

Millennium, schmillennium. A relaxed Michael Hewitt can't see what **all the fuss** is about.

Doom with a view



My next-door neighbour recently asked me whether she should start stocking up on tinned luncheon meat. I've received several junk emails exhorting me to cash all my savings and buy gold. And, last week, at Speakers' Corner, I was accosted by the resident 'Repent! The end is nigh!' man. Except this time, he seemed a lot more confident about it.

The usual story: Millennial Fever strikes. I wonder if, in 999 AD, there was general panic as to whether or not, come midnight on December 31st, the beads would fall off everyone's abacuses. Quite possibly. These transitional dates seem to bring out people's worst fears. Why is it so with computers, though? What everyone tends to overlook is that, even without the benefit of a Millennium Bug, they have been screwing up, often disastrously, since they were invented. Yet civilisation has endured.

In the 1970s, 'computer error' overtook 'your cheque is in the post' as *the* most common excuse for non-payment of bills and subsequent corporate bankruptcy. And who can forget the Stock Market crash of '87, initiated largely by computers going into automatic panic-sell mode?

There's always been a ready-market for Doom Merchants, of course. In the 'Protect and Survive' 80s, for instance, estate agents were selling caves in Wales where you could stock up with provisions and shelter from nuclear Armageddon. They didn't sell that many, as I recall. Possibly because, if you had to choose between being incinerated in a fraction of a second in central London or spending the rest of your life eating cold beans somewhere off Anglesey, annihilation seemed the more attractive option. Now those same Doom Merchants are at it again, thanks to the Bug.

Forget computers, they say; anything with a microchip in it — microwaves, your fridge, your central heating system, your pacemaker — is at risk. Come January 1, 2000, they'll all think it's January 1, 1900.

So what? I say. With the exception of VCRs, these things aren't programmed to recognise years, anyway. This is no doubt to stop some idiot putting a supermarket lasagne into his microwave and zapping it on full-power for a decade. (Not that, in my experience, it would make that much difference to the average supermarket lasagne.) It therefore doesn't matter to a typical piece of consumer

electronics equipment whether it thinks it's operating in the late Victorian era or the late Elizabethan (II).

OK, say the Doom Merchants, but what about the chips in nuclear missiles?

If they aren't already 2000 compliant, they'll probably react the same way as those in my microwave and fridge and ignore the year. But even if they don't and they do actually think it's 1900, we needn't worry unduly. In 1900, America had just finished fighting Spain over Cuba, so I'd imagine the US missiles would try to target the non-existent Spanish fleet out in the mid-Atlantic. The Russians, on the other hand, were then engaged in territorial squabbles with the Japanese over ownership of Siberia. So their missiles will no doubt be targeting some patch of frozen tundra in the middle of nowhere. Which, come January 1, could be something of a bummer if you're living on, say, Ascension Island or in darkest Khabarovsk. Otherwise, no-one else will notice.

Elsewhere, banks and building societies have known about the problem since at least 1975 thanks to 25-year mortgages, so are on top of it. Supermarkets for at least five years because of sell-by dates on tinned food. The

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manager of the National Grid recently announced that all his supply systems were 2000 compliant. And you'll no doubt have read that the heads of the major airlines have been ordered to be airborne on January 1st. That should concentrate minds perfectly.

So no worries. Of course, I could be quite wrong — it's a regular occurrence. But there's an easy way to find out in advance. This is the May edition of PCW, yet you're reading it in March. This means that the computer systems at VNU House must be set to at least two months ahead. So if anything untoward is going to happen courtesy of this Millennium Bug, it's going to happen to them first. Therefore if, on November 1st, you hear that Broadwick Street has exploded, you can expect the worst.

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