What causes a program to be marked as "new" on the Start menu?

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One of the features new in the Windows XP Start menu is that "newly-installed" programs are highlighted. Before discussing the rules, a quick backgrounder on why the feature exists at all.

Research revealed that one of the tasks people had trouble with was installing a new program and running it. The step that the "new programs" feature tries to assist with is the "running it" part. In our tests, we found that people who managed to muddle through a program's setup got stuck at the "Okay, why don't you play the game now that you've installed it?" step because they couldn't figure out how to get to that program. That's why there's a balloon that pops up saying "Psst. That program you just installed? It's over here." And then there's a "yellow brick road" leading you through the Start menu to the program launch point itself.

What are the rules that control whether a program counts as "newly-installed"? The basic idea is simple: The Start menu looks for shortcuts that were recently created and point to files that were recently created. If there are multiple shortcuts to the same program, only one of them is chosen. (No point highlighting two shortcuts to the same thing.) Once you've run a program, it is no longer marked as "new".

But then there are a bunch of rules, based on feedback from our research, that "tweak" the results by removing candidates from the list:

- Things that aren't even programs. Example: A shortcut to a text file.
- Shortcuts in the Startup group, since they are already run for you automatically.
- Shortcuts more than a week old. Clearly you aren't interested in those any more.

- Shortcuts that should be ignored because they aren't really programs. Some people felt that they had to run every single highlighted program "because the computer told me to", so we had to un-highlight the ones that either aren't really all that important or are downright dangerous.
  - Online help disguised as programs. Examples: "XYZ Read Me", "XYZ Documentation", "What's New in XYZ 2.0".
  - Product support disguised as programs. Example: "XYZ Support Center".
  - Application management disguised as programs. Examples: "Uninstall XYZ", "XYZ Feature Setup", "INSTALL.EXE".

  You can imagine the excitement that reigned when "Uninstall XYZ" was highlighted on the Start menu and one of those "the computer told me to" people was sitting at the computer.

- Shortcuts to programs which are being used as file viewers rather than as programs in their own right. Examples: "explorer.exe", "rundll32.exe", "quikview.exe".
- Shortcuts to programs which were already installed before you installed Windows. These programs are obviously not new, even though you may never have run them. Before this rule was put into effect, upgrading a computer resulted in every single old program being highlighted because the Windows XP Start menu said, "Well, I've never seen you run any of these programs; they all must be new."
- Shortcuts to programs which were installed within one hour of installing Windows. Although these programs are "new" in the strict sense of the word, they were clearly installed by whoever set up the computer and not by the end user. Therefore, there is no need for a "yellow brick road" to find them. Before this rule was put into effect, a person who bought a computer with a dozen programs preinstalled would turn on their computer Christmas morning and be greeted with a wall of yellow programs.

Wow, that's a lot of tweaks. But each one was to address a real-world scenario that was found during research and testing.

A typographical note: The correct capitalization is "Start menu" with a capital S and a small m. (I got it wrong for the first several years as well until somebody corrected me.) Not that anybody pays any attention to what I say about how things should be called.

[Raymond is currently away; this message was pre-recorded.]

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