Internet time and doomsday asteroids: this week in tech, 20 years ago

It’s difficult to remember a time when online media wasn’t arranged largely around memetic cultural events. On any given April 20th in recent years, for instance, you can find all sorts of weed-themed stories pegged around the unofficial holiday for marijuana. That’s not so in 1999: a search for “420” brings up precious few results.

Instead, the science and technology news of late April included one big company shake-up, some odd developments in space, and an extremely doomed game studio founded by Michael Crichton. Here’s this week in tech, 20 years ago.

Compaq was the biggest personal computer manufacturer in the world. But in April 1999, it was set to disappoint shareholders with terrible earnings. So, citing a new need to “move at Internet speed,” the company ousted its CEO Eckhard Pfeiffer in a shake-up that surprised the tech world.

As then-*Forbes* reporter Om Malik explained, Comcast had been “under tremendous pressure” from the juggernaut Dell and the low-end brand eMachines, even as the PC market had been “slammed by falling prices and slowing demand.” Compaq ultimately ended up merging with Hewlett-Packard to take on competitors like Dell. The deal has been characterized as one of the worst mergers in history, however, and it led to HP’s CEO Carly Fiorina — who would go on to run for president in 2016 — getting fired a few years later.

[embedded content]

Michael Crichton had an illustrious career in multiple forms of media: he created medical drama *ER*, wrote and directed the movie *Westworld*, and wrote quite a few best-selling novels. In April 1999, he announced that he would be moving into video games with a company called Timeline Studios. As *The New York Times* explained, Crichton had co-written an adventure game called *Amazon* in the 1980s, but he'd left the field until technology improved:

> *The Timeline founders say they think that today's more powerful personal computers and new 3-D software tools finally make it possible to create movie-quality images, detail and movement in computer games. That transformation may be accelerated by the arrival next year of the Sony Playstation II, which, Mr. Crichton said, may eclipse the PC as a game platform.*
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> *''Most computer games give you a big empty environment to go in and kill people,'' said Mr. Crichton, 56. ''Even the suspense techniques are beat-the-clock — do this before you blow up.''*

This was a fairly condescending description of the video game world, and Timeline Studios ultimately only produced one title, which was fittingly an adaptation of Crichton's novel *Timeline*. *Old Man Murray* co-founder Eric Wolpaw gave it one-half star out of five, noting that "progressing through the game is a slightly more challenging version of clicking the install program's 'Next' button."

Earlier this week, Pepsi abandoned some very odd plans to beam energy drink ads from space with the help of a Russian satellite startup, and the world breathed a sigh of relief. Replace "Pepsi" with "Swatch," "a Russian satellite startup" with "the Russian Space Agency," and "energy drink" with "entirely new system for measuring the passage of time," and you've got one of the weirder tech news stories of April 1999.

As *Wired* explained, the Swiss watch company had designed a satellite to advertise its newly created "Swatch Internet Time," which replaced standard hours and minutes with units called "beats." The new "Beatnik" satellite was going to hijack frequencies meant for non-commercial broadcasting, infuriating amateur radio operators. Before the launch, though, Swatch announced that it had donated the batteries to Russia's MIR space station instead – supposedly helping to fix a technical problem on the station.

One expert sounded dubious that this actually happened. But Swatch got some good publicity, the radio operators kept their airspace, and at least a few people thought Internet Time was a pretty good idea.

Earth's next close brush with an asteroid is scheduled for 2027 when an asteroid called 1999 AN10 will pass within roughly 240,000 miles of the Earth. As *Science* reported on April 20th, 1999, the asteroid's original discovery caused some consternation, thanks to a very remote possibility of a future collision with Earth. "A new 'doomsday asteroid' is generating a lot of excitement – and some anger," wrote Govert Schilling.

> *The source of the upheaval, called 1999 AN10, was discovered on 13 January by an automated search camera in Socorro, New Mexico, operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the U.S. Air Force. Andrea Milani of the University of Pisa in Italy and his colleagues, who analyzed its orbit, concluded that the asteroid will pass very close to the Earth in August 2027, and there is an extremely remote possibility that Earth's gravity will alter its orbit in such a way that it will slam into the planet 12 years later, in 2039.*
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> *Milani decided not to call in the press, but he did put up a preprint of a paper about 1999 AN10 on his Web site on 6 April – where it was soon found by Benny Peiser, the moderator of a mailing list on "neocatastrophism." Peiser*

> *concluded that Milani and his colleagues were trying to hide something. "Instead of informing the interested public about their potentially explosive findings, the authors have hidden away their results on an obscure Web page," he wrote in a release posted on 13 April. The next day, the story hit newspaper headlines and Internet news services.*

Milani's colleagues thought he'd appropriately avoided hyping the threat, especially compared to the earlier announcement of 1997 XF11, an asteroid that caused a short panic after astronomers briefly suggested it might be near a possible collision course with Earth.

Kevin Mitnick is one of the world's most famous and prolific hackers, and his exploits have been chronicled in several books and articles. But Adam Penenberg's defense of Mitnick, which was published a month after Mitnick accepted a plea deal with the government, provides an interesting look back at the state of computer crime law and the cultural perception of hacking:

> *Mitnick's crimes were curiously innocuous. He broke into corporate computers, but no evidence indicates that he destroyed data. Or sold anything he copied. Yes, he pilfered software — but in doing so left it behind. This world of bits is a strange one, in which you can take something and still leave it for its rightful owner. The theft laws designed for payroll sacks and motor vehicles just don't apply to a hacker.*
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> *Kevin Mitnick's crime was to thumb his nose at the costly computer security systems employed by large corporations.*

https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/20/18485593/compaq-swatch-crichton-asteroids-this-week-in-tech-20-years-ago-april-1999