

The end of civilisation?



John Shipp

ALIA president

Many people are visibly affected by the full moon. Their behaviour becomes erratic and they act out of character. The end of a decade seems to have similar effects and the approach of a new millennium seems to be affecting even best-balanced minds.

For some, the next millennium holds promise of a new beginning while for others, it looms as a time of destruction in retribution for past sins. How appropriate then that the computer industry should contribute to the general unease which war, pestilence, personal guilt and other calamities visit upon us.

In even the most unworldly society, conversations turn eventually to 'Year 2000 problem', the 'millennium bug' or 'Y2K'. Even people who think Java is an island in Indonesia have opinions on the intricacies of this new plague.

What cleverness the computer industry has exhibited by creating, and then continuing to use, code which is unable to cope with double zeros in date fields! Without intending to do so, the industry has developed a completely new stream of employment and income. Just when equipment prices and software costs were beginning to become reasonable, along comes a compelling reason for us all to re-invest.

This investment is not restricted to equipment and software. We now have a new breed of consultant — the millennium buster. There are various sub-species and in an economic climate that exalts consultants, they all appear to be fully employed. Some specialise in diagnosing the extent of exposure to the millennium bug, others have remedies, while, best of all, are those who counsel staff on dealing with the pestilence.

It is all very reminiscent of the medical profession. A general practitioner to identifies that a problem exists and referrals the patient to a specialist who conducts a large number of tests. Often these tests necessitate further advice or assistance from an associate of the specialist, often in a private clinic in which they both have equity. Should the problem be chronic, undetectable or imaginary, then the services of a psychiatrist or psychologist are recommended.

Just like the health industry, there are providers who offer the full range of services. Quick to take up the scent of profit, the large accounting companies can offer services which rival the private hospital industry. Help is just a telephone call away. All you need is money.

If you cannot afford the multinational approach, your friendly consultant may well be a former employee made redundant by downsizing. In a time of emergency, there is no need to feel uncomfortable about past events. A solution is needed and who better to help than someone you once thought dispensable!

Why is there a problem? Surely no one seriously believed that civilisation (now synonymous with computing) would not last beyond the year 2000? The early developers of software were pioneers for whom every day was a challenge to find a solution to a particular problem. They worked in now almost forgotten languages, such as Fortran, and lived only for the next line of code. Standards were only loosely applied and networking a dream for the future. Forgive them, for they knew not that their creations would live forever. It is harder to forgive the large multinational software and hardware producers who have known about the millennium problem for years.

Undeterred by software bugs and processors that ran out of memory, we have soldiered on hoping for a Utopia in which all software worked on machines that were super-fast and never ran out of memory. Few software releases were not accompanied by 'fixes' and equipment could be 'upgraded' with more 'chips'. Now we are told that mayhem is likely if steps are not taken to replace code and equipment which was deficit from its inception.

The problem is far-reaching since computing technology now pervades our society. Lifts, security systems, cars, video machines are all potentially vulnerable. Civilisation, like Cinderella's carriage, may be transformed at the last stroke of midnight on Friday, 31 December 1999.

Don't sign up for 'Euthanasia Anonymous' too quick. All is not lost. Most computers used for private purposes will not be greatly affected unless use of the date is critical for the control of other functions. Most organisations are now aware of the problem and have set in place strategies to deal with the problem. If they haven't and you want to score some brownie points, look at the excellent web site maintained by the New South Wales Office of Information Technology. It is located at <http://www.y2k.gov.au> and contains a wealth of information including some jokes about the issue.

In the meantime, try contemplating a life without computers. ■

Why is there a problem? Surely no one seriously believed that civilisation (now synonymous with computing) would not last beyond the year 2000?