

## ASSETS'08 Trip Report

Top caliber accessibility research, a small friendly gathering, and a picturesque setting—these were just a few of the highlights of the Tenth International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS'08).

ASSETS '08 took place from October 12–15, 2008 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax boasts the world's second largest natural port and is a lively city on the Atlantic coast and home to several breweries (Yum!). The conference was held at the Halifax Marriott Harbourfront Hotel, overlooking the spectacular waterfront, and close to the heart of downtown.

Though most attendees spent Sunday checking into the hotel and visiting the Harbourwalk, for a small number of attendees the conference officially started early that morning. This year 11 students participated in the Doctoral Consortium, a one-day workshop, where PhD students present their research and receive feedback from a panel of senior researchers. The consortium is typically an intense, but exceedingly helpful experience. From what I heard from this year's cohort, 2008 was no exception.

One of my favourite things about ASSETS is its intimate size. Because it is a relatively small conference, it remains friendly and provides ample opportunity to both catch-up with old friends and make new ones. A prime example of this was the welcome event on Sunday night. After gathering in the conference lobby, Simon Harper, our fearless leader (and the 2008 general chair) confidently lead us through downtown in search of local beer and friendly atmosphere. We quickly found a suitable pub, and spent the rest of the evening gathered cozily around a few large tables, meeting each other and enjoying food and drink.

With Monday morning came the start of the main program, and still a little jet-lagged—not to mention a little tired from the night before—we stumbled into the conference. Fortunately, Dr. Ron Baecker roused our sleepy eyes with an invocative opening plenary on the design of technology to aid cognition. I don't think I was the only attendee a little embarrassed by teary eyes after seeing the video portion of his presentation. His topic was not only captivating, but also timely: there was a marked trend in the program this year towards research on memory and cognition.

In total, 29 papers were presented over the three-day conference covering a wide range of topics. Web-accessibility continued to be a hot topic, but research also ventured in a few new directions including gaming and the use of social networks to improve accessibility. Lunches and coffee breaks provided occasions to mix with other conference attendees and to check out the 34 posters and demonstrations, as well as the posters from the 9 student research competition semi-finalists and the doctoral consortium attendees. There was a lot to see, but luckily a reception Monday night provided even more opportunity to meet, mingle, and catch all the new and exciting research.

ASSETS '08 was particularly special, as the first ever SIGACCESS Award for Outstanding Contributions to Computing and Accessibility was presented at a banquet Tuesday night. This biennial award recognizes individuals who have made significant and lasting contributions to the development of computing technologies that improve the accessibility of media and services to people with disabilities. This year's award went to Dr. Jim Thatcher for his pioneering work on screen readers.

Dr. Thatcher graciously accepted the award and humbly joked about his amazing life, as we devoured a scrumptious meal.

In general, the quality of the research presented this year was exceptional, but two papers were noted as standing above the rest. This year the ACM SIGACCESS Best Student Paper Award went to Yevgen Borodin, Jeffrey P. Bigham, Rohit Raman, and I. V. Ramakrishnan for their paper, "What's new?: Making web page updates accessible." And, the ACM SIGACCESS Best Paper Award went to Jinjuan Feng, Jonathan Lazar, Libby Kumin, and Ant Ozok for their paper, "Computer usage by young individuals with down syndrome: An exploratory study."

Mirroring its start, the conference closed with an informal gathering around local beer and friendly conversation. I, unfortunately, missed out on that event as I had to rush off to the airport. But I left full of excitement for next year's conference, and full of ideas for new research. So as much as I longed to stay just a little bit longer, I couldn't wait to get home and to start on those ideas! I hope to see everyone next October (26–28) in Pittsburgh, PA.

#### **About the author:**



*Karyn Moffatt* is a PhD student in Computer Science at the University of British Columbia, working under the supervision of Dr Joanna McGrenere. Her research interests are in the area of human computer interaction with a focus on the design of inclusive technology. In 2005, she was awarded a 3-year NSERC post-graduate scholarship to pursue her thesis research on increasing the accessibility of handheld technology for older adults. She also holds a M.Sc. in Computer Science (2004) and a B.A.Sc. in Computer Engineering (2001), both from the University of British Columbia.