*

*Carson Daly: I just talked to my folks in California, got to say happy new year.*

*Kathy Griffin: How's the traffic?*

*Carson Daly: Hi mom and dad.*

KYLE: I don't know that I was, like, particularly super nervous or frightened as to what could happen when midnight arrived.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-B7RvfT5-w)*> Carson Daly: It is officially the year 2000, if you can hear my voice the Y2K bug is certainly not around, and what a historical moment…*

KYLE: But my mom prepped and she, like, you know, got some goodies just in case, I guess, the world was destroyed in some way or another. I guess, I mean, in the moment, it just sort of came and went. I don't know what thought I gave to it until, like, I just started minorly obsessing over it. Like it would just hit me every once in a while. The story we were always interested in telling was, to a degree, a riff on teen culture of the era, specifically like, all of these movies were coming out that were geared towards us. It was *She's All That*…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lHGweYtpQKI)*> She's All That: Did he ask you to the prom?*

KYLE: *Can't Hardly Wait*, *American Pie*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.imdb.com/video/vi216120601/?ref_=tt_vi_i_4)*> Ten Things I Hate About You: Number one, no dating ‘til you graduate. Number two, no dating ‘til you graduate.*

KYLE: To a degree, I don't know that I thought in terms of like this is speaking to teenagedom as to, like, this is sort of like the culture that was, like, kind of being blasted to me, and I wanted to return to that.

SEAN: Of course, unlike all those movies you just named, this movie takes a fairly dark turn. As much as you're willing to share with people, what happens when the clocks strike 12 in *Y2K*, your movie?

KYLE: At midnight, the machines go crazy and start killing people, essentially.

SEAN: <laughs>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44bbTmYAXGU)*> Y2K trailer:*

*Oh shit, a tamagotchi just drilled through a chick’s head.*

*C’mon, we gotta go.*

KYLE: It's weird. I don't feel like I've ever made anything that has maybe been so violent, but I was really excited by just taking left turns and doing something that elicits reaction. Like, I really hope that if people see it, you know, there are some laughs, there are some tears, and there are some moments of like, oh my shit, that's fucking crazy.

SEAN: <laughs>

KYLE: Did I say, oh my shit?

SEAN: <laughs> You did.

KYLE: Oh my shit. That's actually not, I kind of, I don't hate that.

SEAN: <laughs> I think you should run with that.

KYLE: <laughs>

SEAN: You mentioned there are a lot of movies when we were teenagers that came out that were for and about teenagers. We've also got a long lineage of movies in which technology turns on us and terrorizes us. And Y2K, your movie is the latest in a long line. Why do we love to watch technology try and kill us? Did you think about that while you were making this movie?

KYLE: I mean, I think that fear is constantly present, you know, it's like Hal 9000 or something like that.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARJ8cAGm6JE)*> 2001: A Space Odyssey*

*DAVE: Open the pod bay doors, Hal.*

*HAL: I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that.*

KYLE: I feel like with the introduction of electronics and robotics, like, there's always been that thought that like, when is the point that these things are going to turn on us? And like, even in the course of working on this movie, we started, right, in 2019 and now it's 2024 that it's coming out, like, we've seen an evolution of AI and like it's seemingly become more threatening and more real than even it was when we were first started talking about this.

SEAN: A lot of the actors in your movie weren't even alive on New Year's Eve 1999. Did you have to have like, you know, Camp Y2K, where you kind of gave them the essentials of what life was like back then?

KYLE: We made playlists for them. We sent them lists of movies to watch. And, you know, any phrase or reference they didn't know, obviously, we'd fill them in. It was really on them to decide how much they wanted to invest in learning about the culture and the time. Like, I think the characters, like, even though they are these archetypes of the period and like some of them are very distinctly late 90s, early 2000s, there is a universal quality to them and I think that like even our young actors I think could relate. Like, I know a comp to this and I know the vulnerability of being this age.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05mq4iEZ5Q4)*> Y2K:*

*I say let's go to the party.*

*I don't know dude.*

*Listen, okay? In a few hours you have a built-in excuse to kiss the newly-single girl of your dreams!*

SEAN: And some of our older listeners might be listening to us, like, reminiscing about 25 years ago and be like, ‘Son, it wasn't that different.’

KYLE: Right.

SEAN: But it feels especially true because Y2K, beyond your movie even, is having a moment. I mean, there are like Y2K vintage clothing stores. Charli xcx, who had a huge year, has a song on her album called “Von Dutch”.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwZ1L_0QLjw)*> Charli xcx: Von Dutch, cult classic but I still pop…*

SEAN: Did the fact that, like, Y2K is back in so many ways – you know, kids using digital point-and-shoot cameras again – help you sell this movie to the studio that ultimately made it, A24?

KYLE: I think so. I mean, I can't say that I'm like the king of the zeitgeist by any means, you know what I mean?   
  
SEAN: <chortles>   
  
KYLE: I'm not like, unfortunately, I'm not incredibly aware of what's happening in the moment at times. But like, you kind of got a sense that Y2K as a fashion aesthetic was coming back. But it's grown in the time from, like, the conceptualization to now. And now I feel like now I'm just, like, lucky that we're getting it out sort of in time because I feel like we're probably at a moment where people will be sick of it. After this, you know what I mean? And we could be like a month or two away.

SCORING IN <Feel the Groove - APM>

SEAN: Yeah. And then we'll see what comes back next. Do you think we can learn anything from Y2K, from your experience making this movie?

KYLE: You know, Y2K was something that we were overprepared for. And like we said, nothing happened. And that's also not to say, I mean, I feel like every time I say that or anyone says that, there were people doing stuff, you know, there were people working on these computers and like making sure that we were ready. So like, there are these sort of unsung heroes that who knows what would have happened if they hadn't done the work that they did. But, you know, I think we've seen in our fairly recent culture and history that, like, there are moments that we were not prepared for and that then, like, kind of shifted our lives. And so there is something to always be thoughtful about, like, ‘Okay, we should maybe take this somewhat seriously and think about it and make sure we're all good if something bad were to happen.’ I think, I think let's not be super obsessive about it, but let's be smart about it.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Kyle Mooney’s new movie is *Y2K*. See it wherever you see your movies. Except at home. I don’t think you can watch it at home just yet.

When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna find out why the machines didn’t turn on us 25 years ago.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*BUMPER: Limp Bizkit - Nookie*

*FRED DURST: I won’t lie, that I can’t deny, I did it all for…  
 AMINA Al-SADI (supervising editor): Today, Explained*.

SEAN: Zachary Loeb teaches history at Purdue University. And he’s especially into the history of Y2K. You can find him on campus trying to convince his students that Y2K is still worth thinking about, 25 years later.

ZACHARY LOEB (history professor, Purdue): I think that it's important to continue thinking about Y2K, because at the core of Y2K is really a confrontation with how reliant we as a society and we as a world have become on computer technology.

SEAN: Hm.

ZACHARY: Far too often the dangers that we expose ourselves to, the risks that we expose ourselves to, they only become things that we really confront, they only become things that we really deal with, in these moments of crisis. And so Y2K is this moment of crisis that forces us to think about how reliant we had become on computer technology. And I think it would be a good thing for us to be thinking about and aware of these issues as they persist today without needing something going horribly wrong to make us pay attention to it.

SEAN: But the deadline probably helped.

ZACHARY: Oh of course, I mean, there's nothing like having a discrete deadline to which you can count down. That really, really drives the issue. It really builds it up.

SEAN: For all of our listeners who are too young to remember or who maybe just didn't care about the hysteria…

ZACHARY: <laughs>

SEAN: …in 1999, can you remind us when exactly it was that someone said, ‘Hey, you know, there might be a huge computer glitch on New Year's Eve, 1999’?

ZACHARY: So pretty much from the beginning of this problem. And it has its origins in the 1950s and 1960s. The computer programmers who are making the decision, which eventually is going to become the Y2K problem, they're aware that eventually this is going to become a problem.

SCORING IN <Nirvana - APM>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6BnVEKbj-8)*> KREX Grand Junction: Nobody really anticipated that we'd be worried about a 100 year span but people from 1900 are still alive…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYLkIcTguR0)*> Greg Hallmark, president, Y2K cybercenter.com: One of the most fateful cost-cutting measures was to deliberately leave out the first two digits of the year date.*

*<CLIP> KREX Grand Junction: The source of the year 2000 bug is this: older computer programs have a two-digit area to store the year - 85 or 97, for instance.*

ZACHARY: But it's always something that it's very far distant. It's down the road. Starting in the 1970s, you start to see people talking about this a little bit more specifically. The computer scientist Bob Bemer writes an article in 1971 talking about this future problem that it's going to represent.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sJuVsYU1OA)*> Bob Bemer: The worst part is the embedded chips. Those are the little things that run your coffee marker, open and close the security gates on a bank or a plant.*

ZACHARY: You can actually find the first coverage of this in the *New York Times* in 1988.

SEAN: Huh!

ZACHARY: 1993 is really the point at which the IT sector really starts waking up to this issue, really starts working on this issue, really starts talking about this much more internally. The point at which the government really starts paying attention to this is actually 1996.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?71245-1/global-computer-failures-2000)*> Rep. Thomas Davis: Without the conversion to the four-digit date as is needed for the year 2000 our entire government computer system could potentially fail. And as we know in today's world, computers throughout this nation and around the world are interrelated and interdependent.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?71245-1/global-computer-failures-2000)*> Rep. Steve Horn: The potential problems are widespread. The systems impacted by this software glitch range from personal computers to the computer systems which operate at the Department of Defense.*

ZACHARY: And by the time the public really starts to pay much more attention to this, the irony is, those working in I.T., those on the government side, are already pretty confident that the problem is, like, being handled. They are less concerned by the point that the public starts having its freak out to the extent that that happens.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: What was the extent to which people freaked out? Was there a panic?

ZACHARY: I'm not sure there really was panic. I think that there were lots of media outlets that were really, really eager to report on the end of the world because reporting on the end of the world is big and flashy and exciting. And in 1997, there's this cover story in Newsweek magazine that's like…

*<CLIP> PATRICK AKA THE VOICE OF GOD: “The Day the World Crashes.”*

ZACHARY: And it has like a computer monitor crashing through the magazine cover. And that's, like, big and exciting. And within a lot of that media coverage, once the public starts paying more attention, there's all of this effort to find the people who think the world is ending and to kind of elevate these people who are saying it's the end of days, it's the end of time, buy a shotgun and head for the hinterlands.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMrgtkk-Ldk)*> FOX43 News: It is making people buy water, buy generators. You know, they're stocking up. You know, you got this big problem coming, you know.*

*I know some people who moved to Alaska because of this.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QcspWAGWTE)*> WHAS11: I don't know that it's necessarily gonna be a computer problem. I think it's gonna be a social and people problem.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXzKlBVgAMY)*> Ronald Cash, Y2K activist: I think we're going to be setting ourselves back to about the 1800s… I don't want to sound like a, a, a wacko gun nut or something but you have to be able to hunt, you have to be able to protect your family.*

ZACHARY: Because, look, it's fun to imagine society collapsing in a way that it isn't fun to imagine a bunch of I.T. workers dutifully doing their jobs and repairing code. *60 Minutes* did a good long piece on Y2K.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C2860798#/embed/object)*> Steve Kroft, 60 Minutes: If you want to, there are plenty of things to worry about as we approach the end of the 20th century. Global warming, biological warfare, meteors from outer space. And now, Y2K.*

ZACHARY: And it's easy to look at that and be like, oh yeah, listen to these strange people who are preparing for the end of the world. And then forget that in the next clip, there was some government official being like, ‘no, we've we're taking care of this, don't worry.’ *The Simpsons*’ 1999 Halloween episode, their Treehouse of Horror, they had a segment called “Life's a Glitch” in which Homer Simpson was responsible for doing the Y2K maintenance at the Springfield nuclear power reactor. And he fails to do it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.twitch.tv/videos/2018007678)*> The Simpsons:*

*[siren goes off]*

*That’s Homer Simpson’s computer!*

*Oh god, it’s spreading!*

ZACHARY: The world kind of ends. And it's easy to remember that. But it's *The Simpsons*. It's satirical.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.twitch.tv/videos/2018007678)*> The Simpsons:*

*Lisa Simpson: Well, look at the wonders of the computer age now.*

*Homer Simpson: Wonders, Lisa? Or blunders?*

*Lisa Simpson: I think that was implied by what I said.*

*Homer Simpson: Implied, Lisa? Or implode?*

*Lisa Simpson: Mom, make him stop!*

ZACHARY: And luckily, the world of nuclear maintenance, the world of computer maintenance isn't filled with Homer Simpsons.

SEAN: <laughs> Sometimes it feels like the world is filled with Homer Simpsons.

ZACHARY: <laughs>

SEAN: But I think you're getting at an essential point that I really want to stress here, because our collective memory of Y2K is the ultimate nothing burger. But what you're suggesting here is that there are a lot of people working behind the scenes, unsung heroes, perhaps …

ZACHARY: Oh yeah.

SEAN: Who made it a nothing burger. Did things actually go wrong on New Year's Eve, 1999? Can we correct the record here?

ZACHARY: So I think that it's important to answer this question in two ways.

SCORING IN <Westside Geez (Full Mix) - APM>

ZACHARY: When we talk about what the expectations were for what was going to happen, it's really important to note that by the time you get to 1998 to 1999, most of the people in the IT sector, most of the people in the government who are working on this are saying that Y2K is going to be a bump in the road.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/fYINYS72atM)*> Sen. Robert Bennett: We do not at the moment expect that this will be, as the websites are calling it, TEOTWAWKI. That’s the acronym for “The end of the world as we know it.”*

ZACHARY: People around the Clinton administration liked to particularly use the phrase ‘Like a winter storm.’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?154408-1/international-year-2000-preparations)*> Costis Toregas, president, Public Technology: Prepare as you would for a heavy winter storm, with possible ramifications and possible complexities. I would have, certainly, some amount of water in my basement. I would have some food in my basement. Flashlights…*

ZACHARY: Now, in terms of what actually happened when 1999 became 2000, well, I imagine some people drank champagne, some people maybe kissed somebody. I imagine that as this recent film makes clear, there were some teenagers who were getting involved in hijinx, but the computers did not come crashing down. The lights did not fail. But that doesn't mean that nothing happened. And if you look at, for example, the Crisis Averted report, which is the Senate Special Committee on the Year 2000 Problem’s final report that they put out in the early months of the year 2000, there are pages and pages and pages of things that went wrong that they're documenting: issues with satellites, issues at nuclear power plants, lots and lots of issues…

SEAN: Huh!

ZACHARY: …that were Y2K related that did, in fact, happen.

SCORING OUT

ZACHARY: So one of the things that Y2K really drove home was the extent to which by the end of the 20th century, so much of daily life had become dependent on computer systems, computer related infrastructure. Y2K wasn't just about people's new desktop computers. Y2K was about the fact that the electric grid was relying on computers, that keeping the grocery stores stocked properly was also reliant on computers. And just as it's important for us to make sure that we are taking care of and maintaining our more traditional infrastructure, bridges, tunnels, stuff like that. As computing becomes infrastructural, we also need to make sure that we are maintaining and properly taking care of it.

SEAN: But the advantage of Y2K was, as we discussed at the top, the deadline, right? We are better at working together as a planet…

ZACHARY: <laughs>

SEAN: …when there's an asteroid heading towards Earth. And when there's no asteroid, we hate each other. We fight with each other. We're petty as hell. How do we address our biggest problems?   
  
ZACHARY: <laughs>   
  
SEAN: Be they technology, be they climate change, be they the asteroid that's just out there that *might* hit Earth, but it's not on a direct collision course yet, without the looming threat?

ZACHARY: Yeah. If I knew the answer to this, that would be wonderful. I would sleep much better at night. I do think that unfortunately, sometimes it does take a looming threat with a hard deadline to push people to work together on something. And Y2K certainly did involve lots and lots of people working very hard together. The level of bipartisanship in the US government at the same time that President Clinton is being impeached, mind you, the bipartisanship around working on Y2K is really, really impressive in Congress. The work that companies are doing, sharing best practices and information is very important, and the work that is being done internationally between countries sharing expertise is also really, really important.

SCORING IN <Take Me Back To The 90s - APM>

ZACHARY: I think that one of the things that Y2K can also teach us is that sometimes when we see that problem coming and the experts are like, hey, we've got this problem coming, we can listen to the experts and we can marshal the resources that they are saying are necessary, and perhaps we can solve the problem before it becomes a catastrophe. Now, the result of doing that is that it often means that then 20 or 24 or almost exactly 25 years later, people wind up looking back at it and laughing and thinking it was funny. And they don't recognize all of the real serious work that went into mobilizing to fix the problem. But we are able to look back and laugh because luckily a lot of people at the time knew that this wasn't a joke.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Zachary Loeb, Purdue University. West Lafayette, Indiana. He’s working on a book about Y2K.

Avishay Artsy made our show today. He was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Anouck Dussaud and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Rob Byers.

The rest of the dream team: Victoria Chamberlin, Haleema Shah, Amanda Lewellyn, Hady Mawajdeh, Miles Bryan, Andrea Kristinsdottir, Peter Balonon-Rosen, and our power forward Noel King.

Laura Bullard is our senior researcher. Matthew Collette is a supervising editor. Miranda Kennedy is our executive producer. And we use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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KYLE: Oh my shit!

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]