Assistive Technology for
Visually Impaired and Blind People
Related titles

Assistive Technology for the Hearing-impaired, Deaf and Deafblind

*Marion A. Hersh and Michael A. Johnson (Eds.)*
Assistive Technology for Visually Impaired and Blind People
Until quite recently, the medical model of disability was dominant and assistive technology was viewed as an extension of rehabilitation engineering. But times and viewpoints change so that now social inclusiveness is the pervading ethos of disability legislation, regulations and guidelines. While the existence of new legislative frameworks does not always mean that effective implementation has occurred in the community, it is a beginning. Thus, it is the widespread acceptance of the social model of disability that is driving these changes and it is the tools of assistive technology that are the physical enablers of social inclusiveness.

While we have previously published on Assistive Technology for Hearing Impaired, Deaf and Deafblind People (Springer-Verlag London 2003, ISBN 978-1-85233-382-9), this companion volume strikes out in a new direction by using the social model of disability as a framework. In Chapter 1, we present a comprehensive assistive technology (CAT) model that is designed to provide a generic and holistic description of all aspects of assistive technology whether social, human performance, or the engineering technology used. The idea is that the model can be used to provide the systematic vocabulary and interpretation needed to describe any branch of assistive technology applications. The book itself is structured around the activities module of the CAT model and there are several overview or survey chapters that make recourse to various aspects of the CAT model. Of course the volume concentrates on assistive technology for visually impaired and blind people and the various contributing authors have written about their specific assistive technological contributions to this field.

The objective of systematically reporting on assistive technology for visually impaired people and also trying to imbue the survey chapters with a descriptive paradigm based on the social model of disability was an ambitious one. We could not have accomplished such a task without the cooperation, enthusiasm and, above all, the patience of our collaborating authors. We should like to thank them all for their help in seeing this publishing project come to fruition. We have been very fortunate to meet some of our collaborators at the Workshops and Conferences on Assistive Technologies for Vision and Hearing Impairment that we organise with invaluable European Union support. In many cases this has given us the opportunity to discuss and debate the engineering issues described in this book.
Patience, too, is a virtue our Springer Engineering editorial staff: Oliver Jackson and Anthony Doyle have in abundance. We should like to acknowledge their enthusiasm and support through the long gestation of this publishing project. Our copy editor, John Kirby, is also to be thanked for producing an elegantly presented volume. Thanks are also due for administrative and graphical support given by Vi Romanes and Peter McKenna of the Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering at the University of Glasgow during the years of preparation for this volume.

We hope this book with its new modelling perspectives and its systematic coverage of assistive technology will inspire many new projects, new courses, and new ways to secure social inclusiveness for the visually impaired and blind community.

Marion A. Hersh and Michael A. Johnson
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Who should read this book?

This book is designed to inform a wide range of current and future professionals about the assistive technology used by visually impaired and blind people to achieve independence and social inclusiveness in the home and the wider community. Basic engineering principles are explained and the ways these are used to develop and drive assistive technology applications for visually impaired and blind people described. The volume has some chapters that refer to a generic comprehensive assistive technology model to capture the essentials of the applied system and this model should find applications in other assistive technology areas.

The book is suitable for electrical engineering, mechanical engineering and scientific professionals. It is also considered highly appropriate for undergraduate courses in the discipline of assistive technology. Thus, we hope this book will be well placed to meet this need as a course textbook or to supplement existing course material. The authors have been encouraged to see many engineering undergraduates enjoy this type of material and it is hoped that this enjoyment will fire the ingenuity of new generations of engineering students to find new and innovative ways to develop assistive technology for visually impaired and blind people.

An Overview of the Book

The book has a map, for the first four chapters are devoted to fundamentals: disability and assistive technology models, eye physiology and sight, sight measurement principles and technology and finally, haptics. Subsequently groups of chapters explore the topics of mobility, communications and access to information, daily living, education and employment, and recreational activities. These chapter groupings follow the structure of the Activities module of the comprehensive assistive technology model as presented in Chapter 1 of the book.
The book is designed so that each chapter is self-contained and can be read on its own, although the overview chapters (Chapters 5, 10, 12, 17 and 18) assume some familiarity with the CAT model material in Chapter 1. Each chapter is motivated by specific learning objectives and contains introductory material or descriptions of the basic principles underlying the technology or applications area. The chapters close with a chapter summary, questions and suggestions for more investigative projects. Full citation details for references to journals, books, and conference papers are given along with information about useful related websites.

A brief description of the contents of each chapter along with full details of the chapter authors can be found next. For the interested reader, biographical sketches of all the contributing authors can be found at the end of the book. These are given in alphabetical order of the author family names. The concept of the book and the overall editorial direction was solely the responsibility of Marion Hersh and Michael Johnson. However, as is usual for a contributed book, the chapter authors are responsible for the opinions and factual accuracy expressed in their particular contributions.

**Chapters on Fundamentals**

**1 Disability and Assistive Technology Systems**
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The social model of disability is discussed highlighting the recent pre-eminence achieved over the medical model of disability. The concept of “quality of life” indices is explored and its relevance to assessing assistive technology applications is described. A survey of the main assistive technology quality of life procedures is presented and the value of the individual procedures considered.

The later sections of the chapter investigate whether assistive technology can be described in a single holistic and generic model, the idea being that the model will provide a uniform and consistent framework for analysing existing applications and for creating or synthesizing new assistive technology systems. The new comprehensive assistive technology (CAT) model is presented and its use demonstrated in these sections.

**2 Perception, the Eye and Assistive Technology Issues**
Marion Hersh

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, U.K.

Many assistive technology systems for the visually impaired are supported by contributions from the senses of touch, hearing and smell. This chapter opens with a description of the nature of multisensory perception as this forms an important context for the design and use of assistive technology systems.
The chapter then concentrates on the sense of vision. Basic eye physiology is presented along with descriptions of some of the capabilities of the human eye for binocular vision, colour vision and motion tracking.

A brief review of the demographics of vision impairment is given and this is followed by descriptions of the effects of typical vision impairments. A set of photographic images illustrates the conditions described. The basics of simple spectacle provision close the chapter.

3 Sight Measurement
David Keating and Stuart Parks

Gartnavel Hospital, Glasgow, U.K.

Measurement science for the sense of sight has exploited advanced computer technology to emerge as an exciting technical and medical discipline. The chapter presents a full survey of sight measurement methods describing procedures, engineering principles, technological construction and diagnostic motivation. The chapter opens with the classical measurement tests for visual acuity, field of vision, and intraocular pressure, followed by the techniques used in biometry and ocular examinations.

The more advanced technological fields of optical coherence tomography and ocular electrophysiology are described in the last two sections of the chapter. These techniques have developed in sophistication over the last twenty years or so. Advances in computer visualisation software, laser technology, data collection, signal processing algorithms and human-sensor interface systems have all been used to provide complex and accurate measurements and visualisations of the eye physiology and functions for clinical diagnosis. The chapter presents a state-of-the-art review of these sight measurement advances.

4 Haptics as a Substitute for Vision
Gunnar Jansson

Department of Psychology, Uppsala University, Sweden

Historically the sense of touch has been used extensively to generate information for the visually impaired person. This chapter surveys the underlying principles of haptics and the perceptual capabilities of touch achievable with the human hand. After a presentation of these haptic fundamentals, the chapter proceeds to investigate how haptics can be used and enhanced through training or with the aid of specialist tools. A central section of the chapter concentrates on low-tech haptic applications; some, like the long cane and the guide dog, are for mobility whilst others, like Braille and embossed pictures, are for information from text, as well as embossed graphics. Subsequent sections in the chapter examine the more technologically advanced applications of haptic science. Of particular importance are the technologies for haptic computer interfaces and for haptic
displays. A project to provide haptic access to museum pieces for visually impaired people is one outcome of this advanced work.

**Chapters on Mobility and Navigation**

**5 Mobility: An Overview**

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Visually impaired people usually require assistive technology to aid mobility and retain independent travel within the community environment. This overview chapter opens with a discussion of the travel activity and investigates how people negotiate a desired route or journey. Assistive technology for visually impaired person's travel has had a long history and this is briefly reviewed. One finding is that there have been quite a few attempts to harness the available contemporary technological advances in mobility assistive devices. The subsequent development of the chapter pursues three main topics: obstacle avoidance, navigation and orientation and the design of accessible environments. The presentation reveals that most effort has been devoted to obstacle avoidance assistive technology and that more recently global positioning system and mobile telephone technology has begun to impact the development of viable navigation and orientation assistive technology. The final section of the chapter reviews progress towards the accessible environment that is just beginning to appear in many cityscapes.

**6 Mobility AT: The Batcane (UltraCane)**

Brian Hoyle and Dean Waters

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The use of the long cane by visually impaired people as an obstacle detector is long standing. More recently the basic cane design has been equipped with laser or ultrasound transmitters and sensors and an interpretive human interface to improve its effectiveness, the objective being to allow safe travel by a visually impaired person. This chapter reports an important case study of the steps involved in developing an advanced technology obstacle avoidance cane that used bat echolocation signal processing techniques and ultrasonic technology. The final cane design is now marketed worldwide as the UltraCane™.

The chapter reviews the basic technological principles for ultrasonic waves and the advanced signal processing methods used. There is an extended discussion of all the design and construction issues followed by a description of the final engineering and prototype test phase. The chapter closes with an examination of the issues involved in bringing the prototype to eventual commercialisation.
7 Navigation AT: Context-aware Computing
Nicholas Bradley and Mark Dunlop
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Achieving independence whilst attempting a journey involving long distance navigation still remains a significant challenge for the visually impaired community. In this chapter the contribution that might be made by context-aware computing is explored. The first half of the chapter investigates different aspects of the long distance navigation problem and presents a survey of existing assistive technology, along with an introduction to cognitive maps and navigation learning strategies.

It is in the second half of the chapter that the principles and potential application areas for context-aware computing are introduced. The topics examined include how contextual information, for example, about location and personal preferences, can be embedded into user-computer interactions and how these facilities and capabilities could be used to assist the visually impaired traveller on a long distance journey. The chapter closes with sections on specific prototype applications and some results from the authors’ own research tests.

8 Accessible Global Positioning System (GPS) and Related Orientation Technologies
Michael May and Charles LaPierre
Sendero Group, United States of America

One of the better-developed technologies for pinpointing a person's location is the global positioning system (GPS). This US positioning technology has been widely exploited in many consumer applications and over future years alternative systems will become available for use (notably the European Galileo system). The success of a system for use by the visually impaired will depend on the accessibility of the interface design and the value of the information imparted to the user. This case study chapter looks at all the issues from the simple principles of GPS technology through to interface design, development and testing and finally the commercialisation aspects of marketing the end product accessible GPS device and system. The chapter is based on the authors’ joint and direct experience of developing and then marketing an accessible GPS product for visually impaired people.

9 Electronic Travel Aids: An Assessment
Elizabeth M. Ball
Ergonomics and Safety Research Institute, Loughborough University, Loughborough, U.K.

Many assistive technology mobility products are expensive and visually impaired people are a community group with considerable variability in their range of sight
abilities. Thus, it is very useful to learn about the relative successes and limitations of many of the currently available mobility products; this chapter provides such an assessment.

The chapter opens with an analysis of the various types of methods that can be used to set-up an end-user assessment exercise. Part of this concerns the framework of user requirements of the products to be assessed and another part is concerned with selecting the way of collecting the raw data of end-users responses and experiences.

The second part of the chapter presents the author’s findings for an end-user assessment of six obstacle avoidance mobility aids and two accessible navigation aids. The chapter closes with a discussion on the importance of training to achieve the best return from the use of advanced technology to assist in mobility and navigation.

10 Accessible Environments
Marion Hersh\textsuperscript{1} and Michael Johnson\textsuperscript{2}

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One consequence of the social model of disability is the need for the community environment to be physically accessible to all members of society. This accessibility applies to both the outside environment of, for example, parks, shopping malls and bus stations and to the interior environments of, for example, schools, hospitals, health centres, sports centres, shops, banks, town halls and entertainment complexes. This chapter provides an overview of the types of features that make the community environments accessible for visually impaired people.

The opening section of the chapter looks at the legislative and regulatory frameworks and the general design principles for accessible environments. This is followed by two sections covering the streetscape and buildings respectively. More challenging applications involve embedding detailed information technology modules into the environment and these are covered in the last two sections of the chapter. This is where exemplary applications of accessible public transport and way-finding systems are described.

11 Accessible Bus System: A Bluetooth Application
Tai Fook Lim Jerry, Han Leong Goh and Kok Kiong Tan

National University of Singapore, Republic of Singapore

The flexibility and freedom offered by new wireless technologies are often discussed in the media and on the Internet. But having this potential translated into working assistive technology systems is not so common. In this chapter, an application of Bluetooth technology for a bus alerting and information system suitable for use by visually impaired people is described. The chapter reports case study material across all the activities found in a typical prototype development project.
The chapter opens with a detailed consideration of the elements of Bluetooth technology and has a short comparison section with other competing wireless technologies. Having selected Bluetooth as the enabling technology, the chapter then reports on the design requirements for the bus alerting system. The system development is presented in detail along with careful consideration of the user interface needed for visually impaired people using mobile telephone technology. A discussion of future plans and commercialisation issues closes the chapter.

12 Accessible Information: An Overview
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In our modern society, increasingly complex media and technology are being used to transmit information. However, to participate and enjoy the benefits of the information revolution requires a continual familiarity with the new developments, so it is important that this area remains accessible to the visually impaired community.

This chapter opens with a review of the principles and technologies of low vision aids that are used to access print. Sections on audio transcription and Braille as access routes to print information then follow. It is the recent developments in speech processing and speech synthesis technology that are drivers in the wider use of audio as an information interface for the visually impaired. Major sections of the chapter describe the accessible computer and the accessible Internet. Both are extremely important in the processing and provision of information and there are many interface options to make these systems accessible to the visually impaired. Finally, since mobile telephony is increasingly accruing computer and Internet capabilities, the chapter closes by reviewing accessible communications technology.

13 Screen Readers and Screen Magnifiers
Gareth Evans and Paul Blenkhorn

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Two extremely important assistive technologies for the accessible computer are screen magnifiers and screen readers. Together these two tools create the accessibility for computer output needed by a wide range of visually impaired computer users.

The chapter has two major sections, one for screen magnifiers and one for screen readers. Within these extended sections are topics like historical perspectives on the technology developments, the architectures and implementation of the technologies and other sections on particular or special features of these two assistive technology systems.

The chapter is completed by sections on hybrid screen reader-magnifiers, self-magnifying applications and self-voicing applications.
14 Speech, Text and Braille Conversion Technology
Rüdiger Hoffmann

Dresden University of Technology, Dresden, Germany

This chapter is devoted to the fascinating triangle of conversion technologies that arise between text, speech and Braille. These are enabling technologies that allow speech to be converted into text as might happen in the creation of a letter, that allows text to be converted into speech as might happen in the reading of a book for enjoyment and then, the additional steps taking text into Braille for the Braille user. The everyday application of these technologies in making information and computers accessible to the visually impaired is an important assistive technology area.

The chapter opens with a presentation on the fundamentals of speech and text conversion technologies. The spectral analysis of speech is an important theoretical and practical component of this introductory material. Then, this is followed by sections that examine the three technologies; speech-to-text, text-to-speech and Braille conversion in detail. These sections describe the technological principles used and the equipment and applications that follow. The section on Braille conversion has additional material on more specialised Braille applications like Braille refreshable displays, reading machines and access to telecommunication devices.

15 Accessing Books and Documents
James Fruchterman

Benetech, Palo Alto, California, USA

Reading is an essential daily living task, and is crucial for school and work. Whether it is sorting the bills, reading a textbook or the daily newspaper, access to reading is critically important to people with disabilities that prevent easy reading of the printed page. Assistive technology has been created to address these needs and bridge the accessibility challenge to print. One of the first challenges is acquiring the text from the printed page. This need is met through optical character recognition that turns an image of the printed page into an accessible digital text file. In this chapter, the fundamentals of OCR technology and reading machines are described. The new international standard for digital talking books, the DAISY standard, is explored. The critically important move to direct digital access to textbooks and newspapers is projected and a discussion of future technological development closes the chapter.
16 Designing Accessible Music Software for Print Impaired People
David Crombie and Roger Lenoir

DEDICON (formerly FNB Nederland), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Making music is a pastime enjoyed by many and making printed music accessible to the visually impaired community is a particularly challenging and technically interesting problem. Music notation is a form of symbolic information with its own systematic rules; since it is essentially a visual medium the challenge is to make this system accessible to the visually impaired and blind music player. There are three basic formats: Braille music, talking music (that might use the DAISY standard) and large print music, and the chapter covers all three formats.

The chapter opens with a brief introduction to music notation that defines many key terms and structures for later use. This is followed by a survey of the three music formats designed to support accessibility. Some international project activities are described along with attempts to prescribe an international standard for the field. A key section in the chapter carefully details the steps in the production of Braille music and also gives further information about Talking Music. Since these accessibility topics are still developing, closing sections of the chapter review the likely future developments for the field.

17 Assistive Technology for Daily Living
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The first of the contextual activity areas in the comprehensive assistive technology model is that of Daily Living, and this is the subject of this chapter. Thus, the chapter describes assistive technology solutions designed to remove barriers to enable visually impaired and blind people enjoy independent living in their own home. These assistive technology solutions range from some very simple low technology devices to very sophisticated and specialised high technology solutions giving the chapter a large number of subsections and coverage of a wide variety of engineering methods.

Within this diversity of assistive technology applications, there are some techniques that span several of the activities found in the daily living category. Labelling is one generic assistive technology described in the chapter and this has a range of applications in personal care, food preparation and using appliances. Similar generic technologies are those for light and colour detection and identification and these too are described in this chapter. Along with these general solution technologies, the chapter presents groups of devices for the areas of personal care, time-keeping, alarms and alerting, food preparation, using appliances and money amongst others.

Summary conclusions, projects to pursue and reference citations close the chapter.
18 Assistive Technology for Education, Employment and Recreation
Marion Hersh\textsuperscript{1} and Michael Johnson\textsuperscript{2}

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Education and employment, and recreational activities complete the trio of contextual activities of the comprehensive assistive technology model, and this final chapter of the book reports on the assistive technology available in these two areas.

Education and employment is divided into six subsections covering learning and teaching, and then five employment activity areas. The generic assistive technology to support mobility, access to information and communication that are essential to access education and employment have been described earlier in the book and in this chapter access to the higher level activities are discussed. For example, this part of the chapter covers access to mathematics in education, and the use of specialised tools in the skilled and non-skilled trades. There is also a discussion of the general levels of access attained by visually impaired and blind people to education and employment in the introductory section of the chapter.

Recreational activities are essential to personal wellbeing and this is the third contextual activities category in the CAT model. This category also divides into six sub-activity areas, and a wide variety of assistive technology solutions is described. These range from an infrared cinema audio description system, through to accessible football and tactile tape measures to facilitate craft activities.

Summary conclusions, projects for further investigation and reference and resource citations close the chapter.
Contents

1 Disability and Assistive Technology Systems ........................................ 1
    1.1 The Social Context of Disability ..................................................... 2
    1.2 Assistive Technology Outcomes: Quality of Life .............................. 4
        1.2.1 Some General Issues .............................................................. 5
        1.2.2 Definition and Measurement of Quality of Life ............................ 6
        1.2.3 Health Related Quality of Life Measurement ............................... 7
        1.2.4 Assistive Technology Quality of Life Procedures ........................... 9
        1.2.5 Summary and Conclusions ....................................................... 13
    1.3 Modelling Assistive Technology Systems ......................................... 14
        1.3.1 Modelling Approaches: A Review ............................................... 15
        1.3.2 Modelling Human Activities .................................................... 18
    1.4 The Comprehensive Assistive Technology (CAT) Model ....................... 20
        1.4.1 Justification of the Choice of Model ......................................... 20
        1.4.2 The Structure of the CAT Model ............................................... 21
    1.5 Using the Comprehensive Assistive Technology Model ........................ 36
        1.5.1 Using the Activity Attribute of the CAT Model ............................ 37
            to Determine Gaps in Assistive Technology Provision ....................... 37
        1.5.2 Conceptual Structure of Assistive Technology Systems .................. 38
        1.5.3 Investigating Assistive Technology Systems .................................. 38
        1.5.4 Analysis of Assistive Technology Systems ................................... 40
        1.5.5 Synthesis of Assistive Technology Systems .................................. 41
    1.6 Chapter Summary .............................................................................. 45
    References ......................................................................................... 48

2 Perception, the Eye and Assistive Technology Issues .............................. 51
    2.1 Perception ....................................................................................... 52
        2.1.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 52
        2.1.2 Common Laws and Properties of the Different Senses ................. 53
        2.1.3 Multisensory Perception ............................................................. 54
        2.1.4 Multisensory Perception in the Superior Colliculus ....................... 57
        2.1.5 Studies of Multisensory Perception ............................................. 58
    2.2 The Visual System ............................................................................ 58
        2.2.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 58
        2.2.2 The Lens ..................................................................................... 60
2.2.3 The Iris and Pupil ........................................ 61
2.2.4 Intraocular Pressure ...................................... 62
2.2.5 Extraocular Muscles ....................................... 63
2.2.6 Eyelids and Tears .......................................... 65
2.3 Visual Processing in the Retina, Lateral Geniculate Nucleus
and the Brain .................................................. 65
2.3.1 Nerve Cells .............................................. 65
2.3.2 The Retina ................................................. 67
2.3.3 The Optic Nerve, Optic Tract and Optic Radiation ..... 69
2.3.4 The Lateral Geniculate Body or Nucleus ............... 71
2.3.5 The Primary Visual or Striate Cortex .................... 71
2.3.6 The Extrastriate Visual Cortex and the Superior Colliculus . 72
2.3.7 Visual Pathways .......................................... 73
2.4 Vision in Action .............................................. 74
2.4.1 Image Formation .......................................... 74
2.4.2 Accommodation .......................................... 76
2.4.3 Response to Light ........................................ 76
2.4.4 Colour Vision ............................................. 77
2.4.5 Binocular Vision and Stereopsis ......................... 82
2.5 Visual Impairment and Assistive Technology ............... 82
2.5.1 Demographics of Visual Impairment ...................... 83
2.5.2 Illustrations of Some Types of Visual Impairment ...... 84
2.5.3 Further Types of Visual Impairment ...................... 91
2.5.4 Colour Blindness ........................................ 93
2.5.5 Corrective Lenses ....................................... 94
2.6 Chapter Summary ............................................ 98
References ....................................................... 99

3 Sight Measurement ............................................ 103
3.1 Introduction .................................................. 103
3.2 Visual Acuity ................................................ 104
3.2.1 Using the Chart .......................................... 105
3.2.2 Variations in Measuring Visual Acuity ................. 105
3.3 Field of Vision Tests ........................................ 107
3.3.1 The Normal Visual Field ................................ 107
3.3.2 The Tangent Screen ..................................... 108
3.3.3 Kinetic Perimetry ....................................... 108
3.3.4 Static Perimetry ......................................... 110
3.4 Pressure Measurement ....................................... 111
3.5 Biometry ..................................................... 112
3.6 Ocular Examination ......................................... 113
3.7 Optical Coherence Tomography .............................. 114
3.7.1 Echo Delay ............................................... 116
3.7.2 Low Coherence Interferometry ......................... 116
3.7.3 An OCT Scanner ........................................ 117
3.8 Ocular Electrophysiology ................................... 118
4 Haptics as a Substitute for Vision ........................................... 135
  4.1 Introduction ........................................................ 135
    4.1.1 Physiological Basis .................................... 136
    4.1.2 Passive Touch, Active Touch and Haptics .......... 137
    4.1.3 Exploratory Procedures ................................ 137
  4.2 Vision and Haptics Compared .................................... 138
  4.3 The Capacity of Bare Fingers in Real Environments .......... 139
    4.3.1 Visually Impaired People's Use of Haptics
       Without any Technical Aid ............................... 140
    4.3.2 Speech Perceived by Hard-of-hearing People
       Using Bare Hands .................................... 140
    4.3.3 Natural Capacity of Touch and Evaluation of Technical Aids 141
  4.4 Haptic Low-tech Aids ............................................. 141
    4.4.1 The Long Cane ....................................... 141
    4.4.2 The Guide Dog ....................................... 142
    4.4.3 Braille ............................................. 143
    4.4.4 Embossed Pictures .................................... 144
    4.4.5 The Main Lesson from Low-tech Aids ............... 145
  4.5 Matrices of Point Stimuli ........................................ 145
    4.5.1 Aids for Orientation and Mobility ............... 145
    4.5.2 Aids for Reading Text ................................ 148
    4.5.3 Aids for Reading Pictures ........................... 149
  4.6 Computer-based Aids for Graphical Information .......... 149
    4.6.1 Aids for Graphical User Interfaces .................. 150
    4.6.2 Tactile Computer Mouse ............................. 150
  4.7 Haptic Displays ................................................ 151
    4.7.1 Information Available via a Haptic Display .......... 152
    4.7.2 What Information Can Be Obtained
       with the Reduced Information? ........................ 153
    4.7.3 Haptic Displays as Aids for the Visually Impaired .... 156
  4.8 Chapter Summary .............................................. 158
  4.9 Concluding Remarks ....................................... 159
References .............................................................. 160
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mobility: An Overview</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The Travel Activity</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Understanding Mobility</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Assistive Technology Systems for the Travel Process</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>The Historical Development of Travel Aids for Visually Impaired and Blind People</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Obstacle Avoidance AT: Guide Dogs and Robotic Guide Walkers</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1</td>
<td>Guide Dogs</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2</td>
<td>Robotic Guides and Walkers</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Obstacle Avoidance AT: Canes</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.1</td>
<td>Long Canes</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.2</td>
<td>Technology Canes</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Other Mobility Assistive Technology Approaches</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.1</td>
<td>Clear-path Indicators</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.2</td>
<td>Obstacle and Object Location Detectors</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.3</td>
<td>The vOICe System</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Orientation Assistive Technology Systems</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.1</td>
<td>Global Positioning System Orientation Technology</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.2</td>
<td>Other Technology Options for Orientation Systems</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Accessible Environments</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mobility AT: The Batcane (UltraCane)</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Mobility Background and Introduction</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Principles of Ultrasonics</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>Ultrasonic Waves</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Attenuation and Reflection Interactions</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>Transducer Geometry</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Bats and Signal Processing</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1</td>
<td>Principles of Bat Sonar</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2</td>
<td>Echolocation Call Structures</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3</td>
<td>Signal Processing Capabilities</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4</td>
<td>Applicability of Bat Echolocation to Sonar System Design</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Design and Construction Issues</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.1</td>
<td>Outline Requirement Specification</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.2</td>
<td>Ultrasonic Spatial Sensor Subsystem</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.3</td>
<td>Trial Prototype Spatial Sensor Arrangement</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.4</td>
<td>Tactile User Interface Subsystem</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.5</td>
<td>Cognitive Mapping</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.6</td>
<td>Embedded Processing Control Requirements</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Concept Phase and Engineering Prototype Phase Trials</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Case Study in Commercialisation</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7 Navigation AT: Context-aware Computing

7.1 Defining the Orientation/Navigation Problem
7.1.1 Orientation, Mobility and Navigation
7.1.2 Traditional Mobility Aids
7.1.3 Limitations of Traditional Aids

7.2 Cognitive Maps
7.2.1 Learning and Acquiring Spatial Information
7.2.2 Factors that Influence How Knowledge Is Acquired
7.2.3 The Structure and Form of Cognitive Maps

7.3 Overview of Existing Technologies
7.3.1 Technologies for Distant Navigation
7.3.2 User Interface Output Technologies

7.4 Principles of Mobile Context-aware Computing
7.4.1 Adding Context to User-computer Interaction
7.4.2 Acquiring Useful Contextual Information
7.4.3 Capabilities of Context-awareness
7.4.4 Application of Context-aware Principles
7.4.5 Technological Challenges and Unresolved Usability Issues

7.5 Test Procedures
7.5.1 Human Computer Interaction (HCI)
7.5.2 Cognitive Mapping
7.5.3 Overall Approach

7.6 Future Positioning Technologies

7.7 Chapter Summary
7.7.1 Conclusions

References

8 Accessible Global Positioning System (GPS) and Related Orientation Technologies

8.1 Defining the Navigation Problem
8.1.1 What is the Importance of Location Information?
8.1.2 What Mobility Tools and Traditional Maps are Available for the Blind?

8.2 Principles of Global Positioning Systems
8.2.1 What is the Global Positioning System?
8.2.2 Accuracy of GPS: Some General Issues
8.2.3 Accuracy of GPS: Some Technical Issues
8.2.4 Frequency Spectrum of GPS, Present and Future
8.2.5 Other GPS Systems

8.3 Application of GPS Principles

8.4 Design Issues

8.5 Development Issues
8.5.1 Choosing an Appropriate Platform
8.5.2 Choosing the GPS Receiver
8.5.3 Creating a Packaged System
8.5.4 Integration vs Stand-alone
8.6 User Interface Design Issues ......................................................... 281
  8.6.1 How to Present the Information ........................................... 281
  8.6.2 When to Present the Information ......................................... 282
  8.6.3 What Information to Present ................................................ 282

8.7 Test Procedures and Results .................................................... 283

8.8 Case Study in Commercialisation ................................................ 283
  8.8.1 Understanding the Value of the Technology ............................ 283
  8.8.2 Limitations of the Technology ............................................... 284
  8.8.3 Ongoing Development .......................................................... 285

8.9 Chapter Summary ........................................................................ 286

References ...................................................................................... 286

9 Electronic Travel Aids: An Assessment ............................................. 289
  9.1 Introduction ................................................................................. 290
  9.2 Why Do an Assessment? .............................................................. 291
  9.3 Methodologies for Assessments of Electronic Travel Aids ............ 292
    9.3.1 Eliciting User Requirements .................................................. 292
    9.3.2 Developing a User Requirements Specification
        and Heuristic Evaluation ......................................................... 294
    9.3.3 Hands-on Assessments .......................................................... 295
    9.3.4 Methodology Used for Assessments in this Chapter .................. 295
  9.4 Modern-day Electronic Travel Aids ............................................. 299
    9.4.1 The Distinction Between Mobility and Navigation Aids .......... 300
    9.4.2 The Distinction Between Primary and Secondary Aids .......... 300
    9.4.3 User Requirements: Mobility and Navigation Aids ............... 300
    9.4.4 Mobility Aids ....................................................................... 304
    9.4.5 Mobility Aids: Have They Solved the Mobility Challenge? .... 311
    9.4.6 Navigation Aids .................................................................... 312
    9.4.7 Navigation Aids: Have They Solved
        the Navigation Challenge? ...................................................... 314
  9.5 Training ....................................................................................... 315
  9.6 Chapter Summary and Conclusions. ............................................ 317

References ...................................................................................... 320

10 Accessible Environments ............................................................... 323
  10.1 Introduction ................................................................................. 323
    10.1.1 Legislative and Regulatory Framework .................................. 323
    10.1.2 Accessible Environments: An Overview ............................... 325
    10.1.3 Principles for the Design of Accessible Environments .......... 326
    10.1.4 Relationship Between Environmental Information and
        Navigation Systems and Global Positioning Systems (GPS)
        Orientation Systems ................................................................. 327
  10.2 Physical Environments: The Streetscape .................................... 328
    10.2.1 Pavements and Pathways ..................................................... 328
    10.2.2 Road Crossings .................................................................... 330
    10.2.3 Bollards and Street Furniture ............................................... 331
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.3 Physical Environments: Buildings</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.1 General Exterior Issues</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.2 General Interior Issues</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.3 Lighting and Décor</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.4 Signs and Notices</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.5 Interior Building Services</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4 Environmental Information and Navigation Technologies</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4.1 Audio Information System: General Issues</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4.2 Some Technologies for Environmental Information Systems</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5 Accessible Public Transport</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5.1 Accessible Public Transportation: Design Issues</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5.2 Accessible Public Transportation: Technological Information and Way-finding Systems</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Accessible Bus System: A Bluetooth Application</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1 Introduction</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2 Bluetooth Fundamentals</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.1 Brief History of Bluetooth</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.2 Bluetooth Power Class</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.3 Protocol Stack</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.4 Bluetooth Profile</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.5 Piconet</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2.6 Bluetooth and Competing Wireless Technologies</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3 Design Issues</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.1 System Architecture</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.2 Hardware Requirements</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3.3 Software Requirements</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4 Developmental Issues</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4.1 Bluetooth Server</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4.2 Bluetooth Client (Mobile Device)</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4.3 User Interface</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5 Commercialisation Issues</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Accessible Information: An Overview</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.1 Introduction</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.2 Low Vision Aids</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.2.1 Basic Principles</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3 Low Vision Assistive Technology Systems</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3.1 Large Print</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3.2 Closed Circuit Television Systems</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3.3 Video Magnifiers</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3.4 Telescopic Assistive Systems</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4 Audio-transcription of Printed Information</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4.1 Stand-alone Reading Systems</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4.2 Read IT Project</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5 Tactile Access to Information</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5.1 Braille</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5.2 Moon</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5.3 Braille Devices</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6 Accessible Computer Systems</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6.1 Input Devices</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6.2 Output Devices</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6.3 Computer-based Reading Systems</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6.4 Accessible Portable Computers</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7 Accessible Internet</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7.1 World Wide Web Guidelines</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7.2 Guidelines for Web Authoring Tools</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7.3 Accessible Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) Documents</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7.4 Bobby Approval</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8 Telecommunications</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8.1 Voice Dialling General Principles</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8.2 Talking Caller ID</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8.3 Mobile Telephones</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.9 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Screen Readers and Screen Magnifiers</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.1 Introduction</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.2 Overview of Chapter</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.3 Interacting with a Graphical User Interface</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4 Screen Magnifiers</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4.1 Overview</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4.2 Magnification Modes</td>
<td>454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4.3 Other Interface Considerations</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4.4 The Architecture and Implementation of Screen Magnifiers</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5 Screen Readers</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5.1 Overview</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5.2 The Architecture and Implementation of a Screen Reader</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5.3 Using a Braille Display</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5.4 User Interface Issues</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.6 Hybrid Screen Reader Magnifiers</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.7 Self-magnifying Applications</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.8 Self-voicing Applications</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.9 Application Adaptors</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.10 Chapter Summary</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15.7 Accessing Newspapers .................................................. 575
15.8 Future Technology Developments ...................................... 576
15.9 Chapter Summary and Conclusion ..................................... 577
  15.9.1 Chapter Summary .................................................. 577
  15.9.2 Conclusion .......................................................... 578
References ............................................................................. 579

16 Designing Accessible Music Software for Print Impaired People .... 581
  16.1 Introduction ............................................................... 582
    16.1.1 Print Impairments .................................................. 582
    16.1.2 Music Notation ..................................................... 583
  16.2 Overview of Accessible Music ......................................... 584
    16.2.1 Formats ............................................................... 584
    16.2.2 Technical Aspects .................................................. 593
  16.3 Some Recent Initiatives and Projects .................................. 594
    16.3.1 Interactive Music Network ...................................... 594
    16.3.2 Play 2 ................................................................. 595
    16.3.3 Dancing Dots ....................................................... 596
    16.3.4 Toccata .............................................................. 597
  16.4 Problems to Be Overcome ............................................... 597
    16.4.1 A Content Processing Layer ..................................... 598
    16.4.2 Standardization of Accessible Music Technology .......... 599
  16.5 Unifying Accessible Design, Technology and Musical Content ...... 600
    16.5.1 Braille Music ....................................................... 600
    16.5.2 Talking Music ...................................................... 607
  16.6 Conclusions ................................................................. 609
    16.6.1 Design for All or Accessibility from Scratch ................. 610
    16.6.2 Applying Design for All in Emerging Standards ............. 610
    16.6.3 Accessibility in Emerging Technology ......................... 611
References ............................................................................. 612

17 Assistive Technology for Daily Living ............................................. 615
  17.1 Introduction ................................................................. 616
  17.2 Personal Care ............................................................. 617
    17.2.1 Labelling Systems .................................................. 617
    17.2.2 Healthcare Monitoring .......................................... 625
  17.3 Time-keeping, Alarms and Alerting ................................... 628
    17.3.1 Time-keeping ....................................................... 628
    17.3.2 Alarms and Alerting .............................................. 630
  17.4 Food Preparation and Consumption .................................... 633
    17.4.1 Talking Kitchen Scales .......................................... 633
    17.4.2 Talking Measuring Jug .......................................... 634
    17.4.3 Liquid Level Indicator ............................................ 635
    17.4.4 Talking Microwave Oven ....................................... 635
    17.4.5 Talking Kitchen and Remote Thermometers .................. 635
    17.4.6 Braille Salt and Pepper Set ..................................... 636
17.5 Environmental Control and Use of Appliances .......................... 636
  17.5.1 Light Probes ........................................... 637
  17.5.2 Colour Probes ........................................... 639
  17.5.3 Talking and Tactile Thermometers and Barometers ....... 641
  17.5.4 Using Appliances ....................................... 642

17.6 Money, Finance and Shopping ........................................ 643
  17.6.1 Mechanical Money Indicators ................................ 644
  17.6.2 Electronic Money Identifiers ................................ 645
  17.6.3 Electronic Purse ......................................... 645
  17.6.4 Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs) ......................... 647

17.7 Communications and Access to Information: Other Technologies .. 648
  17.7.1 Information Kiosks and Other Self-service Systems ......... 648
  17.7.2 Using Smart Cards ....................................... 650
  17.7.3 EZ Access® ........................................... 652

17.8 Chapter Summary .................................................. 653

References .............................................................. 656

18 Assistive Technology for Education, Employment and Recreation .... 659
  18.1 Introduction .................................................. 659
  18.2 Education: Learning and Teaching .............................. 661
    18.2.1 Accessing Educational Processes and Approaches ...... 662
    18.2.2 Educational Technologies, Devices and Tools .......... 667
  18.3 Employment ................................................... 670
    18.3.1 Professional and Person-centred ........................ 671
    18.3.2 Scientific and Technical ................................ 673
    18.3.3 Administrative and Secretarial .......................... 674
    18.3.4 Skilled and Non-skilled (Manual) Trades ................ 676
    18.3.5 Working Outside ....................................... 680
  18.4 Recreational Activities ........................................ 680
    18.4.1 Accessing the Visual, Audio and Performing Arts ...... 681
    18.4.2 Games, Puzzles, Toys and Collecting ................... 686
    18.4.3 Holidays and Visits: Museums, Galleries and Heritage Sites 687
    18.4.4 Sports and Outdoor Activities .......................... 688
    18.4.5 DIY, Art and Craft Activities ........................... 696
  18.5 Chapter Summary .................................................. 700

References .............................................................. 703

Biographical Sketches of the Contributors ................................ 709

Index ................................................................. 717