Win-Test – A French Twist on Contest Logging

Win-Test is a relatively new entry in the Windows contest logging field. Project leader Olivier Le Cam, F5MZN is a very active contester, deeply involved with FY5KE contest efforts. While contesters in France and elsewhere in Europe have been using Win-Test for some time, it was only last fall that Olivier and Laurent Haas, F6FVY, began making a concerted effort to publicize it in English and on this side of the Atlantic. Win-Test provides all of the tools for serious contesting, and a few that are particularly noteworthy. We'll get into those below. It deserves serious consideration, along with Writelog and N1MM Logger, if you are think about a new contest logging program.

Writing close on the heels of my review of N1MM Logger (NCJ, May-June 2005), I was struck by how different the design philosophy of Win-Test is. First, there currently is no provision for anything other than CW and phone contesting. This greatly simplifies the program and reduces the risk of misconfiguring it, although the authors have announced plans for an MMTTY-based RTTY module in the next major version (Version 3).

Second, the part of the program reserved for entry of QSO data is a direct clone of the CT entry window, and the only QSO-logging commands supported by the program are CT-style – Insert, + and so on. There is no "mode" distinction between running and S&P. The great advantage of this is that new operators coming to the program from CT – in a multi-op situation, for example – will have a very short basic learning curve. The disadvantage is that the program forgoes the opportunity to improve on a user interface that is almost 20 years old. Recently, on the Win-Test reflector, the authors announced their intention to provide a "TR-type" user interface in Version 3.

Setup

Win-Test's minimum hardware requirements are stated to be a 166 MHz Pentium with 32 MB of RAM, and any Windows operating system from Windows 95 on. Of course, later operating systems like Windows XP require far more than that simply to run the OS, but in any case the hardware should not be a hurdle. In my testing, I used a 2.6 GHz Pentium with 384 MB of RAM, under Windows XP home.

After installing the software, the first step is to define an initial contest; Win-Test uses a different data file for each one. Contest-specific settings, including scenarios and the definitions of CW function keys, are stored in the contest database. This means that last year's tested and proven CW messages and the like can readily be imported into this year's contest folder for quick set-up.

The contest setup dialog itself is admirably simple and straightforward. About 50 international contests are supported; although such U.S. standbys as Sweepstakes, the NA QSO Parties, and various state QSO parties are not. There are pre-configured databases for a number of contests on the Win-Test web site at http://download.win-test.com/databases/.

Once you have done this, the next step is to define external interfaces, such as radio communications ports, CW and PTT ports. This process is fairly easy, although I had trouble finding configuration information for the various radios, and no default values are provided during setup. Additional serial ports (beyond the usual two ports for radios) can be used for serial port networking or communications with a packet TNC or other external devices. A simplified Ethernet network, which imposes some limitations on synchronization of logs between computers, is available for multi-transmitter stations now, and a log synchronization facility is promised in Version 3.

Connecting to a DX Cluster via telnet is a little complicated. The authors have opted to use a separate Telnet application, called wtDXTelnet and available on the Win-Test web site, to handle that task. WtDXTelnet passes Telnet data to the main program through the Ethernet communications interface. Once installed and set up, this arrangement worked well, feeding packet spots directly onto the bandmaps for my radios and integrating well with Win-Test for spotting and querying the cluster network. The authors say that it also makes it easy to feed spots to multiple computers in a multi-op station.

Operating

On-screen, the program both resembles and departs from the appearance of other Windows logging programs. The screenshot (Figure 1) shows what I mean. As a Windows XP user, I was struck by how crisp and compact-seeming the individual windows are, as compared with those generated by Windows XP. For the most part, the title bars of the individual windows can also be recolored to aid spotting them easily on a crowded monitor screen. Fonts can be changed in size on the fly, and serif/sans-serif type faces can be selected, but a slash-zero font is available only in the sans-serif typeface.

The logging area (actually part of the main background window) looks and works like CT. When running two radios, selection of the second radio is indicated by a white highlight in the current log line. To dupe a station heard on the second radio, you just press “*” to switch radios, enter the callsign, and, if you need to return to the primary radio to continue a run, press the “*” key again. The logging line reverts to its original appearance, but the callsign from the second radio is stored until you can get back to it again.

In January of this year, a secondary radio window was added, which provides a separate logging area for the second radio, so that you can continue logging operations on the primary radio in parallel with dupe-checking or CQing on the other radio.

Win-Test offers the option of either graphical “slide-rule-dial” bandmaps or lists arranged by frequency. A double click on a spot will move the radio to that frequency and enter the call in the logging interface, while color coding tells you whether a station is a dupe, a new QSO or a multiplier. Spot-to-spot navigation is also available through Ctrl + Arrow keys, although there is no option to jump only to multipliers. Each bandmap also displays how many stations, new stations and multipliers are available on the selected band at any given time.

Another essential is the Check Multiplier window, which crisply displays a number of items of interest when a callsign is entered in the logging area. If you have worked the station on other bands, those QSOs’ information is displayed; if you have worked other stations for the mult, those stations are displayed on the appropriate bands. Azimuth, country, and sunrise/sunset times are all displayed as well. The Check Multiplier window cannot display more than one multiplier, so it defaults to the country. In a contest like CQWW, the zone status is only displayed in text form below the logging area, although a small “Worked Zone” window is available that identifies zones that are still needed on the current band.

An extensive set of drop-down menus and icons for the most commonly needed functions is arrayed across the top of the main window. For most of these, keyboard hot-key alternatives are provided so that you can put your mouse aside. One useful feature is a built-in facility for remapping the keyboard so that operators can customize the operation of the program to fit their preferences (or differences in the layout of various national keyboard designs).

Highlights

Win-Test has teamed with I4UFH, maker of the EZMaster SO2R system, to implement an “Advanced SO2R” capability, designed by CT1BOH. This enables the operator to select from a number of “scenarios” which automate the switching of radios and headphone audio. When operating CW or SSB with canned voice message, this can result in a fairly high degree of automation, and should help to reduce operator fatigue in intense SO2R contesting.

For example, when operating in a heavy pileup, the Win-Test scenario for CQ (the F1 key) would be “$RESET $R2R2 $F1 $RESET $R1R1”. Translating, that means that the EZMaster will put both ears on Radio 2 while Radio 1 is sending a CQ (the contents of the F1 CW message), then put them back on Radio 1. By contrast, in a lighter pileup you can select the scenario “$RESET $R2R2 $F1 $R1R2” which will put both ears on the second radio while the first is sending a CQ, but then revert to one radio in each ear after the CQ is complete. In effect this automatically makes the sort of change that the operator might otherwise

make manually. Scenarios can also permit automatically sending repeat CQs on alternate radios, or restarting a CQ on the run radio whenever the S&P radio is not transmitting. The scenarios can be stepped through manually from the keyboard or selected with the mouse in the secondary radio window.

Full implementation of the advanced SO2R mode requires the use of I4UFH's EZMaster SO2R box, which uses a single USB port for all data. Other standard SO2R boxes may be used with somewhat reduced capability, because the standard LPT port "stereo bit" only allows a choice of 2 states, versus three provided by Win-Test -- both ears on radio 1, both on radio 2, and one on each. A subtler question, which will require operating experience to evaluate properly, is whether the added automation proves on balance useful or confusing to operators who do not spend a great deal of time studying and memorizing the various scenarios, so that it is second nature to know what is happening with each function key press.

An excellent feature of Win-Test is the “N+1” master data window. Using the traditional master.dta file in CT format, this window displays all the calls in the file that vary from it by only one character, to help in identifying and correcting busted calls. It might be better, from the standpoint of conserving screen space, if this information was displayed in the same window as the traditional master data check. Also, there is no provision for a database to store and recall other station-specific data, such as QTH or power in the ARRL DX Contest.

Win-Test’s Statistics window incorporates a very powerful “objectives” function. The user can define target numbers for a wide variety of parameters – everything from QSO rate to multipliers, number of QTCs (for the WAE contest) and even average kilometers per QSO, for VHF+ contests and others where this is important. A separate rates window displays a constantly-updating bar-graph of the last 15 minutes’ QSOs, as well as the usual numeric rate and mult data. One disadvantage is that this window takes up a fair amount of screen real estate, but like all Win-Test windows, it can be layered under other windows with only a corner showing, for ready access when needed.

Win-Test also incorporates a resizable world-map window showing the grey line, which eliminates the need for a separate program to provide that capability.

Issues

The only truly significant issue with Win-Test at this stage is its inadequate user documentation. The only information readily available, other than by right-clicking on each window and experimenting, is a set of HTML files that may be downloaded from the Win-Test web site. These simply define each menu pick and CT-style text commands, and list short-cut keys, supported radios and supported accessories. There is no user manual as such.

Fortunately, I discovered that it is possible to use Google to search the www.win-test.com site, and this process turned up a number of critical pieces of information that are not otherwise available. For example, I was able to find information on the variables used in the Advanced SO2R scenarios by Googling my way to the release notes for version 2.6 of the software. Also, the QuickStart document on the web page is fuller than most, and the Win-Test reflector is a good resource.

The authors are aware of the deficiencies in documentation, and a user manual is in the works, but until it is available its lack will continue to be a serious obstacle to broad adoption of Win-Test.

For further details and to download a 15-day trial version of the software, visit www.win-test.com. The purchase price of the software is 35 Euros (currently about $45), payable through PayPal.. You can subscribe to the Win-Test mailing list by sending an e-mail to support-request@win-test.com, with “subscribe” (without the quotation marks) in the subject line. The public archives of the mailing list are available at http://www.f5mzn.org/pipermail/support/ .