

CONSULTANT: Jonathan Romm
AGE: 36
RESIDENCE: White Cross, NC
OCCUPATION: Not specified
INTERVIEW DATE: August 6, 2016, approx. 9:30 am
LOCATION: Carrboro Farmers Market, Carrboro, NC

Jonathan approached my table while holding his two-year-old son, Daniel. I briefly describe the project and he agrees to an interview. We begin with the standard audio introduction (name, age, residence).

So you've already been privy to the topic somewhat. Take me back to New Year's Eve 1999; it's going into the year 2000. On a personal level, paint the picture for us. Where were you, what were you doing?

Personal level, so I was, let's see, a sophomore in college. And there was...we had Ethernet. We didn't have wireless. We did have cell ph -- some of my friends did have cell phones with the Internet on it, and computing capabilities. I remember that was Treo was the version of phones that were popular then. I was at a New Year's party. Prince was playing...

Of course.

Of course, yeah. It was everywhere I'm sure, that night. Lots of royalties.

Yeah, what foresight that man had, right?

[laughs] And there was...we were at a house party. And I remember there was a large contingency, including myself, who were running back to our dorms prior to the ball dropping to make sure that our computers worked. There was a frenzy...I know the question is what we were doing that day --

Oh, no, it's whatever comes to mind.

Yeah, there was a frenzy, kind of the week leading up to that, with Y2K, where we were all of us frantically saving to the three and a half inch hard floppies, if you remember those. All of our school work, Excel spreadsheets, papers that we were writing, and even some people were trying to go back to some of their documents from high school. A little bit of, not pandemonium...and some nostalgia. I remember some nostalgia. I was doing this as well, saving some of my documents from my computer which I had from high school, going back and looking at the poorly written essays that I had in English classes and whatnot.

Worth saving those.

Yeah. I mean, I did it. I put my name on it. So jumping forward to the New Year's Eve. We went a bunch of us, not dorky types, but we ran back to our dorms to turn on the computers to make sure that they still worked at 12:01 or 12:02, you know, after the ball dropped. And everything seemed to be working fine. And I had a friend, I think it was John's computer, that coincidentally had a bug. I mean, there were maybe, let's say there were 10 of us that went back, all of our computers were working fine, except for John's, which the next day we found out was due to an unrelated bug. But there was this, "It's here," mentally ---

Wow.

-- that quickly caught fire throughout...in dorms, word spreads like that. So he took his computer maybe to Best Buy or the campus technology people, and they fixed it for him the next day. But there was a slight moment of panic, where we were back to basics, you know. We gonna play with sticks and rocks...

You ran outside to see if planes were falling --

-- Yeah, exactly. And it was kind of like, "Cool, they did predict it."

Interesting.

The naysayers were correct. And all of the folks with the FBI and CIA who said, "No, Y2K won't be an issue," they were wrong. And all of the kind of undercurrent of "We just don't know, and it could break all the systems, and da-da-da-dah." So we had kind of an interesting 24 hours, especially for John.

Now, this is New Year's, which is typically Christmas break, but you were on campus?

We were on cam--. So there was a group of us who were RA's. And a group of us who lived...so I went to school at Marquette University. I was from Milwaukee, which is right down the road. We went back to campus, because who wants to be at home for New Years? And so there was a group of us who were back on campus, and because we were RA's, we had keys to the dorms, we could go in.

Interesting. And you remember the Prince song playing repeatedly, on a loop.

Absolutely. Absolutely. I want to say it was even playing throughout the quad, but that may be me wanting to remember something that wasn't there.

So it's interesting that we bring up the Prince song. He wrote that in what, 1983, or something. So the mindset there is, "We're gonna party like it's 1999." That it was going to be such a big deal, right? Do you feel like it was that way?

Well, so remember I was a young college student. And probably everything was a party at that point in time.

[laughs] **Right.**

And I was working, so we had a little bit of money to play with, and all that new exposure to kegs, and whatnot. So it was a party. And this was probably like one of the pinnacles. It was a smaller party, because, like you said, everyone was out. But there was a group of us who were either from the area, or were RA's or whatever. So that was a fun time.

Did it feel important to you? It's hard to say with hindsight, but –

I remember, I distinctly remember coming home, maybe for Thanksgiving, in 1999. This is when all of the Y2K stuff was starting to take place, or it was being brought to my attention. And talking to my parents, who lived through the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Christa McAuliffe, those moments in time where you remember where you are. And I remember thinking, "Is this going to be my generation's 'I remember where I was when'?" And it wasn't, because our generation's is 9-11.

But you didn't know that at the time.

But we didn't know that at the time, and then it was...maybe there was a little bit of a letdown, that the system didn't break, you know? The status quo continued, as far as we could tell.

You just actually cherry picked my research question.

Ha!

That's one of them. Because I had the same thought going into it. I was 23 at the time, and I remember vividly thinking, like, "Is this going to be something that I remember where I was and what I was doing?" And just flippantly discussing it with people, it's funny: a lot of people don't remember it at all.

That will be one of those...you talked hindsight, now let's talk foresight. I think with – and I have a two-and-a-half-year-old son in my arms right now, Daniel – I have a feeling when he has kids and they're wearing their version of Google Glass or whatever the technology is, and we're sitting around at the beach, and I'm old and grizzled, 40 years from now, and I'll pull up a chair, and he pull up a chair next to me, and I'll start that conversation around technology, saying, "You know when I was little, I remember when..." And to the best of my ability, explain Y2K and maybe some binary code behind it, the zeroes and the ones and what

they were. How the line was supposed to end at 51 or 53, and there wasn't going to be room for that extra number, or however it was supposed to work. And they will roll their eyes at me. I'll remember it. But it won't be 9-11.

Do you think that time period was when everything really took off exponentially, in terms of technology?

I think it was the precursor.

The precursor, okay.

The foundations were being laid. Let's call it the "foothills" of it. Wireless wasn't there. Technology, as we know it today with wireless and GPS tracking systems [*Jonathan looks down at his son*] He will be the most surveilled generation in the world to date. That wasn't...you could see the cameras then. Now you can't see them. You could plug in the Ethernet connection to get your wireless connection. Now, you don't plug it in. We're very, very hands-free, and almost sight-free, if you will, if you know what I mean. And so I don't know when that leap took place. We were close then, but not quite there.

We hadn't gone wireless yet.

We hadn't gone wireless. We had the AOL dial-up modems, in the early 90s, late 80s, and so it's kind of like these foothills. And then there was a jump at some point, where smart phones became smart phones, and it wasn't just this bulky phone, where you could text and call, and also a little bit surf the web. I guess when responsive web design came around, and your phone, we moved...Remember the PDAs that we had?

Yeah, where you could write; the Palm Pilots.

Right, with the little stylus. So you had that in one pocket, professionals had that in one pocket, and your flip phone in the other. Or maybe you had your Treo that did have Internet, you could kind of, sort of use...

And if you wanted to take a picture, you had to whip out a separate digital camera...

Right. You had that somewhere else, in your third pocket.

Not digital even, back then.

Right.

Most people still used traditional film.

Yeah, you took it in and waited a week, and realized that you had 24 really bad pictures.

There's a blast from the past. Do you remember having film developed?

Oh, yeah. I was a darkroom rat, and so I remember developing my own film. And thinking about that now...actually, the waste that was involved, with all the chemicals. And now it's so much more efficient.

You had to put more thought into your pictures back then, because you didn't want to waste a negative.

Right. I mean, it was not one-and-done, but 24, 36, and done. And then you waited. And now it's like...

Are you nostalgic for that a bit? That waiting?

Oh, yeah. So as much as I say the...I'll give you a long-winded answer. I miss the darkroom. I don't miss the inefficiencies that were there. I miss the smells, I miss, like, it was you versus your negative and the chemicals, and trying to find something beautiful. And you had to concentrate on that roll of 24, 36, to find something that really meant something to you. That you were going spend time putting in the developer, putting in the fixer, and then going back and doing it again because the contrast wasn't quite right and you needed to adjust. And that was...no screens were in front of you. You had Led Zeppelin, you were probably smoking a little bit of grass in the darkroom, maybe two of you.

Now I'm starting to understand the nostalgia.

Yeah, yeah. And now, if I wanted to a version of that...if I was in school now, it would be either everyone would have their own MacBook Pro in one room, or you would all be in your individual rooms, cut off from everyone else, with headphones on or something along those lines. And the luxury of choices that you have to manipulate photos, and pick and choose from the 3000 that you took an hour beforehand, by holding down the button and getting just the perfect frame. Whereas before, like you mentioned, you had to wait. You had to pick and choose...

You had to know what you were doing.

Yeah! You had to know what you were doing, or at least figure it out quickly.

Jonathan's son is getting restless, so I ask one last question.

Last question real quick. It's good to ask you this, since you do have your son with you. What is he going to be talking about in 2100?

He's going to...Ha, I just had a conversation two weeks ago with a colleague. I think when we're sitting around the fireplace on Thanksgiving, 2037, he's going to be one of the few people in his class – because he will have been of driving age, theoretically, five years prior to that point in time – on why we had so many accidents with our cars, because we were all individually driving them and they weren't assisted or fully driven by a computer system that's in place. It will look -- our current driving system -- will look archaic to him. *He* is partially growing up on my wife's family's farm and will be driving tractors and other things that won't, that technology will probably lag just a little bit. So we think that he'll be one of the handful of suburban kids that will actually have fully driven, without assistance, a vehicle, be it a tractor or a farm truck.

The last generation.

Yeah. Yeah.

I had a conversation – we were on the road last week, and I was with my kids in the car – and it occurred to me while I was filling the car up with gas, and I said, “That’s going to be one of their early childhood memories.” Like [*old man voice*], “Do you remember when there were *gas stations*?”

“What does gas smell like?”

Yeah.

“I can’t remember.”

“What was gas?” Or even car ownership, I mean, because once it’s all automated, there’s the question of, “Do you need to own a car?”

Right. Do we have some sort of a public system in place? Or does a private entity take it over? Where, you know, it can look at efficiencies. And also, we had freedom back then, because we could get in the car, put the keys in the ignition. Whereas now, it's all defined routes, and you slide your card or your thumbprint, or maybe even a retinal scanner. Who knows how it all takes place?

Is Daniel growing up online? In terms of, are pictures of him on Facebook and all that?

Yes. Not...we try and curtail that as much as we can.

Okay, that’s interesting.

Milestones, like three months, a year, and if there's a cute picture. But he doesn't have a Facebook account, unlike some of his friends who are in playschool.

You gotta be kidding me.

Oh yeah. That's a thing, because once they become of age, their parents are going to turn their Facebook account over to them. And so they'll have this timeline of the parental comments and photos that the kid can continue through. It's like a gift of some sort. Very strange.

Brave new world.

I guess.

I thank Jonathan for his time and end the interview.