

Y2k problem 3470

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If you haven't heard of the year 2000 problem (also known as Y2K or the millennium bug), you soon will. To save space, many computer programs and chips

use two digits to designate the year. On 1 January 2000, the year date will be "00", causing some computers to set dates back to 1900, and others to shut down or enter an emergency state. No one really knows for sure what impact the

millennium bug will have, but that hasn't stopped people from speculating on

the potential for disaster. Scenarios range from the bizarre (telephone calls made over New Year's Eve 1999 being billed as lasting a hundred years) to the

horrifying (nuclear-power plants exploding and planes falling out of the sky).

In Christian theology, the millennium is the 1,000-year period in which Christ will return and set up his kingdom on earth. Although expectations of the Second

Coming in the year 1000 were not fulfilled, a number of religious sects have continued to predict it. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, saw the First World War as a sign that Christ would soon be with us, and they stated that

“ millions now living will never die”. Whether motivated by religious or secular concerns, many people believe that the coming of the millennium will change our world for better or worse. The rise of the Internet has provided a new medium for the spread of such beliefs, especially those of an apocalyptic nature. The Net is filled with sites warning that Y2K will mean “ the end of the world as we know it” (shortened to TEOTWAWKI). Some of the more wild-eyed radicals believe that Y2K is a diabolical invention of the American government.

This summer, anti-government militias held a “ Preparedness Expo”, where they sold survival gear and warned that the millennium bug could be a way for the government to reduce personal freedom. That being the case, the safest place to be, the survivalists say, is in a cabin in the woods, complete with dehydrated food, bottled water, a petrol-powered generator and a wood stove. Others,

perhaps more plausibly, feel that the year 2000 problem has been greatly exaggerated by computer-industry consultants who want to make a lot of money

fixing it. In Britain, for example, Computing magazine reported that consultants

are charging widely varying rates for government-sponsored training programmes

aimed at helping small businesses. Identical courses can cost anything from $\pounds 130$ to $\pounds 500$ a day and run from the one to ten days. The cost of fixing the problem in the US and Europe alone could be over \$850 billion. Certainly, there

is no shortage of work for computer programmers and other specialists in information technology. Because US universities and technical schools are not

producing enough computer-science graduates to deal with the problem, the number

of qualified foreign experts who have been given visas has increased

dramatically. Large companies are bringing in programmers from countries like

India, China and Russia. Russian programmers, especially, have an advantage in

the new market, because they are skilled in older programming languages such as

FORTRAN and COBOL; which are most likely to cause problems in the new millennium. COBOL programmers, many of whom retired years ago rather than learn

new programming languages, could suddenly find their skills in demand and companies willing to pay them enormous salaries. With the dead line now only a

year away, reactions to the Y2K problem vary from panic to denial. There are those who, like astronomer Clifford Stoll, author of the book "Silicon Snake Oil", believe Y2K can be fixed in a long weekend. The panic side seems to be getting more publicity, perhaps because alarmism is more attractive than reason.

The Global Millennium Foundation's Internet site, for example, warns of likely shortages of food and water and suggests that concerned parents may want to

avoid conceiving a child in 1999 for fear of being unable to feed it. Perhaps

the biggest name in year 2000 awareness is Canadian Peter de Jager, who was one

of the first to take the problem seriously. In a 1993 article called "Doomsday

2000" for The Computer World magazine, de Jager warned that "our information

systems are based on a faulty standard that will cost the worldwide computer

community billions of dollars in programming effort. We and our computers were

supposed to make life easier; this was our promise. What we have delivered is a

catastrophe." In 1996, de Jager, who is a special adviser on Y2K to several

governments, appeared before the US House of Representatives to discuss the

problem. In his presentation, de Jager described computer programmers as "the

most optimistic people in the world". Despite the fact that the computer

industry in general is known for late delivery of software, de Jager said, they

are still convinced that they can fix the bug on time. He warns that companies

that did not make their businesses Y2K-compliant by 31 December 1998 are already

too late. It could affect electric power, phone service, air travel and major governmental service. In Britain, the government is trying to reassure the public and provide information on how hospitals, emergency services, local authorities, financial and transport bodies are dealing with the problem. It is difficult balancing act between openness and the risk that people will panic.

bug: is commonly used to mean a small insect. But it can also refer informally

to a virus or an illness caused by a virus. In the article, " bug" is used to described a malfunction or defect. Doomsday: is the last day of the world. In Christian belief, it is the day of Last Judgement(Jungster Tag). In a figurative sense, the word has come to mean a time of great crisis or danger.