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Drinking From the Firehose — The Year 2000 (Y2K) Millennium Bug: Or, The End of the World as We Know It?

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The Year 2000 is rapidly approaching and I have been doing some reading, thinking and talking to others. Let me say first that I am a rational person and I do not think we need to panic. I started working on this article for *Against the Grain* two months ago and my opinion about it continues to vacillate. My original article was not published last issue as planned and frankly, I am grateful to be able to have a chance to rewrite it. I suspect the scenario will continue to develop as we approach the deadline.

The major library system, book and serial vendors have been taking the Y2K computer glitch problem quite seriously. (See *ATG*, June 1996 issue for a great article by Bruce Heterick and David Fritsch.) Generally speaking, we have nothing to worry about when it comes to library systems. However, there are many businesses, institutions and governments worldwide who will not be ready. The general public may panic if information about this dilemma is not handled properly. Libraries may be particularly affected by non-compliant CD-ROM products, older computers, and small suppliers.

I was getting my hair cut a few weeks ago and my hair dresser wanted to know if I had heard about the Year 2000 problem. "Yes," I said, "I am even writing an article about it." She then reported to me that her church had a speaker address the topic. They were advising stock piling food and water. She was very worried. I tried to assure her it would probably not come to that—but I could not honestly be totally confident in what I was saying.

There are many types of disasters that we have no control over; all we can do is prepare for the possibilities. I am keenly aware of this as I am trying to lead efforts in my library this year to develop a disaster plan. Weather-related disasters such as hurricanes, floods, forest fires and earthquakes are all examples of when plans can be made ahead of time to mitigate possible damage, but not necessarily prevent it entirely. Comparing the damages from Hurricane Mitch, which recently hit both the U.S. and Latin America, it is clear that countries that do not have the resources pay a huge price for their inability to plan ahead.

The Year 2000 computer glitch is a problem that could have been prevented. But since computer space was costly in the past, the short-cuts are our inheritance.

Following are some considerations to ponder, based on my research:

- Please note: the Year 2000 is NOT the beginning of the 21st century. 2000 is the last year of the 20th century. The popular media continue to refer to 2000 as the beginning of the new millennium. Please be an informed reader and spread the truth. And thanks from me, it's one of my pet peeves!

- There are a couple of other dates that may cause computers to get confused. Two of them: 04/09/99 which is the 99th day of 1999; and 09/09/99: September 9, 1999. Also, the year 2000 will be a leap year, although some people are arguing about this. There's an explanation of this in the Sept. 13, 1998 *Parade Magazine* that is easy to follow.¹

- Are there enough programmers around who know the old code to fix this problem? Hard to say. Those who can are naming their price. In the meantime, companies are investing in training new programmers to learn the old code. Furthermore, there are some work-

arounds that programmers are using to trick systems until they can permanently fix the problem.^{2&3}

- The power grid is the key to everything. If utility companies are able to keep power interruptions to a minimum, we'll be OK. Personally, I am most concerned about this. January is not a great time to lose electric power in most parts of the Northern Hemisphere. The banking and finance industry has been taking this situation seriously so they will probably be ready. But without power, it wouldn't matter. It might not be a bad idea to have some extra cash on hand when the time comes.

- Y2K compliance is a legal issue and will change the way we do business in the future. Businesses are notifying their vendors and business partners of the need to be in compliance and are threatening severance of relationships when compliance is in question. There may be lawsuits on the horizon, especially if businesses claim to be compliant and are later found not to be after all.

- Y2K issues reach into every nook and cranny of life. I have seen articles about this in journals ranging from *Christian Camping* to *Farm Journal*. Any device that has a computer chip in it could be affected: coffee makers, elevators, automobiles, etc. This is not just about per-

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sonal computers. ⁴

•• Cyber terrorism: If our infrastructure is at stake, then unfriendly regimes might take advantage of any chaotic situations. Also, countries with out-dated missile systems might find themselves vulnerable to all sorts of mischief. I don't want to think about this!

There are more and more articles appearing in the popular and computer press about this problem. I will append a select number of citations here, but if you are interested in pursuing the topic, I suggest you look further than the few I've listed.

By the way, P.S.: Rational or not, I am doing some contingency planning. I live in a region that is very cold in January. I plan to have plenty of canned goods, a generator and fuel, and extra cash on hand. If nothing happens, so I am prepared for the next blizzard. What could it hurt? 🐼

Endnotes

¹ Vos Savant, Marilyn. "Ask Marilyn," *Parade*, Sunday, Sept. 13, 1998, p.15.

² Phillips, William G. "The Year 2000 Problem: Will the Bug Bite Back?" *Popular Science*, Oct. 1998, p.90.

³ Poulsen, Kevin. "The Y2K Solution: Run for Your Life!" *Wired*, August 1998, p.122.

⁴ Klintberg, Patricia Peak. "Year 2000 May Not Compute," *Farm Journal*, Sept. 1998, p.20.

Other Resources

www.year2000.com. Particularly see: Petersen, John L., Wheatly, Margaret, and Kellner-Rogers, Myron. "The Year 2000: Social Chaos or Social Transformation?" <http://www.year2000.com/archive/social.html>, p.4.

www.pcmag.com/y2k. Lots of good links to other sites.

www.y2k.com. Focus on legal issues.

www.mitre.org/research/y2k. Focus on making systems compliant.

Other articles of interest (by no means exhaustive)

Berman, Dennis, "The Y2K Bug: Look Both Ways." *Business Week*, Sept. 14, 1998.

Chisenga, Justin, "Y2K and Computerized Library Systems." <http://www.unam.na/1370/lib-y2k.htm>.

Evarts, Eric C., "Prepare Today for the Year 2K." *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 9, 1998. v.90, issue 242, p.B3.

Lowenstein, Joanna, "Fulfillment Houses Begin Y2K Testing." *Folio*, Sept. 1, 1998, v.27, no.12, p.25.

Michael, Donald M., "Connectivity and Control: The Y2K Problem." [letter to the editor] *Harvard Business Review*, Nov/Dec 1998, v.76, issue 6, p.180.

Newberry, Jon, "The Great Y2K Escape." *ABA Journal*, Nov. 1998, v.84, p.90.

Quinn, Jane Bryant and Ehrenfeld, Temma, "Bugged by Y2K?" *Newsweek*, Aug. 31, 1998, v.132, no.9, p.48B.

"What You Will Need to Survive the Apocalypse." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk:80/et>.

On the Road — Alligators in Charleston? Fore!

A glimpse at "Life in the Trenches" — "On the road again/ Just can't wait to get on the road again..."

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Unsure of the game of golf to begin with, I've often wondered why I put myself through the pain of trying to actually play the game. As if working in an academic libraries Acquisitions Department isn't frustrating enough, I choose to chase a little white ball around a course of grasses, freshwater hazards, cliffs, oceans, and sandtraps. Never mind my lack of depth perception, ability to keep my shoulder down and my eye on the ball, or that there are about 15 clubs in my bag and I choose to use only 4 of them. (My putter is a most unusual club that serves me a multi-of-purposes.) Did you know that the rubber around the body of a golf cart really does diminish the effects of whiplash when you crash into the back of one? I learned that this year in Charleston, as well as the fact that you don't even hit the vendor's golf bag if it's in the proper location.

After a very stimulating and exciting conference in Charleston this year, a friend and trading partner (Okay, a vendor, I'll go ahead and say it!) decided that he and the gals from Dartmouth should hit the links on Saturday afternoon to help unwind and enjoy the beautiful scenery that the Patriot's Point Links on Charleston Harbor has to offer. Well he was certainly right about the views, and I was certainly right about chasing that little white ball around. We gals purchased a 10 pack of "experienced" golf balls (also known as water-soaked) and some tees, rented some clubs, and proceeded to show our true Dartmouth "Green" abilities (or inabilities) to play the game of golf.

After 6 holes, I had already re-soaked 2 of those ten golf balls, and I still had 12 holes to go. With those statistics and the odds

against me already, I decided that I would hunt for any other ball I might happen to misplace off the fairway. Of course, on the 7th hole, my ball found its way to yet another body of water. Alas, there was no splash, so I was off and running to retrieve that little sucker before it sunk into the mud or quicksand. My golf partners were continuing on their own separate ways, realizing I was hunting again instead of golfing, when my new golf partner appeared.

My ball, small, meek and mild, was within 3 inches off the tail of a 3 foot alligator, who was trying to catch any rays he could on this rather brisk but sunny Saturday afternoon. Being a typical New Englander, my first response was to say "Hello" to the little fellow, and ask if he'd mind if I took my ball back. Of course, I also apologized for invading his space, explaining that I wasn't originally from this area and a horrible golfer as well. He appeared just fine with our discussion, so I felt it a wise idea to wave down my original golf partners to come and meet my new friend, and to bring me my camera. Of course, due to the wind (or their professional abilities to ignore me), they had no idea what I was yelling about. Finally, **John Riley** (Yes, it was John Riley) felt he should come and drag me away from the hole since I wasn't leaving on my own free will. Soon realizing my excitement was well warranted, (I can't publish his first expression of speech.) he began the "waving" dance at **Ann McHugo**, to hurry her along down to the water hole. She was hesitant, but figured if there were two of us doing the "wave" thing that something must be going on. She arrived and expressed the same disbelief, "Holy Cow!" (That's what

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