

Get Your Game On...

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Following up last month's editorial on "Looking Back at a Year of Looking Back," I think it's appropriate to start 2021, our 77th year of publication, with a look ahead. This year will be one of new beginnings ... a new decade, a new sunspot cycle, new leadership for the FCC with whatever that may portend for amateur radio. As I write this, we're also on the cusp of having a vaccine for the coronavirus, and the new year will hopefully bring us a return to some semblance of normalcy.

Amateur radio has been a great antidote to the restrictions imposed in many places to help slow the spread of the virus. Social distancing, or what we've been calling social DXing, has been a part of ham radio's fabric since its earliest days, a means of bringing people together even when we're physically distanced from each other. That was never clearer than in the past year, as clubs expanded on-air nets and meetings and participation records were set across the board in contests. We hope this trend of increased activity will continue even after the pandemic is brought under control.

We also hope the FCC will act soon on the ARRL's long-stalled "Technician enhancement" proposal to provide expanded HF privileges to half of our community. The sun is starting to wake up and HF DXing opportunities will be growing. Giving Techs "a slice of the pie" will hopefully get many more hams hooked on DXing and hungry enough for more that they want to upgrade and get access to much larger chunks of our HF bands.

We also hope to see more hams making better use of the bands at the high end of our spectrum, above 1 GHz (see last April's "Zero Bias," "The Gigahertz Imperative," and November's "News Bytes" column on the coming loss of our 3.3-GHz band). Keep the gigahertz in mind for a minute while I switch back to a topic I touched on in October, the ongoing challenge of recruiting more young people into amateur radio. I'm going to put these together into a challenge for the coming year:

A popular activity among many young people today is competitive video games, generally played over the internet. Current game consoles are designed with connectivity in mind. But with so many adults working from home these days, as well as kids doing remote learning, there's a lot of competition for available internet bandwidth. Here's the challenge: Let's combine video game technology with amateur radio digital networking technology and our microwave bands to build a ham radio video game network. We could start locally and then expand our networks, as we did with packet radio a generation ago. The technological pieces are there already and the concept of a "private" (vs. the internet) video game network should be appealing to many young people, particularly those who are technically-oriented and may become equally fascinated with network-building as they are with gaming. Remember, ham radio is a technical "playground" like none other. Parents may like it, too, as it would reduce the incidence of problems sometimes associated with internet gaming networks.

Some of you may say that video gaming on the ham bands is incompatible with what ham radio is all about. But it really isn't any different from the long-established tradition among some hams of playing chess over the radio (except that the chess pieces may come to life and try to blow each other up!).

Likewise, there's a longstanding tradition among some hams of using amateur frequencies to "pilot" radio-control (R/C) aircraft and boats. It is specifically permitted under FCC rules (see Section 97.215, Telecommand of Model Craft). There are even more than a dozen designated R/C frequencies on the 6-meter band plan. Nobody does R/C flying anymore, you say? Really? What do you think drones are? Let's look at what's involved in

modifying drone controllers to operate in the ham bands. Maybe we could combine ham-band control transmissions with video feeds on ATV (amateur television) frequencies to permit hams to operate unmanned aircraft (within FAA safety rules) at higher power and over longer distances than unlicensed drones, and with less possibility for interference among multiple users in a specific area. Imagine the advantages that could provide for emergency communication groups using drones to help authorities with damage assessments or to monitor the spread of wildfires.

There might be a few technological issues to be overcome in the process of setting up and organizing ham-band gaming networks, but that would actually be a good thing, as it would promote involvement with the broader amateur radio community and, perhaps, an introduction to other competitive ham radio activities, such as foxhunting and contesting. Same story for modifying drone transmitters to operate on ham bands (although more likely on 2.4 GHz than 6 meters). The technical challenges will likely prompt more involvement with the general ham community.

This challenge is directed primarily to the VHF / UHF / microwave, digital, and YOTA (Youth on the Air) segments of our community to come together and explore the possibilities. But many more of you may have contributions to make as well. Hopefully, such collaboration will produce ideas and activities that I haven't even thought about thinking about. Our friends at HamSCI might also want to get involved, to translate interest in gaming networks to support their distributed citizen science projects. The possibilities are endless.

CQ will be happy to use our pages to share ideas, circuits, etc., in developing such networks and interfaces between game consoles and radios, or building a ham radio drone and ATV network, or whatever else may come out of any col-laborations that result. Are you up to the challenge? I've droned on long enough. Let's get our game on ...

This and That ...

This month's issue covers a variety of topics, with a tilt toward the technical side. We've got topics ranging from refurbishing a 1950s-vintage Collins receiver to an introduction to baluns (which seem to be a great mystery to many of us), and even an introduction to greeblies.

By the time you read this issue, we will hopefully have a new Awards Editor. I've spoken with several excellent candidates and plan to make a selection soon. As of now, we're still looking for a new VHF Editor, as K8ZR has had to step down due to increased responsibilities at his day job. If you've got your finger on the pulse of the VHF / UHF / microwave world, have at least a little bit of writing skill (we can help) and time to produce a monthly column, drop me a note and let's talk.

A couple of sad notes from the rest of ham-world ... as you'll read in our News Bytes column, the 900-ton instrument platform at Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory collapsed on December 1st. The iconic radio-telescope is full of ham radio connections.

In addition, Universal Radio in Ohio has announced its closing, although its mail order arm will remain open for a while to liquidate its inventory. Fred and Barbara Osterman have been leading figures in the hobby radio industry for decades, and their decision to retire and close the business will leave a big hole — specifically in the area of shortwave receivers, a specialty of theirs that has been underappreciated by other dealers. We wish Fred and Barbara well, and we'll miss them.

Finally, HAPPY NEW YEAR! And may 2021 be a much, much better year for all of us than 2020.

— 73, Rich, W2VU