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Taking first steps with the new Christmas computer

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the first of seven columns by Steve Kellman, our newsroom computer wonk, on what to do with that new computer the Big Elf dragged down your chimney. It assumes that the reader is a first-time computer owner who has a PC loaded with Windows 95, word processing and other basic software, a printer, modem and CD-ROM player.*

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It's Christmas Day and you've just unpacked that new computer you've always wanted. Now what?

Like most Americans, you probably have more than a passing knowledge of PCs, but you may not have owned one of your own. Sure, the one at the office is great for entering data and playing the occasional game of Solitaire when the boss isn't looking, but what do you do now that you have your own machine humming?

For starters, take a look at the screen. Along the left-hand side, you'll see a row of icons. This is known as the "desktop." The icons represent the computer's hard drive, software programs on it and documents created with the programs.

Also included - in a bow to earth-friendly waste management practices - is a Recycle Bin icon to deposit documents (and programs) no longer needed. They remain in the bin (you can tell by the papers sticking out of the top) until you empty it by clicking on the bin's icon with the right mouse button.

A word about the mouse. Throughout Windows 95, basic tasks like opening a document or starting a program are done by clicking a menu item or double-clicking on the appropriate icon with the left mouse button. More advanced tasks are often done with a click of the right.

OK, let's move on to the Start button in the lower left-hand corner of your screen. You can click with the left button to pull up "menus" listing available software programs, previously opened documents and computer settings. If the Start button is not visible, move your cursor (arrow) to the corner and it should pop up.

You'll see that some of the listed menu items have arrows to the right of them, leading to more menus, or lists. Pull up those menus by placing your cursor on the item with the arrow (no clicking is necessary), and then moving the cursor to the item you want in the new menu. Click to open up the item.

Software programs and folders appear in "windows." Any window (and the program it represents) can be closed down by clicking on the small X button at the upper right-hand corner. Clicking on the button that looks like a window to the left of that will enlarge or shrink the window. Clicking on the button to the left of THAT - the minus button - closes the window but leaves the program running. You can open the window again by clicking the corresponding button at the bottom of the screen in the taskbar, the same place where you found the Start button.

So, do you want to customize your desktop? Maybe change the wallpaper, which is computer-speak for the color or pattern that serves as a background to your desktop.

If you do, right-click anywhere on the desktop other than on an icon or window. Up pops a menu allowing the user to straighten up all those desktop icons, create a new folder or document, or change desktop "properties." Click on Properties and you will see a window that allows you to change the color or pattern of desktop wallpaper, desktop appearance and computer monitor properties. You also can customize the screen saver, a built-in software program that turns your computer screen into an asteroid field or a contorted, rainbow-colored Slinky if you wait long enough.

Experimenting with the options available in the desktop properties window will give you a sense of the thousands of ways you can change the look of your computer.

One last thing: You can find that Solitaire program by clicking on the Start button. With the mouse, move the cursor to the Programs menu, and then from there to the Accessories and Games menus where you can click on Solitaire. Go ahead and play; it's a great way to learn the basics about getting around inside Windows 95.

And hey, you don't have to worry about a boss breathing down your neck. It's your computer.

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