

Y2K, Collective Ritual, and Sound in the New Millennium

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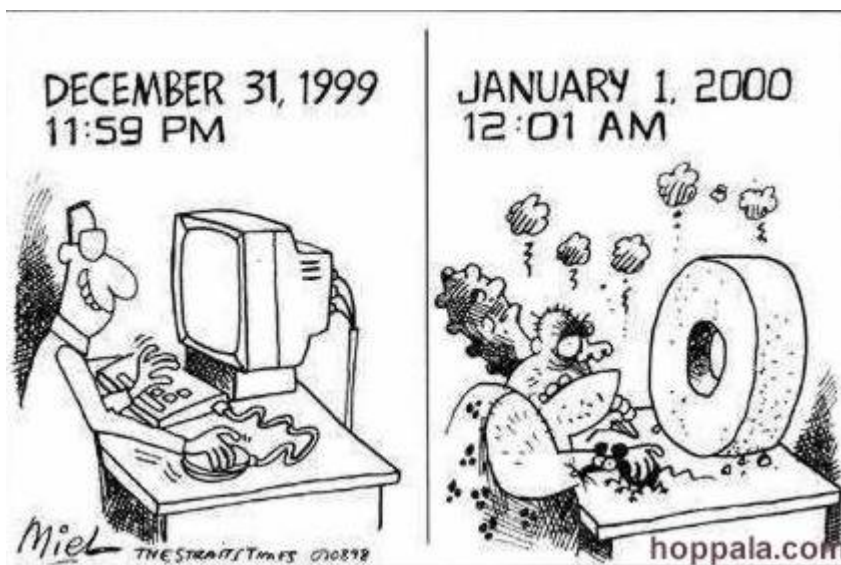
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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Digital Humanities, Identity, Internets, Listening



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The recent New Year brought back some slightly embarrassing memories of past ball-droppings, 1999 in particular. That was the year, you'll remember, when the world as we know it was to end due to all the clocks in all computers reading 0000 instead of 2000 – nuclear plants were to implode, bank accounts would be scrambled and a month later, the world would resemble some scene from *The Road Warrior*. I'll fess up. I bought into the [Y2K hype](#) hook-line-and-sinker. I hunkered down in my living room with some old friends playing Risk that New Year's Eve, I awaited an event of cataclysmic proportions. As the countdown droned on TV, it seemed every dice roll took me one step closer to the end . . . 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Upon zero, nothing changed and anxiety slowly began to leak from my body. Sting appeared on TV and introduced the new millennium with his jazzy "Brand New Day." With [lyrics about time and second chances](#), I grew to associate the song with a sense of profound relief. No matter how hokey Stings lyrics were (he uses the term "fuddy-duddy" at one point), "Brand New Day" will forever remind me of second-chances and possibility. Part of a clever advertising coup designed to reinvigorate Sting's flagging career, the gospel tropes used in "Brand New Day" fit as a discursive response to the apocryphal (and apocalyptic) conversations circulating about Y2K at the time.



<https://youtu.be/ENp1js63zKo>

The history of technology is filled with utopian and dystopian visions of the future. Famously depicted in Apple's "1984" commercial, the technocratic American narrative (Think Reaganomics) goes something like this: While developments in technology can allow for an increased sense of autonomy and individuality, they are unerringly used for evil. This evil strongly resembles a stereotypical Soviet culture where individuality is sacrificed for the good of the collective whole. Therefore, good technology promotes the individual while evil technology supports the collective.



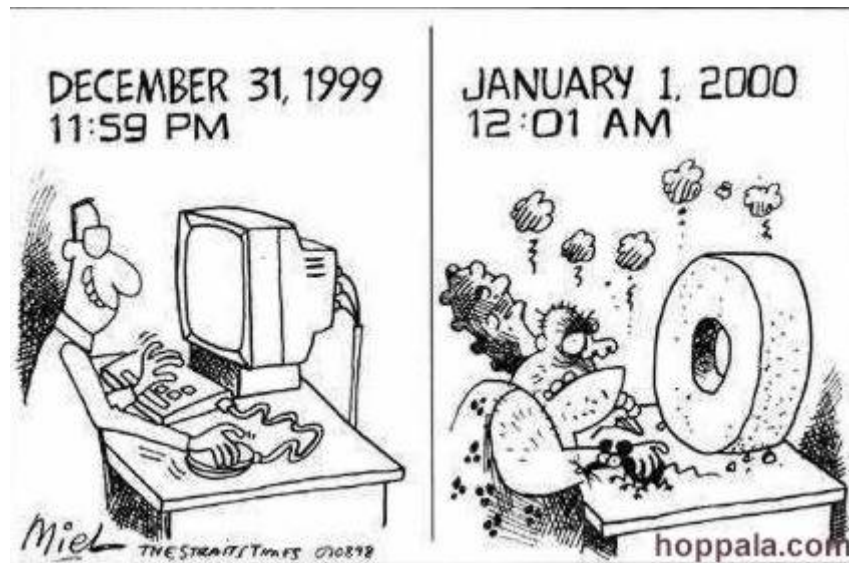
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If this seems a little heavy handed, it should be noted that the whole endeavor of mass computing has its roots in American Cold War history. After the atomic catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, [Vannevar Bush](#), then Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, predicted the Internet with the “memex machine” in his [article to The Atlantic, “As We May Think.”](#) Written to an unassuming audience, Bush suggests the destructive potential of atomic weaponry heralded a concrete limit to traditional methods of warfare, because of this the next battlefronts would be informatic. Y2K is a dystopic variation on this theme, [atomic blow up by-way-of nuclear power](#) had even become incorporated into some of its myths. These myths were a fantasy, to be sure, but they were rooted in the collective fears of a confused and dysphoric America, an America which had recently overcome Communism and lauded its rapidly developing technological sector as a new source of economic capital on the world stage. Y2K was scary because it played on a cultural fear of technology, which was paradoxically one of America’s key exports at the time.

It is an interesting contrast between the cultural environment of post-Cold War America and the loose backup calls of “brand new day,” with its rhythmic pleas to “stand up!” increasing in frequency and intensity as the song continues. Though the song has nothing to do with Y2K, or even technology, its position as a televised event after the ball dropped December 31, 1999, had solidified it forever in my imagination as a spiritual reaction to the technological paranoia of the time. Sting conveys a baptism narrative; as a country we had mysteriously been absolved of our technocratic sins. I was (and am) a believer. As I sit writing this on my iMac, I consider the many marketing strategies Apple has used in the last decade to convince me of the ways their software and hardware could define me as an individual. Sting redeems the pursuit of individuality through the use of gospel tropes. Instead of an almighty passing the judgement of heaven or hell, a technocratic neoliberal economy threatened the wrath of Y2K to nonbelievers at the turn of the

millennium. As the proverbial gates to a new era of prosperity opened, Sting climbed higher in falsetto, “Stand up and be counted every boy and girl/Stand up all you lovers in the world/We’re starting up a brand new day.”



This year, as I watched a web stream of the ball drop January 31, 2010, I was able to later navigate to the MTV website and enjoy a Flaming Lips concert in Oklahoma City live from my computer. In this transition, something struck me. The potentials of computing, particularly video and sound editing (iMovie, Garageband and their disseminatory middle-man YouTube) still rely on an earlier Cold-War rhetoric of individualism and creative innovation to express the potential strengths of technology. Meanwhile any sense of collective ritual is set to the whim of a mouse-click, from New York to Oklahoma in a heartbeat. These new rituals compete with the old in a new context of hyper-individuality; ironically “Brand New Day” has become stuck once more in my head, as it has been routinely on New Years for the past 10 years. From these changes in collective ritual, what will it mean to celebrate the new year in 2011?



<https://youtu.be/ja-wUwWYJrl>

