

information insider



Electronic Publishing and the Y2K Problem Robert J. Boeri Martin Hensel

EMedia Professional, October 1998

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It's about 14 months to the year 2000 (Y2K). Are there bugs in your books? That is, do you know if your documents--including your document media and publishing processes--are safe from the "Millennium Bug" primarily associated with aging mainframe computer systems? Software written in the '70s and '80s, frequently in COBOL, gets most of the press. Memory and disk capacity were expensive, and programmers saved space by using only the two least significant digits when dealing with dates. Additionally, programmers often used special numbers like 99 to indicate the end of a data set. So when the systems' internal clocks pass 1999--denoted simply as an end-of-file-identical 99--they'll revert to an apocalyptic 00 instead of advancing to a merely millennial 2000.

Beyond COBOL-based systems, what about publishing system software and document media? Consider one wake-up call we got quite recently. One of us wanted to upgrade a \$100 PC application (Adaptec's Easy CD Creator, released in late 1997), and the approving manager asked a routine question: "Is it Year 2000-compliant?" Surprisingly--with kudos to Adaptec for their honesty--we found that this product was not compliant, although Adaptec's Web site gave it a "near-compliant" rating and said their engineers were working on a solution. Looking at the default CD name generated by the software, a sample of which is the label "980604_1305," we understood how pervasive the problem is: the label uses two digits for the year. Now this two-digit problem won't matter as long as you don't use it to manage titles (although it may matter a great deal if you do). But use it or not, this instance highlights the pervasiveness of Y2K issues.

Y2K THROUGHOUT THE PUBLISHING LIFE CYCLE

To determine your electronic publishing systems' exposure to Y2K, you must cast a very wide net in two directions. First, consider your publishing systems through their entire life cycle: document creation and editing; production, indexing, and distribution; searching and using the publications; and repurposing or retirement (which either feeds back into the creation point or saves the content in an archival system). You must also consider all "layers" of each device or process through that life cycle. A journey through a typical document's life cycle easily turns up examples of potential Y2K issues. Note that compliance information changes almost daily, so check your favorite manufacturer's information for the latest updates.

Let's start with creation and editing using a word processor. Word processors create summary pages containing attribute information such as author and time created. Any problem? Corel's Web site provides great detail about Y2K issues in WordPerfect such as date ranges, two-digit year representation, and its compliant products. If you're using any Windows 95 or NT version of WordPerfect earlier than version 8, there may be date limits. Also, if you are still using any DOS version of virtually any application (almost guaranteeing Y2K problems), or even high-end composition tools, converting macros or scripts from such applications to compliant applications is not trivial. If you use a document management system that extracts

document summary information to track, archive, or remove documents based on this information, you should be on guard. Even Microsoft Word 97 displays two-digit dates in automatically generated document attribute pages.

Let's move down the life cycle to production, indexing, and distribution. Suppose you use a composition system running the Sun Solaris operating system. According to Sun's Web site, as long as you're running Solaris 2.6 or higher, you're Year 2000-compliant. If not, buy a support contract for enhancements to your operating system. If you routinely upload changed Web pages to your Web site, will your Web authoring software know that Year 2000 pages are newer than those created in 1999? On its Web site, SoftQuad posted a sweeping assurance that "after detailed investigation, we have determined that all current versions of software produced by SoftQuad Inc. ... are Year 2000 compliant." However, there was no date on the page indicating the effective date which "current" applies.

Now let's look at the search and use stage of the life cycle. New third-party Acrobat products are emerging that allow you to secure documents you distribute on CD-ROM. These products let you specify a shelf date after which the Acrobat documents cannot be opened. If you use such products, test them to ensure they don't become permanently locked. All Y2K testing requires you to consider several time horizons, including the transition from 12/31/1999 to 1/1/2000 and 2/29/2000. This millennium is special in that it is also a leap year.

Lastly, consider the final stage: repurposing or retirement. If your systems manage media by date labels produced automatically, be sure that inventory management systems understand how to process those labels. Even ZIP disks have automatically imprinted manufactured dates showing years as two-digit Julian values.

AND CLOSER TO HOME ...

After you consider all the applications in your publishing life cycle, don't forget to look at all your equipment, from PCs to other devices. Consider one IT manager's only half-joking criterion for which devices to consider in his Y2K inventory: Does it use electricity?

Will the millennium come with a whimper or a bang, causing a disintegration of publishing systems? No one knows. But even the captain of the unsinkable Titanic would probably have adjusted course if he had known the iceberg was in the ship's path.

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