

Windows Contest Simulators – January-February, 2005

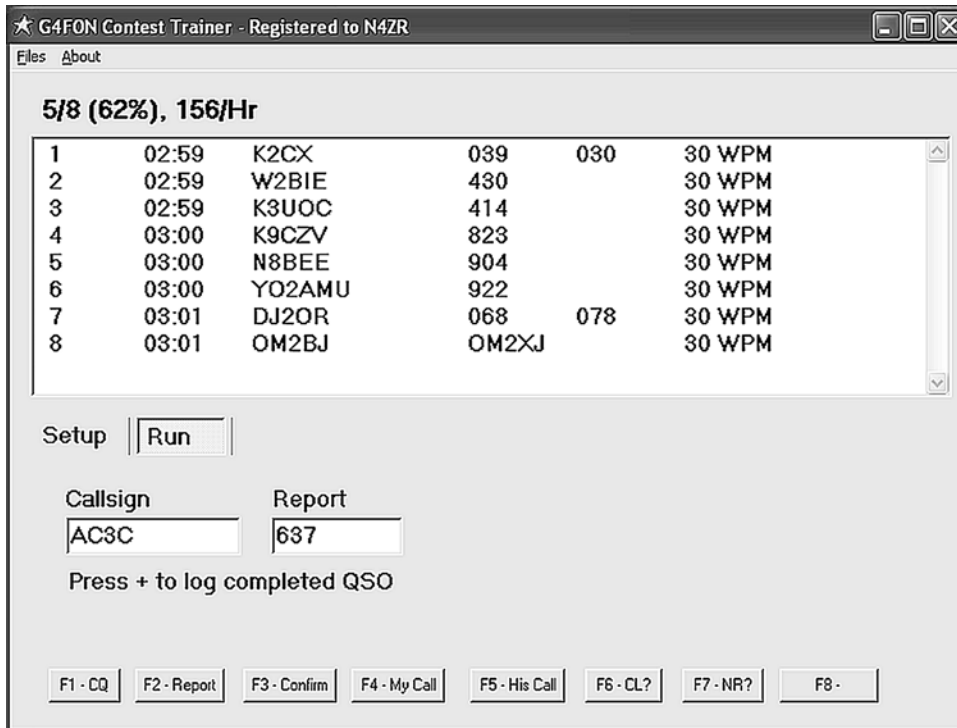
It seems as if Windows XP is becoming more and more common on hamshack computers. I think this is mainly a good thing, particularly from the standpoint of stability. I didn't realize just how much better XP is until I booted up my Windows 98 machine the other day for the first time in a while, and had to deal with its occasional random crashes again.

One of the downsides of XP, however, is that there is no longer a true DOS operating system underlying Windows. Instead, what you get when you open a DOS program is a DOS emulator, which may or may not work properly with some of the DOS programs we're used to.

I recently became aware of this when trying the venerable RUFZ and PED contest trainers on my XP machine. Nothing doing. So then I went looking for XP-friendly trainer/simulators. Fortunately, there are a couple of pretty good options available.

Pilemania! is a freeware simulator written by JA1YDB, available from <http://www.geocities.jp/yasushi_hashi/pilemania/index_e.html>. Pilemania! uses its own set of keystrokes for logging practice QSOs, rather than emulating any of the common contest programs. Its slowest CW speed is 11 wpm; at that speed the sent CW's ratio of dots to dashes seems a little off, and some characters are dropped at slow speeds. More often than not, I found that the speed of the "received" CW did not track the speed control. Currently, Pilemania's only option is a CQWW-type fixed exchange. On the plus side, its simulation of noise and pileup conditions is quite credible. It uses files of actual callsigns, which the user can readily augment with a simple text editor, and it keeps track of any errors you make on the screen. It also has a graphic rate bar chart, which is a convenient way of tracking your progress, and a RUFZ-like "game mode" that increases the speed with each QSO. This one has only been out for a few months, so it is reasonable to suppose that it will be evolving fairly rapidly.

A much more "evolved" simulator comes from G4FON, whose web site is found at www.g4fon.co.uk. This trainer is now in version 2.3, with a license fee of US\$40; a demo is available on the web site. Its simple user interface provides instant feedback on copying errors (Fig.1), which I find very helpful.

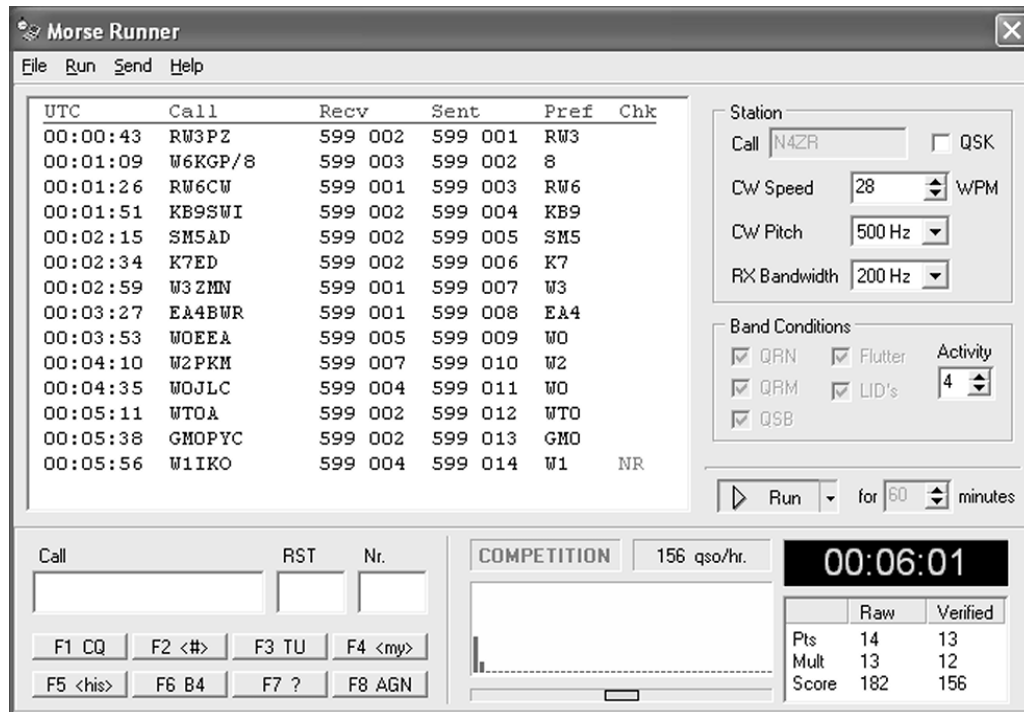


G4FON uses the CT keystrokes as his basic configuration (“Insert” to call the other station and send his report, “+” to log the QSO), but also provides for specifying functions for various keyboard keys so that you can set it up to more nearly emulate whatever logging software you use. The lowest supported speed, for both incoming and outgoing CW, is 12 WPM, but the CW seems excellent at any speed. You can adjust the density of the pileups, the number of stations calling, and the range of speeds they will call at, as well as introducing random QRM and, and occasional buzzy and chirpy signals. One of the things I like best about this one is the ability to specify several different contest formats, including WPX (different serial numbers from each station), CQWW, ARRL Field Day (!) and IOTA.

While other trainers assume a simplified contest model where you CQ and others answer, Cyber CW Contest (by B&B Cyber Software, www.bbcyber.com) has both Run and S&P modes, and provides a virtual receiver you can tune across the “band” to find stations to work or a CQ frequency. The demo mode of Cyber CW Contest is limited to 20 QSOs per “contest” and uses a hard-coded callsign (WZ0XYZ). A licensed copy costs \$54. Unfortunately, the developers didn’t respond to my e-mail, so I didn’t have the opportunity to wring it out enough to give any real comments.

Just as I was putting this column to bed, VE3NEA, the author of DXAtlas, released his freeware trainer, called Morse Runner (www.dxatlas.com). For those of you familiar with his other efforts, it will come as no surprise that this trainer is exceptionally good. It permits speeds down to 10 WPM, and the CW sounds good at that speed. There are a variety of special effects, including very realistic

QRN, QRM, QSB and flutter, as well as a “lids” mode in which the “stations” coming back to you periodically mess up (see Fig. 2). I found myself grabbing for my paddle to send fills, the simulation is that good. The one quibble that experienced N1MM users may have is that if you start sending your exchange before finishing typing the callsign, it is not sent in Morse the first time, but rather is sent as a correction at the end of the QSO.



The simulator operates only in WPX mode (with serial numbers) and emulates N1MM Logger, which in turn emulates CT and TR Log. There are pileup, single signal and competition modes available. For those of you who are competitive even when running a simulator, the competition mode offers the option of doing a 60-minute contest and then reporting it to VE3NEA's web site, where a list of top scores will be maintained and available to users.

A last note this time, which crosses the line a bit into hardware. Many of us would like to be able to use “pure” DOS programs that won't run under the DOS emulation in Windows XP. If you're like me, your machine came with XP already installed. Microsoft's dual-boot arrangement requires re-installing Windows XP after first installing the other operating system, and destroying the existing installation. There are commercial partitioning software packages that will permit adding a DOS (or other Windows) partition to a drive that already has XP installed, but they are expensive and reportedly have had some problems dealing with more recent (Service Pack 1) releases of XP.

Accidentally, I ran into an alternative. I had been looking for a cheap and simple way to transport data easily between my Windows 98 test machine and my main

XP machine. The local office supply megastore had a sale on USB “thumb drives,” the miniature flash memory storage devices that connect to your machine via a USB port. I bought one, and just for fun, decided to see if DOS (and my BIOS) would recognize it. I booted my XP machine to DOS, and sure enough, DOS “saw” the thumb drive as the C drive. Next I loaded TR Log onto the thumb drive, and was able to run it from there, just as if it was on an actual disk drive. Very neat!

A couple of caveats are worth mentioning. Most (maybe all) thumb drives come pre-formatted in FAT16 or FAT32 format. This may be standard for these drives, but is worth checking. DOS cannot “see” the contents of a drive that is formatted with NTFS (the default file system of Windows XP). This is why, when you boot in DOS, DOS “looks past” the Windows XP hard drives to the thumb drive.

Second, everything depends on whether the BIOS and USB implementations of your machine will recognize the thumb drive when it is connected through the USB port. You may not be able to boot from the USB drive, but you can boot from a floppy or bootable CD, assuming you have either type of drive on your machine.

Mark Bailey, KD4D has done a lot of work on making this option even more accessible. He has developed procedures for putting the needed DOS files on the thumb drive, as well as on a CD (for those machines that came without a floppy drive). The full story and step-by-step instructions are available on the PVRC web site <www.pvrc.org>, in the Tips section of the Reference menu.

That’s all for this time. Please let me know what software you think ought to be reviewed here, so this column can evolve in the directions you want.