

we write about the things we build and the things we consume

 written by Tom McAdam on 7 March 2016 in engineering

expecting the unexpected

Warning: this is a bit of a rant post.

Expecting the unexpected is good practice in a bunch of situations, such as planning for an Arctic solo trek or a complex release, but when I'm using an API or a library it's the last thing I should need to do.

We were recently looking at a small bug in outputting data from [Atlas](#), where the end of availability date for a [location](#) was always being output as "now". Weird. The effect was that, instead of saying that a particular piece of on-demand content was available in perpetuity, we were actually saying that it is about to be no longer be. It took only a couple of minutes to hunt down, and about as many again to write a test and to fix, but was frustrating.

It turns out that `DateTimeFormatter` `print` method in the [Joda](#) library has quite a surprising interpretation of nulls. Rather than, y'know, throwing a `NullPointerException` when asking to format a null reference, it decides to treat `null` as now. Interesting. Given that, and the fact that in Atlas we represent "no end date" with a `null`, we had a problem. Now, the Joda behaviour is documented:

Prints a `ReadableInstant` to a `String`.

This method will use the override zone and the override chronology [\[sic\]](#) if they are set. Otherwise it will use the chronology and zone of the instant.

Parameters: instant - instant to format, *null means now*

Returns: the printed result

But hey, that's somewhat beside the point. It's not exactly how one would expect the `print` method to behave if passed a null reference. Remember, folks, when you're writing an API or some code others are going to use, put yourself in their shoes: how would you expect it to work? Let's all do our part in keeping that [astonishment to a minimum](#).

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