Whispering Around the World

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Amateur Radio would be much less interesting if our communication channels were always predictable and reliable. In fact, we often don't know where in the world our signals may be copied. If vagaries of the ionosphere and MF and HF propagation fascinate you, you'll surely enjoy using *WSPR* and its associated web site, *WSPRnet.org*.

WSPR (pronounced "whisper") is an acronym for "Weak Signal Propagation Reporter." With a computer program of this name and a standard SSB transceiver, you can participate in a world-wide network of low-power stations exchanging beacon-like transmissions to probe potential propagation paths. Most participating stations transmit as well as receive, although short-wave listener (SWL) activity is also common. In principle, and with the propagation gods willing, everyone can copy and be copied by everyone else who is currently active with *WSPR* on the same band.

When a global picture of all these propagation paths becomes available, things get especially interesting — and that's the purpose of *WSPRnet*. Most stations using *WSPR* are configured to automatically upload their reception reports to a central database at *WSPRnet.org,* in real time. By pointing your browser to *WSPRnet* you can get nearly instantaneous reports of where and at what signal strength you're being received, and view the results plotted on a world map.

In today's ham jargon, *WSPR* is another *soundcard mode.* Its setup requirements are similar to those of, say, PSK31. *WSPR* transmits and receives, but it does not support normal types of on-the-air conversation. Instead, it sends and receives specially coded, beacon-like transmissions aimed at establishing whether particular propagation paths are open. Transmissions convey a callsign, station location, and power level using a compressed data format with strong forward error correction (FEC) and narrow-band, four-tone frequency shift keying (FSK). The FEC greatly improves chances of copy and reduces errors to an extremely low rate. The signal bandwidth is only 6 Hz, which together with randomized time-sharing assures that dozens of *WSPR* signals can fit into a tiny 200-Hz segment of each amateur band. The *WSPR* protocol is effective at signal-to-noise ratios as low as –28 dB in a 2500 Hz bandwidth, some 10–15 dB below the threshold of audibility. On most bands, typical *WSPR* power levels are 5 W or less — sometimes a *lot* less. You will be amazed to discover where your QRP signals are copied, in distant corners of the world.

WSPR OPERATION

WSPR can be freely downloaded from www.physics.princeton.edu/pulsar/K1JT/. Packaged installation files are available for Windows and Linux; the program can also be compiled for Macintosh, FreeBSD, and other operating systems. WSPR is “open source” software, and its source code is maintained in a public repository at developer.berlios.de/projects/wsjt/.

Like all soundcard modes, *WSPR* requires audio connections between your computer and radio transceiver. Briefly stated, soundcard audio out goes to the transceiver’s audio in, and the radio’s audio out goes to soundcard in. You can use VOX control for T/R switching; if you prefer hard-keyed switching you’ll need a serial port or USB-to-serial adapter. A serial connection can also provide handy CAT control of most modern transceivers. If you use other data modes such as PSK31, you probably have the necessary connections already in place. Your SSB transceiver should be set to use upper sideband.

WSPR operation is largely automated. Time-synchronized transmissions last for slightly less than two minutes, nominally starting one second into an even UTC minute. Reception and transmission intervals alternate in a pseudo-random fashion such that on average, a specified percentage (typically 20 to 25%) of two-minute intervals are used for transmitting. It’s important for your computer’s clock to be accurate to within a second or so. Conventional operating frequencies for *WSPR* are summarized in Table 1. Many additional details of *WSPR* operation, including step-by-step startup instructions, are given in the *WSPR 2.0 User’s Guide,* which — thanks to a number of bi-lingual users — is now available in English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, and Russian at www.physics.princeton.edu/pulsar/K1JT/wspr.html.

Table 1 — Conventional frequencies for *WSPR* activity

Band (m)	Dial Frequency (MHz)	Signal Frequency (MHz)
160	1.836 600	1.838 000 – 1.838 200
80	3.592 600	3.594 000 – 3.594 200
40	7.038 600	7.040 000 – 7.040 200
30	10.138 700	10.140 100 – 10.140 300
20	14.095 600	14.097 000 – 14.097 200
17	18.104 600	18.106 000 – 18.106 200
15	21.094 600	21.096 000 – 21.926 200
12	24.924 600	24.926 000 – 24.926 200
10	28.124 600	28.126 000 – 28.126 200
6	50.293 000	50.294 400 – 50.294 600

In normal operation the main *WSPR* screen looks something like Figure 1. At the end of each two-minute reception interval the software decoder looks for all detectable *WSPR* signals in a 200 Hz passband and displays the results in a waterfall spectrogram, a scrolling text window, and a scrolling Band Map. The spectrogram covers a frequency range of about 220 Hz; the last three digits of the received frequency, in Hz, are displayed on a vertical scale at right. Time runs from left to right in the spectrogram, the full width spanning about half an hour. On a typical computer screen each two-minute interval corresponds to a strip about 1 cm wide in the spectrogram. The times of your own transmissions are denoted by thin green vertical lines. For example, at the time Figure 1 was made, transmissions had been made at 22:44, 22:52, and 23:04 UTC.

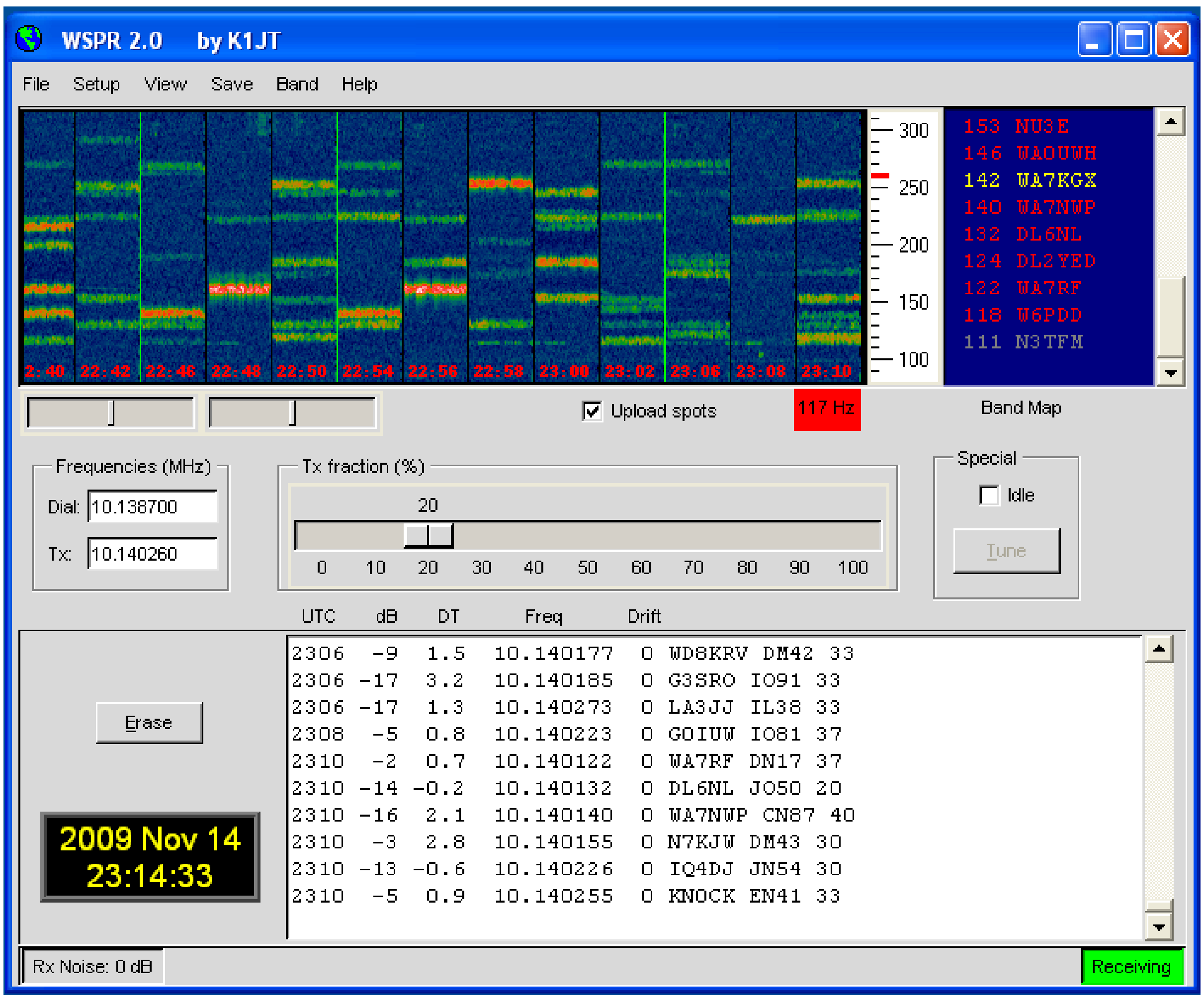

Figure 1 — Typical appearance of the main screen during *WSPR* operation.

Each decoded *WSPR* signal produces text showing the UTC, signal-to-noise ratio in dB (in a 2500 Hz reference bandwidth), time offset DT in seconds, frequency in MHz, drift rate in Hz/minute, and the decoded message. Time offsets greater than about ±2 seconds indicate a significant clock error at transmitter or receiver, or possibly both. Apparent frequency drifts greater than ±1 Hz per minute can usually be traced to the transmitter, and should be corrected if possible. (Of course, receiver drift can also contribute to measured drifts, but this condition is easily recognized because nearly all signals will appear to drift by the same amount.) Good frequency stability is essential to *WSPR*'s remarkable sensitivity, because the software filters used for decoding are only about 1.5 Hz wide.

WSPRnet

The *WSPRnet.org* web site is written and maintained by Bruce Walker, W1BW. It provides a central repository for *WSPR* reception reports ("spots") and offers a simple user interface for querying the database, a mapping facility, and many other handy features. By default, the world-wide map shows all *WSPR* stations reporting or decoded over the past hour, and illustrates the open propagation paths between them. The map can be zoomed and panned, and you can set various criteria to determine exactly which spots are included. The *WSPRnet* site also offers band-by-band counts of stations reporting in the past hour, a chat facility for brief communications between operators, an interface to the historical database back to March 2008, and a number of statistical summaries of the data. An example of the *WSPRnet* home page is shown in Figure 2, on the next page. This particular screen capture, taken in November 2009, mentions that the database of *WSPR* spots contains nearly 13 million spots. By early March, 2010, that number had grown to more than 23 million. Recently, an average of 400–500 stations, scattered around the world, have been submitting roughly 100,000 *WSPR* reports each day.

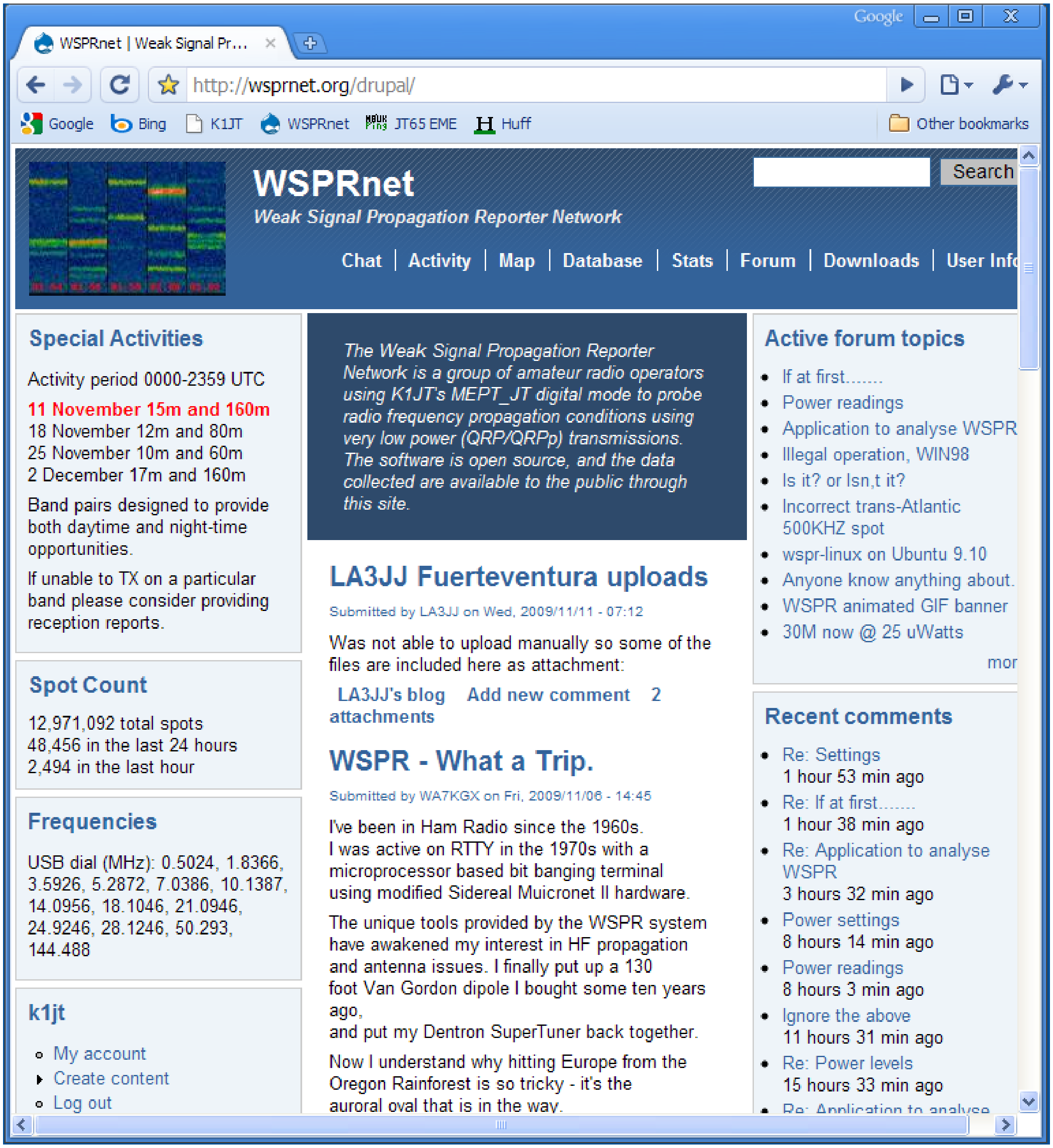

Figure 2 — The *WSPRnet* home page.

Figure 3 is an example of the *WSPRnet* world map taken on March 1, 2010, at 1715 UTC. By default, reception reports on all bands are shown in each map; however, the user may specify selection criteria that limit the spots in various ways. The following pages show maps made at the same time as Figure 3 but with spots limited to those on the 30 m band (Figure 4), and those involving the callsign W3HH (Figure 5). As illustrated in Figure 6, you can click on a specific callsign to see what other stations are hearing and being heard by the selected station.

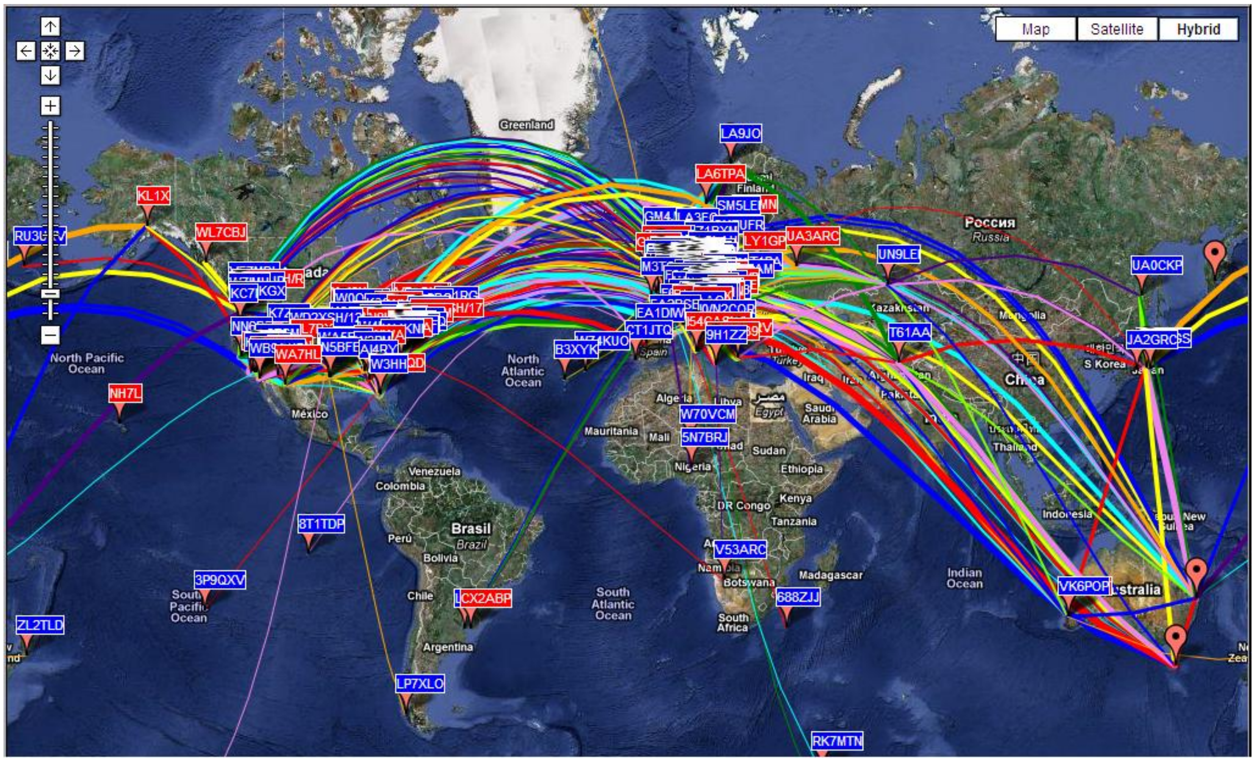

Fig 3 — The *WSPRnet* global map of spots on all bands over a typical one-hour period.

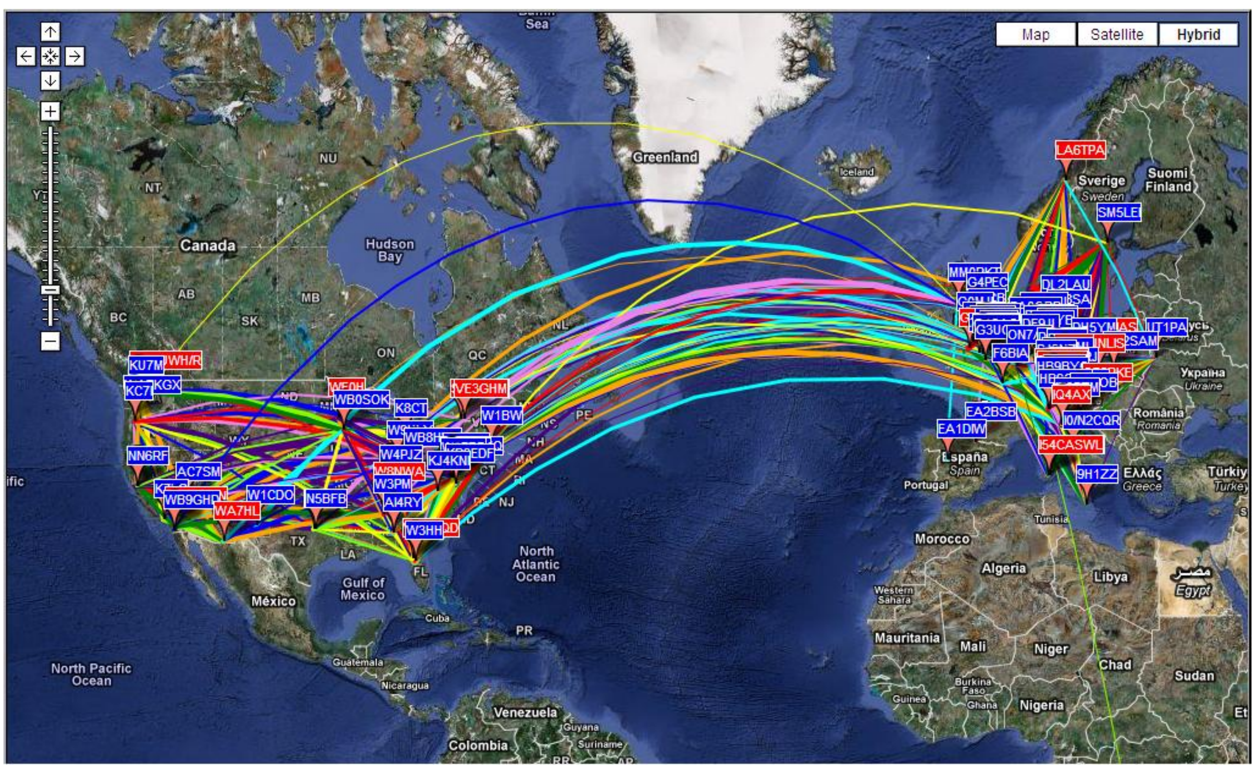

Fig 4 — Here the *WSPRnet* map is limited to spots on the 30 m band.

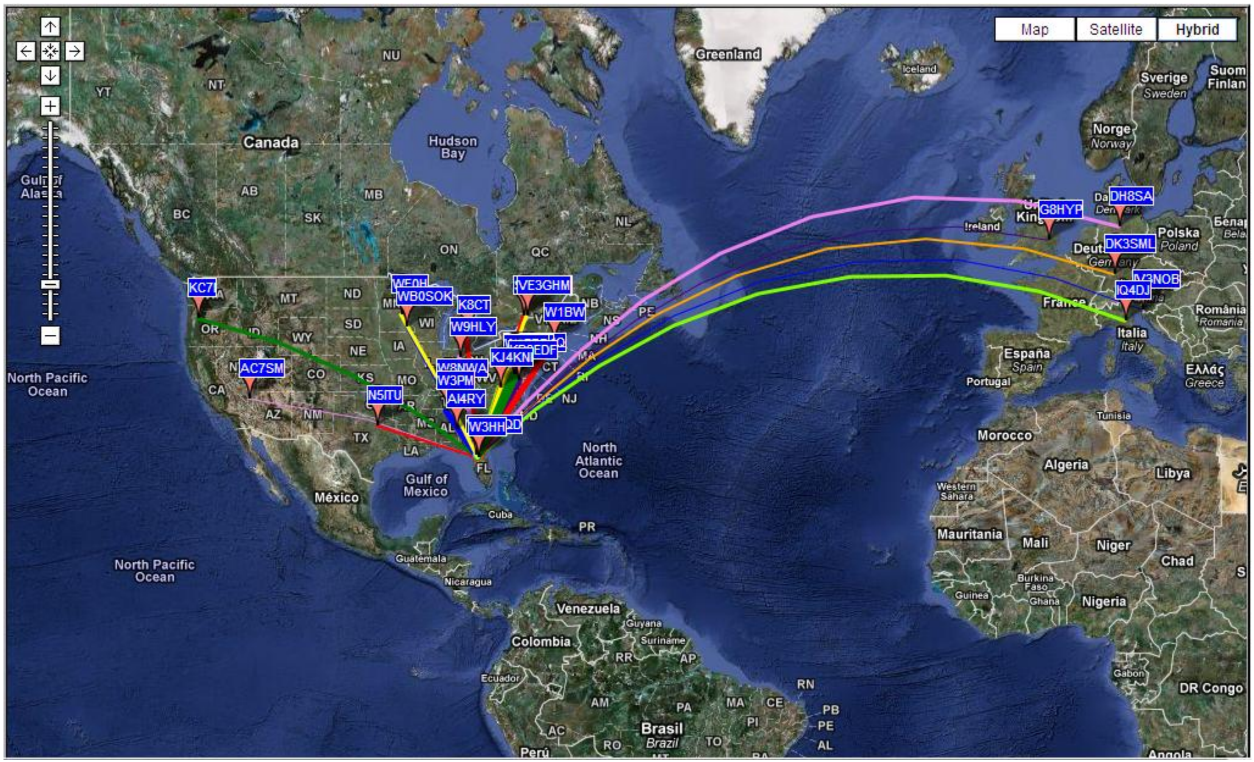

Fig 5 — The map has now been limited to spots involving the callsign W3HH.

Fig 6 — Click on a label to see what stations are hearing and being heard by a particular callsign.

WSPR Protocol and Software

The WSPR protocol was designed to do just one thing, and do it very well. Messages normally consist of a standard callsign, a 4-character grid locator, and the power level in dBm (decibels relative to 1 mW). This information is compressed into 50 binary digits, and the 50-bit message is then encoded using a very strong convolutional code with constraint length $K = 32$ and rate $r = 1/2$. Each of the resulting 162 one-bit numbers is used as the most significant bit of a two-bit "channel symbol" that will be transmitted using 4-tone frequency shift keying at 1.46 baud. The channel symbol's least significant bit is defined by a pseudo-random sequence known to the software at both transmitter and receiver and used to establish accurate synchronization of time and frequency.

Convolutional codes with long constraint lengths have the important advantage that undetected decoding errors are rare. These codes are too complex to be decoded with the well-known and highly efficient Viterbi algorithm, so the *WSPR* decoder uses the so-called "sequential" algorithm, instead. Full details of the *WSPR* protocol and its implementation in the *WSPR* program will be published elsewhere. *WSPR* is licensed under the GNU General Public License and its source code is freely available to anyone.

Conclusion

Radio Amateurs keep finding new ways to challenge the frontiers of wireless communication, exploring the wonders of the electromagnetic spectrum and the extraordinarily wide range of interactions between electromagnetic waves and the terrestrial environment. Conceived with just-for-fun, hobbyist motivations, *WSPR* has helped to bring some recent technical advances from the professional and scientific world into amateur radio, thereby providing educational benefits to the nation and the world as well as many hours of enjoyment for technically minded experimenters. I hope you'll enjoy playing with *WSPR* as much as I have, and at the same time will add to your knowledge and understanding of radio propagation and modern communication techniques.

Joe Taylor was first licensed as KN2ITP in 1954, and has since held call signs K2ITP, WA1LXQ, W1HFV, VK2BJX and K1JT. He was Professor of Astronomy at the University of Massachusetts from 1969 to 1981 and since then has been Professor of Physics at Princeton University. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1993 for discovery of the first orbiting pulsar. He chases DX from 160 meters through the microwave bands.