

SIGACCESS Member Profile

Jim Thatcher

Jim Thatcher, Accessibility Consulting

URL: <http://jimthatcher.com>

E-mail: jim@jimthatcher.com

Member of SIGACCESS since: The beginning

Member of ACM since: (Almost the beginning) 1960

Also member of: None

1. How many years have you been working in this area?

25

2. What motivates or inspires you to work in this area?

I led the development of one of the first screen readers for DOS, IBM Screen Reader, and then the first screen reader for the Graphical User Interface on a PC, IBM Screen Reader/2 for OS/2. Knowing how the assistive technology works and how blind people use that technology puts me in an especially good place to advocate for accessibility of software and the Web. Access is, in my opinion, a civil right, and I want to do everything I can to improve and facilitate that access.

3. What is your professional background?

I worked in the Mathematical Sciences Department of IBM Research starting in 1963 after receiving my PhD in Computer Science from the University of Michigan. My thesis advisor, Jesse Wright, who is blind, joined the Math Department at the same time. He and I worked on mathematical computer science for about 15 years until computer access drew us away from the theoretical work. In 1978 there was a prototype system in IBM called SAID, Synthetic Audio Interface Driver. Developed in IBM Raleigh by Al Overby, this was an IBM 3270 terminal connected to a 12-key telephone keypad and a Votrax Synthesizer the size of a suitcase. With the keypad you could speak the previous, current or next line (1,2,3), word (4,5,6), or character (7,8,9), say all (0), go to the cursor (#) or change form speaking to spelling (*). Jesse used one of these talking terminals that cost the Math Department \$13,000. SAID went on to be an IBM product, the Talking Terminal. Around this time the IBM PC was born and our idea was to emulate SAID on a PC, we called the project PCSAID, and thus have a much cheaper talking terminal – about \$800. So that is what we set out to do around 1980, to make a cheaper talking terminal. Its first implementation was a “co-resident” application with the terminal emulator, written in BASIC. It ended up being IBM Screen Reader for DOS about 5 years later.

4. Have you participated in any SIGACCESS-sponsored event?

I attended one of the first ASSETS conferences; haven't been back since.