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SIGACCESS Award

**Outstanding Contributions to
Computing and Accessibility**

Oct 14, 2008 | ASSETS'08, Halifax, Nova Scotia

SIGACCESS Award for Outstanding Contributions to Computing and Accessibility

This award is to be presented every other year to a person who has made significant and lasting contributions to computing and information technology that addresses the needs of people with disabilities. Outstanding contributions through research, practice, or advocacy will be recognized. Towards this goal, contributions will be considered from academia, industry, as well as other professions that focus on computer users with disabilities and the application of computing technology in solving relevant disability problems. The award will recognize members of the community for long-term accomplishments or those who have made a notable impact through a significant innovation.

Award Process

- Awards Committee

Enrico Pontelli (Chair), New Mexico State University

Peter Gregor, University of Dundee

Helen Petrie, University of York

- Open call for nominations

(no self-nominations)

Nomination letter

3 (or more) letters of support

Highlights of accomplishments

- The field's guiding light in the area of screen readers and accessibility for blind users
- Developed the *IBM Screen Reader for DOS*
Now generic as the name of assistive technologies that convert text on screens into speech for blind users
- He later developed the first screen reader for a graphical interface, *Screen Reader/2 for OS/2*
- Instrumental in the development of accessible IT as part of the Section 508 guidelines in the USA
- Author of books on accessible web development, has created a course on the topic, and serves as a consultant to a number of companies on web accessibility



IBM Screen Reader for DOS and OS/2

- PhD University of Michigan 1963, one of the first PhD's in CS
- Joined Mathematical Science Department at IBM Research, Yorktown Heights, NY
 - Along with his thesis advisor, Dr. Jesse Wright
 - Mathematical computer science: abstract data types, automata theory and algebraic semantics
- When PC developed in early 80's, began adapting IBM's talking terminal - Synthetic Audio Interface Driver (SAID)
 - PC version – PCSAID (~1984)
 - > IBM Screen Reader for DOS (1986)
 - > Screen Reader / 2 for IBM's OS/2 (1991) first access to graphical interface on PC
- Published at the first ASSETS in 1994
 - “Screen reader/2: access to OS/2 and the graphical user interface “**

In Jim's own words...

“In those days ‘accessibility’ was almost unknown. As a screen reader developer I understood better than most how terribly important it was for software to be well behaved - but we didn't call it ‘accessibility;’ we just complained about non-standard controls and widgets that proliferated in the burgeoning PC software market place.

That changed. In the mid ninety's I turned away from developing assistive technology and turned to working on issues of accessibility of information technology within the IBM Corporation. There were two aspects of that effort. First, a growing number of blind employees using IBM Screen Reader on their jobs needed accessible products with which to work. And second, we wanted IBM to set an example of producing accessible products for its customers.”



<http://www.knowbility.org/newsletter/?content=defining>

In Jim's own words...

“My approach to accessibility in IBM was to lead the development of technical accessibility guidelines to be used within IBM for the development of hardware, software, and the web; guidelines that were intended to cover all disabilities.



We made those guidelines public. Although they have evolved over the years they are still available (<http://www.ibm.com/able/guidelines.html>) on the **IBM Accessibility Center** web site.”

<http://www.knowbility.org/newsletter/?content=defining>

Bio

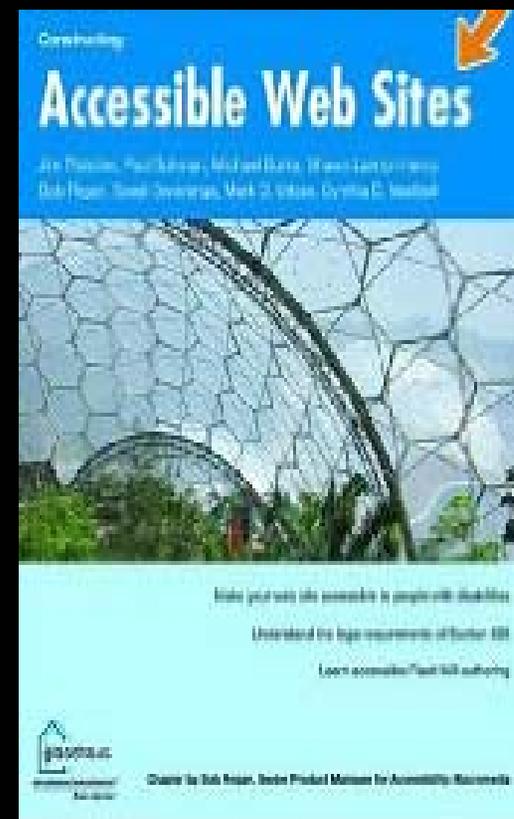
- Eventually moved from Math Dept to IBM's Special Needs System, until 1996
- Consultant for IBM on accessibility until 2000
- Jimthatcher.com
- Numerous awards for his work
 - 2008 – ACM SIGCAS (Computers and Society SIG) Making A Difference Award
 - 2007 – Martha Arbuckle Award, City of Austin, recognizing lifetime of achievement in support of accessibility and the positive impact made on the lives of individuals with disabilities in both our community and the state and national level
 - 1994, the National Federation of the Blind in Computer Science presented Dr. Thatcher with an award for distinguished service to the blind



About Jim..

“His earlier work on screen reader development provides an important understanding of how text-to-speech technology has evolved, but most in the web accessibility field will know him from the seminal Constructing Accessible Web sites book. As lead author, Jim's contribution to the book gives it its true value, in my view - going beyond basic advice on accessible design guidelines to giving us a real understanding of how assistive technologies behave when rendering web content.

Reflecting his personality, his web site has become, for me, a quietly authoritative source of information, choosing its topics carefully but always providing clear and accurate advice that I have been only too happy to pass on to others. For me, his essay on 'Web Accessibility - what not to do' is one of the single most important resources on web accessibility that exists today.”



Also...



“During the late eighties and early nineties, Dr. Thatcher was the driving force for a program called Screen Reader/2 which, at the time, was the only program providing nonvisual access to the OS/2 graphical user interface. At that time, there were several blind computer professionals who were confronted with decisions by their employers to convert from the text-based Disk Operating System (DOS) to the graphical OS/2 operating system. If not for Dr. Thatcher's tireless efforts to make Screen Reader/2 a reality, I am certain that these individuals would have lost their jobs...

Dr. Thatcher is a true friend of the blind.”

For his a notable impact on the
field...

1st SIGACCESS Award for Outstanding
Contributions to Computing and
Accessibility

Dr. Jim Thatcher