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Apocalypse 2012? The Truth About the End of the World

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By [Seth Shostak](#)

published 22 October 2009



A movie still from the new film "2012" depicting the end of the world. (Image credit: Columbia Pictures)

The hype is beginning to invade the cultural landscape like bio-engineered kudzu: the end of the world is a mere three years away.

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In late December, 2012, thanks to an unusual celestial alignment ? or maybe just the expiration date of the Mayan calendar ? our planet will be [wracked and ruined](#).? Look on the bright side: you can blow off your estimated tax payments for that year.

Hollywood producers ? never ones to miss a silver lining ? are hoping to make some hay with Earth's imminent quietus. A [soon-to-be-released film](#), bearing the inventive title ?2012?, will let you see just how visually stunning doomsday can be.

The brouhaha has got some people's knickers in a knot. Scientists have waded into this sticky chaffon of pseudoscience and hyperbole, and told everyone to cool it. The end is not nigh, guy.? After all, the apocalypse is routinely predicted, but always fails to appear.?

This isn't just a reference to the somber forecasts of the Heaven's Gate crowd, or other dire warnings at the turn of the millennium ? forecasts that were wildly inaccurate. No, you have to consider the big picture: There's been life on this planet for nearly four billion years, and nothing ? not asteroids, gamma ray bursts, shifting magnetic poles, or the occasional supernova ? *nothing* has managed to snuff it out. Life's tougher than a leather sandwich.

The idea that the Mayan calendar could tell you when the world is going to end is straight-out goofy. Heck, if the Mayans were this good at divining the future, you'd think their empire would still be around. As for cosmic alignments ? well, they happen all the time, and no one seems the worse for wear. And indeed, what difference could they make? Work it out: even when Jupiter is closest to Earth, the force it exerts on our world is 20 thousand times weaker than that exerted by the Sun every day (and the influence of the other planets is far less than Jupiter's).?

So except for those benighted souls who insist on confounding movies with reality, the whole thing is a tempest in a teacup, right? Isn't that what all the sciency types will be writing once the film hits the multiplex?

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Of course it is. But there's also this: doomsday for humans really *will* happen, at least if a few hundred million extinct species are any precedent. It's been estimated that 99.9 percent of all the critters that ever wiggled or waddled across this planet are past tense.

In other words, and despite the fact that we blithely think of ourselves as the crown of creation, we're no more Nature's ultimate product than '56 Chevys were the last of the cars. Our species will come to an end, and, presumably, be replaced by a new model.

But not yet. Not in 2012. And the reason is what I call the ?why now?? factor, which is really only a temporal version of the Copernican principle. Stated in simple terms, today's not likely to be a special time.

Here's an example. Many people are convinced that aliens have come to Earth to abduct humans. But why now? Why is it that, given 10,000 generations of human history, the aliens are bestowing their unwanted attentions on people *today*? That's like winning the lottery, even if the prize is not as savory as a pile of cash.

Princeton physicist J. Richard Gott exploited this idea a decade or so ago to gauge everything from cosmic timescales to the run of Broadway plays. A simplified Gott calculation of *Homo sapiens*' tenure would go like this: Adopting the ?why now?? philosophy, we can say with 98 percent certainty that humankind is neither in the first 1 percent of its existence, nor in its last 99 percent. Doing the arithmetic, that implies our species has something between two thousand years and twenty million years to go.

Those numbers don't include ruin in 2012.

But of course you might argue that the ?why now?? principle doesn't hold because we're making today special by wrecking the world. Just about any school kid can rattle off schemes for turning humankind into exhibit fodder for the museums of the future: climate change, nuclear war, pandemics, or just [depletion of essential resources](#).?

As bad as these contemporary troubles might be, it's hard to argue these threats could wipe biology from the face of the Earth.

And in any case, the type of doomsday scenarios examined in films such as ?2012? aren't destruction at our own hand. They are lugubrious calamities caused by external factors (e.g., pernicious galactic alignments). For such external phenomena, which take scant notice of humans, the ?why now?? principle applies.?

To think otherwise is merely to assume that the cosmos revolves around us. And that idea was given the boot more than 500 years

ago.

- [Top 10 Ways to Destroy Earth](#)
- [World to End in 2012 \(Check Back for Updates\)](#)
- Video - Collision Watch: The Asteroid Threat

Seth Shostak is the author of *Confessions of an Alien Hunter*.

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Seth Shostak is an astronomer at the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute in Mountain View, California, who places a high priority on communicating science to the public. In addition to his many academic papers, Seth has published hundreds of popular science articles, and not just for Space.com; he makes regular contributions to NBC News MACH, for example. Seth has also co-authored a college textbook on astrobiology and written three popular science books on SETI, including "Confessions of an Alien Hunter" (National Geographic, 2009). In addition, Seth hosts the SETI Institute's weekly radio show, "Big Picture Science."



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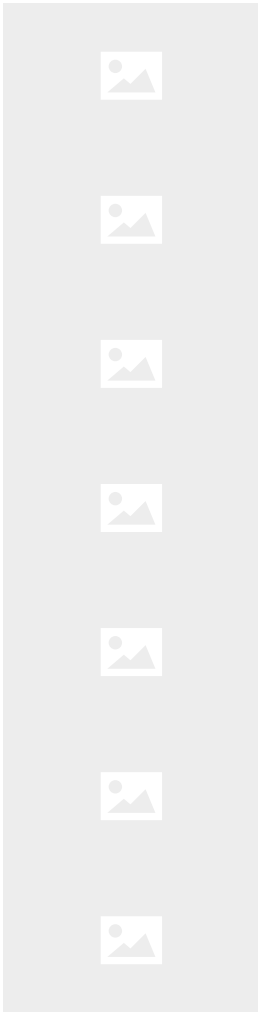


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