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A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology.

Featuring the Stuff You Really Need To Know

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Voice: 412.854.2550 | Fax: 412.854.4707 | e-mail: kgb@kgb.com | www: <http://www.kgb.com>

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Written by Kevin G. Barkes

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Online Secret

Some KGB Report readers like to review the newsletter on the kgb.com website before they receive their copy via US Mail. While the public version of the newsletter is abridged, subscribers can access the complete issue at <http://www.kgb.com/kgbreport/kgbisyndicate.html>. But keep it to yourself, okay?

Frequency Modulation

In response to those asking how many issues of this newsletter are published each year, the answer is: all of them. *KGB Report* appears as time and funds permit. I try to get an issue out each week, but since my family wants to eat on a daily basis, I must from time to time engage in other activities to satisfy their annoying habit. You can help out by signing up for the electronically distributed portable document format version of the newsletter, thereby reducing our print and postage costs. Mention us to a potential advertiser, buy a subscription for a friend or suggest another publication "repurpose" our material; every little bit helps. Or just send cash. We're easy.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Earth-Sucking Cataclysm?

The Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York is denying claims that the lab's planned simulation of the cosmic "Big Bang" which created the universe, scheduled for late this year, could have potentially unfortunate side effects.

Like the destruction of the planet.

In the meantime, the lab is warming up its Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (RHIC) and initiating the sequencing procedures necessary to produce the full nuclear collisions that will culminate in the creation of a particle of quark-gluon plasma, a form of matter that hasn't naturally existed in the universe since the original "Big Bang" billions of years ago.

A few scientists say there's a reason quark-gluon plasma isn't found lying around the universe anymore. They fear it has a tendency to rip holes in normal space. The artificial creation of the substance by the RHIC could generate miniature black holes or space/time singularities through which our planet would be instantly sucked, like a giant glass of Nestlé's Quik in an immense Silly Straw surrounded by the very lips of Jehovah Himself.

In its defense, the lab issued a news release that stated, "there is simply not enough matter or energy in the RHIC collisions to create a black hole. This conclusion does not require difficult or obscure calculations and has not been questioned by any physicist in a relevant field who has considered the matter." John Marburger, the lab's director, noted in a statement following the publication of a story in the *Sunday Times of London* (with the subtle headline *Big Bang Machine Could Destroy the Earth*) that "our universe would have to be extremely unstable in order for such a small amount of energy to cause a large effect." Our universe? Unstable? Obviously, Mr. Marburger hasn't watched daytime television lately.

In addition to the potentially planet-killing Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider, Brookhaven has lots of other really nifty subatomic generating thingies with which they like to play, like a High Flux Beam Reactor. Not to be confused with Doc Brown's flux capacitor from the *Back to the Future* films, the High Flux Beam Reactor, according to the lab's web site, "is one of only three such reactors in the nation dedicated to research in the physical, chemical, biological and environmental sciences, and technology." But the site doesn't explain what the dickens the doohickey actually does. The article continues that the reactor is "currently not operating pending an environmental study..." Environmental study? What the hell does that mean? They have another piece of hardware that could blast this planet into another dimension? A potentially terrifying alternate reality where men fear women's breasts, pickup trucks and telecasts of organized sports?

All kidding aside, we probably have nothing to fear from global destruction at the hands of scientists. I worry more about the cumulative effect of partisan politics, professional wrestling and the undetected mile-wide chunk of space rock currently whizzing through the Oort Cloud with the Earth's name on it. Anyway, as the friendly folk at Brookhaven note, "Scientists are no more willing to endanger the world, or themselves, than anyone else is." Let's all just hope Brookhaven's researchers are happily married, well-paid, have no teenage children at home and are covered by a medical plan that includes mental health care and free prescriptions for the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors of their choice. There's nothing scarier than a depressed particle physicist.

But wouldn't be a kick if the Earth disappears with a loud popping noise after they throw the switch? After all the money spent on Y2K remediation efforts?

Now if Microsoft Would Only Start Giving Away Hardware...

Sun Microsystems has launched a full-bore assault on Microsoft by buying Star Division Corp. and distributing - for free, really - Star's StarOffice 5.1, an integrated suite resembling Microsoft's Office product. Sun said the 65 megabyte package was downloaded by over a quarter million users in its first week of release. The software is also available for under \$20 on CD-ROM. Printed documentation and support costs extra, but the \$39.95 base price for the additional services is a lot cheaper than Microsoft's charges for equivalent doc and handholding.

Sun is really serious about this, and Microsoft should be concerned. In addition to Windows98 and NT, StarOffice also runs on Solaris, OS/2 and Linux. It almost single-handedly makes Linux a viable platform for small businesses, which means you can get a fully functional office software suite and the underlying operating system for peanuts. StarOffice can import Microsoft's Word, Excel and PowerPoint application files, and experienced Office users will have little trouble mastering StarOffice's streamlined interface.

Sun's StarOffice download site is quite busy, and it may take you a while to get either the single 65MB file or the half-dozen smaller packages that make up the complete application. I ordered the CD-ROM online for a friend via standard, non-rush delivery and had it in just three days. It installs quickly, takes up a lot less disk space than similar Office applications, runs several times faster and has a single desktop interface from which all the applications can be accessed.

How can a company make money giving away software? Sun hopes users will buy support services and Sun hardware. The Microsoft nemesis is also developing an intranet version of StarOffice called StarPortal. Sun hopes companies will run StarPortal on its powerful servers, allowing end users to access the applications on less expensive machines. The servers would do all

the hardcore computer work, while the end user machines would be essentially just display devices, accessing the programs through simple web browsers and, eventually, portable computing devices.

It just might work. While large enterprise customers have a major investment in Microsoft applications, small business and home users could be rather reluctant to pay a couple hundred bucks for Office upgrades when StarOffice is available for practically nothing. And even big Microsoft shops may take a hard look at StarOffice or StarPortal when faced with the nightmarish prospect of migrating to the first release of Windows 2000 and upgrading all their applications.

One indication of the seriousness of the potential threat is Microsoft's response. Officially, it's dismissed StarOffice by saying that the distribution of free software isn't a viable business model (ever hear of Internet Explorer?) and that users want the support and upgrade path offered by commercial packages. Right. It appears the Redmond Behemoth is truly concerned. It's really revving up its FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt) mechanisms. Some letters have already begun to appear in the trade press that criticize StarOffice for lacking certain arcane features used mostly by in-house programmers and expensive outside consultants with a vested interest in making certain Microsoft succeeds. One email newsletter contained a letter from an "independent consultant" who whined that StarOffice crashed his machine. If that's the case, it's probably even more similar to Office than I first thought.

I recommend it. At least give it a try. Take a look at <http://www.sun.com/staroffice>.

So Much For The Paperless Office...

A consultant friend of mine told me back at the dawn of the PC era that we'd see paperless bathrooms before paperless offices. Boy, was he right. Despite the widespread use of computers in business, paper remains "the dominant and essential vehicle of modern communications" according to the World Resources Institute. The think tank says 115 billion sheets of paper are printed on personal computer systems every year, and that number will double by the year 2003. The figure doesn't take into account the huge spike in paper consumption expected near the end of this year as everyone starts printing paper copies of their computer-based records to circumvent potential Y2K-related access problems. Hint: Buy the paper you need for your year-end printouts now. There could be supply shortages and price increases in December. And don't contribute to the problem by overstocking. Just get what you'd normally use.

Y2K-A-Rama

Survive Y2K? How About Surviving Until Y2K? At least we know what the Y2K problem is and when it will arrive. Unfortunately, unexpected crises that emphasize the infrastructure's fragility whack our technology dependent society upside the head on an almost daily basis. Some recent events of note:

Boss On Hold: AP reports fans trying to phone for tickets to Bruce Springsteen's October 15 concert in Phoenix, AZ caused US West's Gilbert switching office to "collapse" for two hours, knocking out service to about 60,000 residents. A company spokesman said, "It was like a major traffic jam. No calls went in, no calls went out." Similar failures are expected near midnight on January 1, 2000 if everyone decides to make a phone call "to see if the phone system is working". Similar usage spikes can probably be expected by major Internet service providers, so don't be surprised if you can't reach your favorite web site shortly after Y2K arrives.

Non-Y2K Bugs: As if computer bugs aren't bad enough, the natural kind are causing problems, too. The Centers for Disease Control's Division of Parasitic Diseases says mounting evidence seems to indicate that head lice are becoming resistant to the over-the-counter chemicals that have been used for years to successfully combat cooties.

Friday The First

October 1 is the start of the US Government's 2000 fiscal year, the last big test of Y2K readiness before January 1. Actually, there really hasn't been any doubt that the Fed's major systems will work, since most states have been in FY2000 for months now, and their systems have been

exchanging information with Federal systems without incident. No other major computer problems are expected, although a few surprises are inevitable. According to *Wired*, the Social Security Administration recently sent 30,000 letters to recipients telling them their benefits would be terminated on January 1 - 1900. The incorrect date was probably a print routine error unrelated to date calculations, and those receiving the letters are supposed to have their benefits terminated on January 1, 2000. This is actually a routine situation in billing systems. For the last 15 years, PNC Bank has been sending me Check Credit statements telling me my February payment is due on the 30th. To their credit- well, actually, my credit - the computer accurately computes the interest on 28 days, 29 in leap years.

Whether the Fed's computers work this Friday may be academic, since it's possible the budget snafu may force the shutdown of the government for political reasons. Which proves the old chestnut that there are no computer problems, only human problems.

Insurance Implosion

Expect lots of litigation dealing with expenses incurred by businesses to correct Y2K problems-maybe hundreds of billions in claims. Historically, insurance companies have reimbursed policyholders for steps taken to prevent imminent damage to covered property from unforeseen hazards. Businesses like Xerox, which is suing its insurer for over \$180 million, claim Y2K remediation efforts fall into that category. The insurance companies, which weren't anticipating payouts until after the first of the year, were surprised by the claims. They assert they should have been notified before companies began fixing their systems. They also maintain they shouldn't have to pay to correct the bugs, since systems with Y2K problems contain fundamental design flaws: the computers should have been able to deal with the millennium when they were originally placed into service. Y2K wasn't an unforeseen hazard, the insurers add; everyone knew it was coming. Still, insurance companies are appending riders to their policies explicitly excluding Y2K remediation expenses, prompting some opposing lawyers to ask why the riders are necessary if the expenses can't be claimed. This one has the potential to cause a real judicial logjam, and it's not covered by the legislation limiting Y2K litigation passed earlier this year by Congress.

The Lighter Side of Y2K

Fortunately, the media's take isn't all doom and gloom. Some of it is downright hilarious. For example, *Entertainment Weekly's* report of John Tesh's scheduled appearance at the Millennium Wall, Gisborne, New Zealand: "Tesh will hold a New Age sunrise concert in front of a kilometer-long granite monument. And you can watch it all live on QVC, where you can buy Tesh's album and other assorted goodies... Afterward, the seas will turn to blood and locusts will take over the earth."

The original and best sources of Y2K humor are the recurring "In The Year 2000" sketches on NBC's *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. Some of the big white guy's more prescient predictions:

- The Mir space station will finally crash to earth, but not before completing its most important experiment, to see how long it takes for a big hunk of Russian-made crap to fall out of the sky.
- An even more shocking home videotape of Pamela and Tommy Lee will come out, this one featuring the two of them adding and subtracting.
- Bill Paxton and Bill Pullman will finally give up and become the same guy.
- Man will devolve back into apes, while apes will evolve into man. Women will not be affected.
- Believers in extraterrestrials will be devastated when strange, high frequency signals from outer space turn out to be coming from John Glenn's Medic Alert bracelet.
- Microsoft will go out of business and Bill Gates will be bankrupt after the disastrous release of their latest product, Windows Kevin Costner.
- Everyone on Earth will become flesh-eating zombies. When the flesh is all gone, they will become dirt-eating zombies. And, after that, some will reluctantly go to the Olive Garden.

What, Us Worry? "We hear about how Goldman [Sachs] is worried, not about Y2K, but about what other people might do because they are worried about Y2K. Now we are worried because, while

Goldman is not worried about Y2K, it thinks other people are worried about Y2K so we have to be worried about those other people, even if Goldman isn't! Got that?"-James J. Cramer, Contributing Editor, thestreet.com, September 21, 1999.

Trivia

These questions are becoming more and more difficult to research, since so many of you folks cheat and go to the Internet Movie Database to find your answers. IMDB is an awesome resource. It's virtually impossible to come up with a question that can't be answered instantly by making a simple query there. On the plus side, if I *can* stump IMDB, the odds are you won't be able to find it on the web. Answer to our last question: The telephone number 555-CHER belonged to cabbie Alex Reiger on *Taxi*. This week's question: His real last name was Hoon, and he was originally a violin prodigy. He starred as the title character on a popular television series of the 50s and 60s that aired first on NBC, then ABC, and then was syndicated. He was born in 1911 and died in an auto accident in 1985. Who was he? First correct response gets a free KGB Consulting Y2K Compliant Multi-Dimensional Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar, a \$5 value.

Quotes of the Week

"Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose."-Bill Gates

"Bill Gates announced a plan today to give \$1 billion to fund scholarships for minority students. The donation comes with some strings attached, however, since the NAACP must now be renamed MSNAACP."-Craig Kilborn on *The Late Late Show*

"Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."-Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Internet investors have the brains of grapefruit. If you started a company called Set Fire to Piles of Money.com, they'd be beating down your door."-Dave Barry

"The Andy Warhol Economy: In the future, everyone will have a job... but it will only last 15 minutes."-Carol Simpson

"People think it must be fun to be a super genius, but they don't realize how hard it is to put up with all the idiots in the world."-Bill Watterson, (*Calvin & Hobbes*)

"Politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy some more tunnel."-John Quinton

"The reason people blame things on previous generations is that there's only one other choice." -Doug Larson

And, for our friends in institutes of higher learning:

"A polar bear is a rectangular bear after a coordinate transform."-Unknown

The *KGB Random Quotations Generator* has nearly 3,700 entries and is frequently updated. Visit it online at <http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi>, and be sure to try the online search. Many of the quotes are also available on our Curmudgeon Tees... check out <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>. Some new tees recently added (and not yet on the master list):

I Must Obey The Inscrutable Exhortations of My Soul; Learning Takes Time. Ignorance Is Instant; Arrogance and Stupidity in One Convenient Package; A Pretty Face Can Hide An Evil Mind; Where Are We Going, And Why Are We In A Hand Basket?; Trapped In Time, Surrounded By Evil, Low On Gas; That's It. I'm Calling The Mother Ship; Save The Whales. Collect The Entire Set; and, I Forget: Am I The Good Twin Or The Evil Twin?

Useless Web Site of the Week

<http://www.intriguing.com/mp/>, while no longer regularly updated, is a wonderful resource for fans of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. A&E is conveniently airing the classic comedy show on Saturday nights at 11 pm and Sunday mornings at 3 am. You may instead want to visit this web site, which includes an embarrassment of riches and blatant copyright violations, including the scripts to many of the series' sketches and the group's films.

KGB in the News: I discussed the W32/Kriz computer virus in an *Everybody's Business* item written by Maria Guzzo in the September 20 issue of the *Pittsburgh Business Times*. And the better half of KGB, Pamela Barkes, was thrilled to see that garden.com had used a picture of her butterfly garden at the easily reachable address <http://www4.garden.com/cgi-bin/v2/gemag/PID=68009376848032425729762,00896&p=2&s=773>.

More Shameless Self-Promotion

Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Items from *KGB Report* may be used in other media with proper attribution. And for heavens sake, buy a t-shirt, will you?

They're Here!

As seen on *ABC World News Now*, the KGB Consulting Y2K Compliant Multi-Dimensional Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar is now available! Check out our *Desperate Sideline Enterprises* web page at <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>, which also features our Curmudgeon Tees, now with new lower prices.

The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ Now Available! Nobody knows what the dickens is really going to occur on Y2KDay, but the odds are about a million to one that anything bad will happen to you personally. You say that's not good enough, bunkie? Step right up, here's the answer to your problem! Through the miracle of modern mathematics, you can virtually eliminate the chance of any Y2K calamity visiting upon your person by purchasing and wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™. It works by exploiting the elegant if little understood concept of statistical probability. Now here's the deal... The odds of getting personally zapped by a Y2K bug, according to various generally reputable mass media sources, are, as we previously noted, about a million to one. But the odds of getting zapped... while wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™... are virtually incalculable! Do the math yourself! See what we mean? In order for The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ to maintain its statistical validity, it's necessary to restrict the seeded universe (the number we sell) to... wait a minute... carry the two... say, 100,000. At a mere 20 bucks, it's the best insurance you can buy! Each beanie is unique, hand-modified to further increase the odds against personal catastrophic happenstance! No two are alike! Beware of inferior, mass-produced Y2K Remediation Headgear™... those duplicate beanies may save you a few bucks, but do you dare tamper with the delicate mathematical balance of our pristine calculations? Don't muck around with celestial mechanics, my friends! Accept only The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™! Plus, it'll be a great way to break the ice at that New Year's Party! The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ is more attractive than a lampshade, not to mention far more functional! Order The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ now, save your butt, beat the odds, and make a timely fashion statement! Call KGB Consulting at 412-854-2550, fax us at 412-854-4707, or e-mail us at kgb@kgb.com. Act now! Visa and MasterCard accepted! Quantities will be strictly limited to the number we can sell, so hurry!

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