Brooke Allen, N2BA / brooke.t.allen@gmail.com

Game Design for Contesters — Part 2: Fun

Game designers can teach us how to make everything more fun.

I always found some contests more fun than others, but until recently I had no idea why. Game designers say that a game *enables* an experience, but the game is *not* the experience. What they mean is that you can create rules for a really cool game, and if players don't like the experience of playing, then they won't like the game. If you swapped the dates of the CQ World Wide 160 Meter CW and ARRL Field Day, the rules might stay the same, but the experiences would be *very* different. Few people would think pitching a tent in the snow or battling summer QRN is fun. But, what *is* fun exactly?

Pleasure with Surprise

For Valentine's Day I would usually get roses or a box of chocolates for my wife (N2GSG). One year, however, I passed a clown supply house, and that sparked an idea. When she opened the heart-shaped box she did not find the chocolates she expected but rather a dozen red *noses*. The following year I gave her a dozen pairs of red stockings (ie, "*hoses*"). The third year I gave her a dozen red roses, and she was surprised, since that now was the last thing she expected. An anticipated gift can be pleasant, but to make it fun, make it a surprise.

Holding down 14.167 for a Sunday afternoon European run can feel like work, but when a new African or Asian mult calls off the side of the beam, *that* is fun. Hand me a Bud Lite at the end of Field Day, and I'll thank you, but give me a pint of Doctor Morton's Clown Poison (4.4 percent alcohol), and you'll make my weekend.

A surprise can add fun even if it is a negative one. If you look at the flow channel from Part 1, you'll notice that if you stay in the pleasant region too long, you can drift into boredom. A stressful challenge can bring back the fun. Usually the most *pleasant* thing I can think of doing at 2 AM Saturday is going to sleep, but that wouldn't be *fun*.

In the early 1980s I was operating 20 meters from W3MM when I fell asleep with my finger on the rotator control. It was a prop-pitch motor that didn't have an automatic stop, so I wound the coax around the mast until it ripped off the beam. Climbing the tower at night in a snowstorm sure woke me up, and having my bare hand freeze to a tower rung was rather unpleasant. It was the unusual nature of the experience that made it memorable, and, in a weird way, sort of fun. I will never forget that contest — nor will W3MM let me.

It is not the game that counts, but the player's experience of the game.

When designing a game, you want to ask yourself in what ways is it fun and how can it be *more* fun? One solution is to add more elements of surprise. For example, the typical second day of a 160 meter contest or the ARRL DX from the DX side can get pretty tedious, unless the first day's conditions were poor, so there is still some surprise left for the second half.

If you can't change the rules of the contest, you might be able to add your own challenge to keep things interesting. One year in Antigua I challenged my young sons to a mosquito bite contest. Because they were busy doing fun things all day, they each managed to collect a few dozen without effort. I lost the challenge; my bite count stayed low because I snatched mosquitoes out of the air whenever the keyer was sending "CQ." That kept my butt in the chair, and I set a new North America 40 meter record.

The Experience is in the Player

It is not the *game* that counts, but the player's *experience* of the game. A few equally matched players in a "symmetric" game will usually have very similar experiences. Chess is not much fun if one player can win handily. For a race among five runners to be fun, the outcome can-

not be known for certain in advance. But in massively multi-player games like the Boston Marathon, *World of Warcraft* and the CQ World Wide DX Contest, the game offers very different experiences to different people.

Are you old enough to remember my favorite computer game from the 1970s — Colossal Cave Adventure[1] — with its "twisty little passages all different?" You would explore a cave and discover puzzles to solve and treasure to take. Programmers at Essex University in the United Kingdom soon created a multi-user version of a similar game, which eventually they hooked up to the Arpanet (the precursor to the Internet). This class of game came to be known as multi-user dungeons (MUDs), and they are generally viewed as the earliest virtual worlds implemented on computers.

One of the developers, Richard Bartle, began researching the personality types of the people he observed playing in the MUDs. He proposed a simple taxonomy[2] that groups people into four player types — *achievers, explorers, socialisers* (note: UK spelling), and *killers* — based upon the way in which the player interacts with the multi-user game world and with other players.

Bartle's research was based on interactions in a game that did not have a scoring mechanism or rankings — what game designers call "leader boards" and what we call "results." However, his analysis applies to all sorts of endeavors, from radio contests to career choices. Gamers can take Bartle's personality test on the Web (**www.gamerdna.com/quizzes/bartle-test-of-gamer-psychology**). It sure would be interesting if someone would adapt this test to Amateur Radio contesters.

Achievers want to master the game, and they care most about winning. Their score is an important part of the game for them, and they want to see themselves up near the top of the rankings. If there is a choice between sitting in a pileup for a juicy new country and holding a run frequency, they will do what helps their score the most.

Explorers enjoy interacting with the contest more than with other participants.

To an explorer ZD8Z isn't a person but a game element, and a 10 meter opening is not an opportunity to up the run rates but an interesting phenomenon to be investigated. Explorers will hang out on the low bands well after sunrise, because they enjoy seeing what kind of weird propagation they will experience, or they might put more effort into building and tweaking their stations than actually operating.

Socialisers enjoy interacting with other players on a human level. Exchanging signal reports at 220 QSOs per hour does not float a socialiser's boat, and that is why they might prefer being part of a support crew for a multi-multi effort. Field Day is probably the best event for socialisers, where I've often found hams put more beer in the belly than contacts in the log.

Killers are in many ways the most interesting of Bartle's player types. They prefer to act *upon* other players rather than interact *with* them. This unfortunate term comes from the fact that in multi-user role-playing games some participants in a raid will help you slay the dragon and then turn on you and lop off your head. For these players it isn't good enough that they win; they want to know that *you lose*.

However, many people who act upon others *help* rather than harm. Killer personality types run a spectrum: Teachers, salesmen, lawyers, cops and robbers can all fall into this category. Both the guy who interferes with a pileup and the Official Observer might be categorized as killers. In the online world, killers can make or break a game, and if you try to put up barriers to keep them out, they might try to find ways to crash your party. It is usually better to put killers on rails and give them a way of participating that appeals to their instincts. Often you can deputize a killer and task that person with rooting out players who break the rules.

Players are on a Journey.

Players have different experiences of a game, depending upon their playing level. The process of welcoming a player to a game is called "on-boarding," and this is a critical time in the player's journey. For modern computer games, on-boarding needs to be fast and intuitive or a potential player will move on to something else. There is a rule of thumb that you want the player to get to level 10 in 10 minutes. There seems to be something psychologically appealing to that number, irrespective of whether the game has 20 levels or 1000.

Often that earliest experience begins with a tutorial that's followed by a series of puzzles. Once players have learned a few things they feel vested in the game. In 1966, within days after my license arrived (WN2RWY) I qualified for the Rag Chewer's Club. As I recall, the certificate was free, and the only requirement was that you have a 30 minute contact with another member. Because my high school club already had a few members, I was able to qualify early enough to put it on my first batch of QSL cards. My Novice license arrived in the mail, but I wasn't really on board until the RCC certificate showed up. Next was WAC, and, while pursuing DXCC, I stumbled upon contests. Now that the ARRL has dropped the RCC, I wonder what serves this purpose nowadays.

The "Pre-License"

Can you imagine a day when potential hams begin by participating in contests months or even years *before* getting a license? Enter your name, country, and e-mail address into your computer and you are automatically assigned a pre-license ID of the form that SWLs are issued. A tutorial might take you through the logging software, using recorded contacts. Eventually you might "work" other players over the Internet, and during live contests you might be able to copy along with real ham stations that stream their audio over the Internet. License test questions might be integrated into the software, and you might need to answer questions in order to unlock new features.

Having someone greet you when you first join a game can be critical to on-boarding. We call these people "Elmers," and game designers call them "elder players." They show you the ropes, and more important, make you feel like you have a friend.

Once on board with the game, the goal is to get novices to play regularly, and for this you want the game to be available 24/7. Here we fall down. We have some contest training software, but nothing that budding contesters can do together every day in preparation for those big weekends. Imagine that the only way to prepare for the Boston Marathon was on a treadmill, and you weren't allowed to go running with a friend. Perhaps, just as we have QRP calling frequencies, we can establish "contest frequencies," where contest-style exchanges are the norm anytime.

Economists try to explain human motivators, but they often discount one of the most powerful: Status. This is not lost on game designers, and status plays a major role in what is arguably the largest commercial game of all, the airlines' frequent flyer programs. Humans measure status relative to others, and I get a kick out of the fact that the peon line at the airline check-in counter often is shorter than the one for the hordes with "elite status." People would rather stand on a longer "priority boarding" line than be seen as a commoner.

Game players derive a sense of status by observing how they rank relative to others. In the earliest days of arcade games you might drop a few quarters, play for three minutes, achieve a score of 1330 points and feel proud of your accomplishment until you are told that someone with the initials CM scored 972,200 points. Modern social games seldom show you the entire leader board but rather perhaps two players above and two below. This keeps you from being discouraged and, as you progress through the game, you make new friends. We do a bit of this with differing contest entry categories, but we also might consider establishing leagues, where once you achieve a certain score you "level-up" into a new league where you
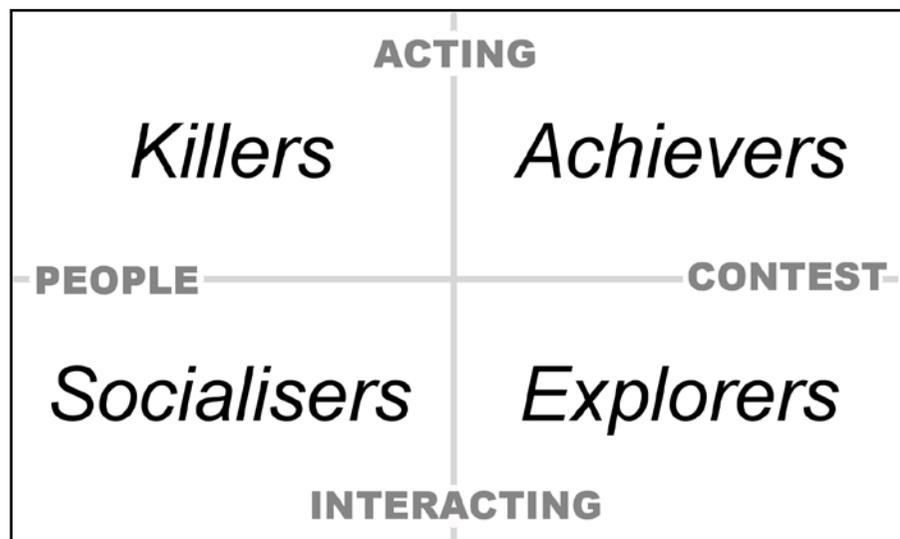

Figure 1 — Bartle's gamer types, adapted to contests Instead of game worlds

start near the bottom again.

Players can be members of factions and can have differing roles and status within each. For example, the massively multi-player online role playing game called *World of Warcraft* has two factions that participate in an epic battle. Members of the Alliance can be *humans, dwarves, gnomes, night elves* and *draenei*. Horde members can be *orcs*, *trolls, tauren, undead* and *blood elves.* Players also choose a role, each of which has strengths and weaknesses. For example, *warriors* are heavily armed fighters, while *mages* do damage with spells, and *priests* tend to be healers. We could offer more behavior-defining roles. For example imagine that before a contest you had to choose either to run or S&P exclusively.

In similar fashion we have our own battles — the one among the FRC, YCCC and PVRC being the most epic of all. Within each team there are classes, from the QRPer and single-band single op to the big multi-multis. Historically, clubs have been formed around geography, although some contests allow teams to come together across geographical boundaries. Can we do more?

Pervasive games are played in the real world, often involving participants who don't know they are in a game. For example, I once ran a scavenger hunt in a city where participants had to collect menus from Chinese restaurants, matchbooks from bars, and jokes from people on the street. The DXCC is an example of such a contest that ropes in non-contesters. Likewise, my friends and I in our high school ham radio club would often create contests of our own design. The people who worked us over the weekend didn't know we were in competition. Imagine contests where you actually had to collect interesting information from your contacts, such as their friends' call signs, occupation or philosophy of life. Facebook is the biggest game of this type. It's not only fun but has even played a vital role in taking down dictatorships.

Different People, Different Interests

Most ham radio contests address a very narrow market, and I think there is considerable potential to expand our hobby by designing games that appeal to many different people who don't currently see themselves as contesters. Not only do achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers enjoy different games (or different aspects of the *same* game), but males and females generally enjoy different experiences. In his book *The Art of Game Design* Jesse Schell says men like games that involve mastery, competition, destruction and spatial puzzles. Women like games that involve emotion, the real world, nurturing, dialog and verbal puzzles. I think radio contests currently appeal to only the first two — mastery and competition.

Men and women also have very different learning styles. Men like to figure things out by trial and error, while women want to see examples, and neither sex likes to read instruction manuals. Have you noticed that many devices, such as the iPad, don't come with manuals? What would a contest look like if the rules weren't published but had to be gleaned from the behavior of the participants?

Skin Versus Skeleton.

The same first-person shooter software engine might allow you to kill zombies, terrorists, aliens or orcs, depending on which video game title you happened to purchase. An entirely different engine
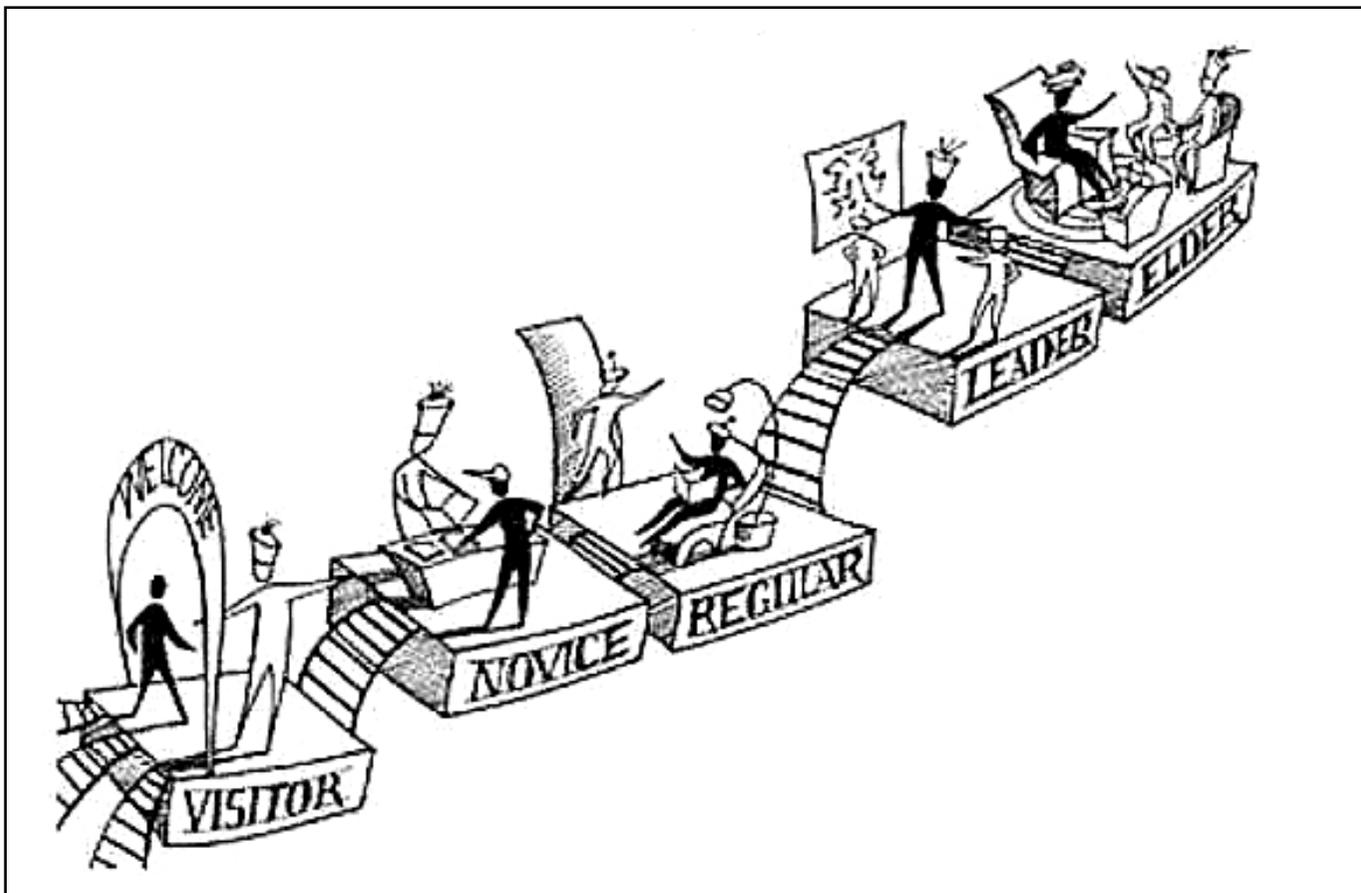

\Figure 2 — "The Player's Journey" by Amy Jo Kim, an expert in engagement design and social gaming (http://amyjokim.com/). Used with permission

is needed to support a flight simulator, although a single program might simulate dozens of different aircraft. The underlying mechanism is called a "skeleton," upon which are built different "skins."

Similarly, a single contest program can support many different contests because, let's face it, there is a *sameness* to them. For example, most contests with multipliers have a similar skeleton; whether states, zones, sections or DXCC entities count as mults is a mere detail.

It would be fun to see if we could come up with some new and completely different contest genres to attract people who would not otherwise find contesting enjoyable. At a minimum, it would be fun to give the developers of logging programs a hard time.

Homework

Imagine that you work for a faltering company that designs games for the ham market, and your boss gives you the urgent assignment to come up with ways to make contesting fun for people who are very different from the current players. What would appeal to young people, to women, to students, the poor, the rich, the retired, even non-hams? What game elements would appeal to achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers? How can we give every single player a way of feeling good about themselves and the promise of feeling just a little bit better, if they try harder next time? How might we confer status on the people who are part of the contests but not behind a mic or at a key?

What genres can you imagine that are totally different from our current contests? What contest might a newbie begin playing even before getting a license? How would you make radio contests out of Monopoly, Scrabble, bridge, chess, hangman, Sim City, Tetris or Pac Man? What new skins could you put on an existing contest? For example, could you create a county hunter interface on Sweepstakes that automatically looks up locations in **QRZ. com**? Could you imagine adding bells and whistles — *literally*? How about a few explosions and some cool graphics? How about educational games, where the exchange looks like a flash card drill of license exam questions?

As I began studying game design, I discovered that the field is very broad and hard to define precisely, because if it's *fun*, it can be a game, and if it's *no* fun, perhaps we can make a game out of it anyway. I run a trading desk, where I am responsible for motivation and managing risk. What I've learned has helped me restate my job description: "Keep it fun, and keep us from doing stupid things." What can you re-engineer for more fun, both on the air and in your life?

Send your ideas to me at **brooke.t.allen@ gmail.com**, and I will incorporate them into a future installment of this series.

Notes
[1]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colossal_Cave_ Adventure
[2]www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm