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Computer crashes - when doom becomes more than a game

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the second 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.*

By STEVE KELLMAN
Record-Eagle Staff Writer

One thing you can be sure of when operating a computer is that, sooner or later, it will crash.

As consumers demand the latest gee-whiz software for running multimedia presentations or accessing the Internet, programmers are working overtime writing the software to run them. Along the way, old-fashioned reliability is sacrificed in the name of cutting-edge technology.

Of course, being able to run 3D games with spectacular sound effects on your computer doesn't mean much when it just ate your electronic tax forms the day before they are due.

Though there is no sure-fire way to avoid crashes altogether, there are a few ways to minimize them - or their impact.

Some programs have "autosave" features that automatically update the file you are working on every few minutes, meaning that at the worst you will only lose several minutes' worth of work. In recent versions of Microsoft Word, the feature can be found by choosing the Options item under the Tools menu. Clicking on the Save item in the window that pops up allows you to activate the feature (by clicking on the square next to it) and set how often a file is automatically saved.

One way to get out of a frozen program is to hit the Ctrl, Alt and Delete keys on your keyboard at the same time. That will bring up a screen giving you several options, from returning to the program to closing it down and returning to the desktop. Unfortunately, those options rarely work and your one remaining choice is usually to hit Ctrl, Alt and Delete again and restart your computer.

Better yet is to stick with reliable software that is less likely to crash your PC in the first place. Jim Bolinski, service manager for ComputerLand in Traverse City, said many problems are caused by people trying to run outdated software on newer computers.

"There's a lot of what I call junkware out there, $5 and $10 CD-ROMs that typically have games on them," he said.

One way to avoid the junkware is to make sure that your software was specifically written for your operating system. A note on the package saying "Compatible with Windows" is not enough if you're running Windows 95. Look for a note saying it was "Designed for Windows 95."

Many computer "problems" are due to people failing to read the manual, Bolinski said.

"In most cases, it's people who have purchased plug-and-play devices like modems or CD-ROM players that they are trying to add on to their computers," he said. "We've had a dozen calls over the last week from people simply plugging their computer speakers into the wrong hole.

"My biggest recommendation would be for people to read the instructions and not be in a hurry."