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This is going to sound bizarre, but I think the Year 2000 problem (nicknamed Y2K in technical circles) is a good thing. I know it's going to be a total mess, that there will be awful stories about computer systems failure around the world, and that someone cranky like me is going to get at least 10 years worth of explosive OUTRAGE out of it, but still, it's a good thing.

Y2K is a reflection of the fact that the programmers designing early computer systems back in the 1950s tended to focus, as one does, on the present. Their problem was that they had a tiny amount of computer memory to work with – this was before Microsoft introduced the concept of burning resources as if they were rainforests. In those days, economising on programming code was highly prized.

In the interests of conserving memory, programmers did what generations of people saving time writing cheques have done: they cut down the year field to two digits. After all, we all know that '55 is 1955, right? This computer thing wasn't going to last out the century, was it? On December 31, 1999, when the clock ticks one second past midnight a whole lot of machines now deeply embedded in every part of public and corporate life will be transported back a century.

Don't underestimate the havoc, which is not just about scheduling. People whose credit cards are being renewed are having problems now since shop machines can't deal with the '00' in the date field. In many corporate database applications, inserting '00' in the date field deletes the record.

There are two reasons this is all a good thing. The ignoble one is that there is a lot of malicious fun in watching the IT industry, which causes us so much frustration, experience public, widespread humiliation (why aren't we making the IT industry pay its profits from fixing Y2K into a public computer disaster fund?). The better one is that it reminds us that computers are only as infallible as the very fallible humans programming them. As important computer systems are now being created to manage medical care, public benefits, news and information, it is vital to remember that computers can fail and fail spectacularly. We must learn from Y2K that every system should be designed with a plan for the days when the computer is down.

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The Hutchinson Dictionary of Computing, Multimedia, and the Internet
Helicon. £14.99. ISBN: 1-85986-159-8.
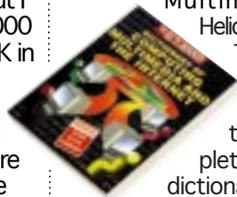
The trouble with the computing industry is that it grows a new crop of words almost weekly, so even if you knew all the terms last year, you could be completely out of date today. A comprehensive dictionary of computing terms is a handy way of keeping up with recent developments or getting a head start if you're a complete beginner.

The Hutchinson Dictionary has an impressive collection of terms, going back to historical items like punched cards and getting bang up to date with lots of Internet jargon. It takes in most of the significant individual and company names, as well as any technological terms you could think of. Explanations are generally clear, simple and accurate, and are helped out with useful illustrations, handy tips and even some background articles. A must if you keep company with techies – or if you want to become one yourself.

PC Upgrade and Repair Bible
Barry Press. 970pp. IDG Books. £42.99.
ISBN: 0-7645-3023-2. www.idgbooks.com

As its name suggests, the PC Upgrade and Repair Bible sits on a desk, to be called upon in times of need.

Essentially, it's a reference guide aimed at anyone who wants detailed, in-depth information on PCs – whether it's for upgrading, repair, purchasing or 'tweaking' purposes. As befits its brief, the PC Bible doesn't skimp on technical information, so it's not a book for beginners. It certainly covers the ground, though – it's almost 1,000 pages thick and has a comprehensive index and glossary.

Pretty much everything you need to know is here. Early chapters cover such things as different types of PCs for different applications and system requirements for Windows 95 (and NT).

Several chapters are devoted to the parts constituting a PC and no component, no matter how minor, is left untouched. Peripherals are covered too, together with networks and other communications aspects. An excellent reference tool for the discerning PC owner.

Upgrading PCs Illustrated
Jim Boyce. 710 pp. Que. £32.49.
ISBN: 0-7897-0986-4

If your PC is more than a couple of years old it might be time to start thinking about upgrading it. Of course, you could just sell it and buy a new one, but often you can save money by simply carrying out an upgrade yourself. If that's what you decide, then Upgrading PCs Illustrated from Que is the sort of book that will come in handy.

It covers everything from simply removing the screws to replacing your processor, and it's liberally illustrated throughout. The text is written in a very friendly style – indeed at times it can be just a bit too friendly, leaving you wondering whether the author would've preferred to be working on a joke book – and for the most part the descriptions and instructions are well structured and clear.

Like most books of this size, Upgrading PCs Illustrated is a bit pricey but it is very comprehensive.