One Last Compile…

Ask not for whom the clock ticks

There are two questions I am regularly asked at parties. The first is: 'While you're here, would you mind setting the clock on my video?' The second (and this is usually when the would-be conversationalist is flailing around for a suitable topic) is 'What do you think about this millennium bug problem?'

The only honest answer to the question, of course, is that I haven't the faintest clue. I'm flattered that people think that because I work in the computer industry I have some kind of insider knowledge that makes me better-informed than the man on the street. If only it were true.

In my heart of hearts I suspect that the whole thing's been massively over-blown and, apart from a minor irritations, life will carry on pretty much as before on 1st January 2000. But I've got nothing to back this up, and my hunches have been spectacularly wrong before. Five years ago I was sniffily dismissing the internet as just another fad that would soon wither and die, and it wouldn't surprise me if this was the case now (I'm buying an extra can of baked beans on my trip to the supermarket each week, just to be on the safe side).

Given that the questioner is usually the first person to show any interest in me all evening, my only recourse is to hide my total ignorance by making stuff up. If the questioner is relatively young looking, I tell them airily that there's nothing to worry about, that it's all taken care of and the worst that can happen is that they might get some odd-looking bank statements for a couple of months. Then I get to look wise and 'in the know', and hopefully they'll introduce me to one of the girls who came with them. Or, if I'm talking to an oldie, perhaps somebody's elderly aunt or uncle, I suck my cheeks in mournfully and tell them that I'm expecting the worst. It's going to be much worse than people think, I mutter conspiratorially. Stock market crash, riots, food shortages, anarchy. They usually turn white, stagger slightly, then head off unsteadily to call their stockbroker.

But it's not just a social topic of conversation, of course. From time to time we get questionnaires from clients, asking us to ascertain that our products will continue functioning correctly into the millennium. To which our response is as follows. First, we are delighted that you think the software is currently functioning correctly, which is contrary to the impression given by your last fifteen pieces of correspondence, and we hope this means that your legal action against us will not be proceeding further. Secondly, we are 100% millennium compliant. At least, we think we are, because we use so many third party products and components that frankly your guess is as good as ours. But, just to be on the safe side, two months ago we put Geoff in a sealed room and set his computer's clock date forward by exactly one year. There don't seem to have been any obvious problems so far, although Geoff's emails have become increasingly plaintive. Lastly, although millennium compliant, we reserve the right to carelessly create and introduce lots of other bugs that will probably be even more destructive and cause massive inconvenience to all our users.

It's funny. Our profession has perhaps never had so much attention focused upon it, nor had so many people worrying about it. Here we are, on the verge of a new millennium, and the world is obsessed with whether millions of tiny pieces of electrically charged silicon are going to keep pulsing in exactly the correct way. Still, at least it gives us something to talk about at parties.