



## The birth of a new religion — are you Y2K-proof?

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**T**here was a time — many years ago — when milestones as trivial as the changing of a date were considered entirely unimportant to all bar a select group of learned people who no doubt would wish to debate the philosophical or spiritual aspects of the passing of time. And while raging debates may have ensued amongst the enlightened classes, the general population concerned it-

self with thoughts of impending doom caused by any likely cataclysmic event, such as a comet crashing to earth, or a volcano erupting, or through large sea creatures coming ashore to swallow up all living things. Many of these simple beliefs led to the development of complex religious sects and societies, some of which survive today. The Y2K religion may not remain with us long enough or have enough proponents to be accounted for in the next Australian census, but judging by the fervour exhibited by the more-vocal doomsayers, life will indeed be tumultuous for those whose lives are governed by computers.

Not me, you say? I doubt if there is a single person in Australia (outer suburbs of Uluru excepted) who will *not* be affected in some way by the change in the date from 1999 to 2000. It is a portent of things to come that modern society cannot function properly without computers — and computers that work properly. During the past fifty years, people have become increasingly dependent — directly, or indirectly through government and business — on computer technology. 'Embedded systems', which are literally any electrical systems with computer chips inside, can be found everywhere from your car to your video cassette recorder to your toaster (perhaps not *all* toasters). They are also used to run giant systems such as airport navigation, lifts, traffic signals, telephone systems, bank vaults, and ATM machines. Consequently, many large corporations and government departments are working on solutions to the Year 2000 problem. Yet this problem demands the at-

### But I'm already up to my neck in alligators...

**I**n all of this I am assuming that the reader comprehends the nature of the Y2K problem. Here is an example to illustrate the dimensions of it all: On 31 December 1999 my mortgage calculations tell me that I will owe interest on a debt that began on 31 October 1992 (in mathematical terms,  $99 - 92 = 7$ , thus around 7 years of interest plus payments). On 31 October 2000, if my bank has not resolved the Y2K problem, interest and other payments due will be calculated on the number of years the debt has been serviced, which would result in a negative number ( $00 - 92 = -92$ ). This could prove beneficial!

To place the problem in a context more at home with the average reader: in your library loans system, how would the software cope with calculating overdue payments? Would it perhaps calculate that the library owes the borrower money — or that the item is borrowed at

all? And what about cataloguing records? Would a search made in the Year 2000 of all acquisitions made in the past three years show entries made prior to 1/1/2000? And so it goes on...

Don't for one minute believe that the programmers will get it right, either. If computer systems users fail to organise for a solution now, they will suffer more than a hangover on New Year's Day, 2000.

And don't assume, unlike many lawyers, that you can sue your way out of trouble — I predict that many large computer and computer-related companies will go bankrupt in the Year 2000. You may discover that your chances of recovering any losses caused by the problem will be thwarted by solvency issues. On the other hand, life may become a whole lot simpler without traffic lights, bank vaults, ATM machines, life insurance, telephones...

## I can probably afford to be without our organisation's 'Accounts Receivable' for a year or two...

**Y**ou can easily determine if your IBM compatible computer suffers the Year 2000 flaw. Restart your computer without being connected to any network (which often provides the date and time signal from a central server).

From a DOS prompt perform the following test; Set the date on your personal computer to 31 December 1999. Set the time to 23:58 (11:58pm) and then shut down the computer. Wait at least three minutes and then turn the PC back on. Check the date and time. It should be a minute or two past midnight, on the morning of Saturday, 1 January 2000, or 01-01-00. If it's not (it is usually 01-04-1980), the machine exhibits symptoms of the Y2K bug.

One possible solution for most AT-class (286 to Pentium IBM clones) PCs running DOS or Windows (not including Windows NT) has been developed. A shareware program called YEAR2000.EXE is put into the autoexec.bat file which corrects the date problem. The YEAR2000.EXE can be downloaded from <http://www.RightTime.com>. While you are in the mood, try running various software applications with the date set to 9 September 1999. This is one bug that many are unaware of: programmers often used the date code 9/9/99 to test and debug their software — you may discover that strange things begin to happen when you enter this date. And, as a trivial aside, no-one at Microsoft seriously contemplating anyone being silly enough to be using Windows 3.1 at the turn of the century, either — for good reason... [and don't forget to test 29 February 2000 (yes, it exists!)]

If you are sitting in front of a Macintosh, then sit back and relax in the knowledge that your computer will survive without a single date-related hiccup until 6:28:15am on 6 February 2040. Luckily, a fix is on the way to see you through to the Year 2630. Of course, it is highly unlikely that your Macintosh will survive the next 632 years without an upgrade or two that should extend it further. ■

tention of *all* businesses and organisations — large or small. Solutions will not arrive by magic, and we cannot expect that we can solve the problem after the event (though the fact that 1 January 2000 falls on a Saturday is a small bonus).

Conspiracy theorists will no doubt be happy to believe that a small network of underemployed programmers who once developed big computer systems back in the 60s and 70s are now boosting their employment value by demonstrating that their systems are about to fall over and are in need of specialist programming to adequately cope. Statistics have been drawn up to show that to rewrite all of the code in software that is considered faulty would take 500 000 pro-

grammers ten years to complete — and since there are not enough programmers to do the work, it will take the entire worldwide programming pool of employment 120 years to get it right. What a shame that all of us will not live to see a time when computers will prove to be 'reliable'. In fact, one commentator went so far as to report the following:

'Experts tell us that if it [the millennium bug] is not fixed, when the Year 2000 arrives, our telephone system will be flaky, our financial records will be inaccurate, our government will be paralysed and airline flights will be cancelled without warning. In other words, things will be pretty much the same as they are now...' ■

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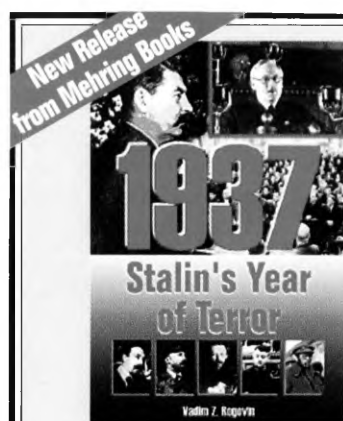
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