

"Gegenwart": A magazine for blind and visually-impaired people

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Dresden: Blind programmer is an expert in barrier-free iPhone apps

Colour scanner app 'ColorVisor' makes everyday living easier for the blind and visually-impaired

Dr. Jan Blüher, who has been blind in both eyes for 17 years, is a dedicated expert for barrier-free movement in virtual space. He programs and develops his apps on behalf of his customer for iPad and iPhone according to the inclusive motto 'design for all'. His company 'visorApps' also releases its own applications. The first app from Dr. Blüher's 'visorApps' was the 'ColorVisor', a colour scanner for the iPhone. A blind person who developed and programmed a colour scanner; certainly an exciting story!

The son of a teacher and a physicist, Blüher grew up in Leipzig. Right from his birth in 1977 in Borna, Saxony, he was extremely near-sighted; at the age of 10 years old, he lost sight in one eye, and then at 20, he lost sight in the other. After going completely blind, he was forced to break off his studies in physics, which he had just started. In 1997, he went to Dresden to study computer science. He continues to live here with his wife, where they raise their two children (13 and 11) from an earlier relationship and their common child of four years.

His friends consider him to be a relaxed person. Someone who carefully weighs the situation before he speaks his mind and someone who doggedly follows his goals. In private, he spends a lot of time at home with his family, for example playing with model trains, Lego, or Uno with his children. With his friends who can see, he plays 'Settlers of Catan', for example, which they have marked with sand to make them legible for him as well. Dr. Blüher also likes watching films and listening to music, especially to Funny von Dannen. When he has time, he likes reading, in which case Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams are among his favourite authors, although he also enjoys non-fiction, for example history.

"I decided to study computer science because I have always been interested in mathematics and technical natural sciences. At TU Dresden, the special program for blind and visually-impaired students at the computer science faculty offered very good studying conditions." Blüher says that in retrospect, computer science was likely easier for him than physics. After his studies, he began working scientifically and then wrote his doctorate in 2008 in the area of algorithm development for material sciences.

Purchasing an iPad in 2011 set the course for the future. Dr. Blüher was thrilled from the start by the simplicity of its operation, its barrier-free functions, and the opportunities offered by the technology. Like most of the blind or the visually-impaired, he was excited that the screen reader is an integral feature of the Apple operating system. "Blind people can use devices operating with iOS very easily. Although the iPhone, for example, is very accessible for this reason, there are many apps on the market that cannot be operated by the blind or they can hardly operate."

Because this doctor of computer science possessed very good starting conditions and enjoyed the material, he decided to specialise in the development of barrier-free apps on an independent basis. "One big motivation for me personally is the fact that many apps don't take complete advantage of the possibilities that are available. All apps of my apps use the features of Apple's voice-over technology as far as possible, which makes them designed for maximum accessibility," states Dr. Blüher.

The company's first product ready for the market was its colour scanner 'ColorVisor', which has been available since March 2012. ColorVisor is also a useful tool for Dr. Blüher himself throughout the day, for example, when he is putting together coloured socks for his children. He also describes the programming this requires as "technically manageable to begin with." ColorVisor is mainly intended for the blind and visually-impaired people, for example for colour-blind users of the iPhone, the iPad, and the iPod touch. "Of course, the hardware of the iPhone etc. places limits on the colour scanner, which are not so constrained with special devices for the blind. However, devices of this kind are 300 times more expensive than the app, and they aren't always handy," explains Dr. Blüher. This app recognises colours via the cameras of all iOS devices version 5.0 and higher, which normally possess a camera, and in saved photos and images. Besides the RGB colour components, the HSB colour system is now available for identifying and creating colours. The integrated reference database also enables the ColorVisor to name scanned colours individually. The user can also have different colour nuances like lemon yellow, olive green, or mauve read out to them, and one might suppose that Dr. Blüher referred to the expertise of his wife in this case.

With 'MouseKick', Dr. Blüher has programmed a game app following the completion of ColorVisor to test the differences to the more helpful program. He is excited to program a game that is equally intended for people who can see and for the blind to discover the opportunities offered by the graphics (visorApps works closely together with graphic designer Torsten Becker). Currently, visorApps is working on a commissioned project for Norddeutsche Blindenhörbücherei, the North-German Library for the Blind, where he is able to contribute his expert knowledge in barrier-free design.

"The iPhone enables easy, fast, and efficient access to information in a completely new way. The potential for blind and visually-impaired people thanks to the versatile opportunities for accessing information simply cannot be imagined. For this reason, it is changing the way that we interact with the world even more strongly than it does for those who can see," explains Dr. Blüher.

As a blind developer himself, Dr. Blüher is able to connect the needs of a blind user with his skills in the technical implementation of apps to create a barrier-free user experience for both those who can see and for the blind. 'Design for all': Because Dr. Blüher always has this motto in mind, he has become a specialist in demand in the meantime for barrier-free applications; other developers are now also approaching him with questions about barrier-free development.

ColorVisor in the App Store:

<http://iTunes.com/app/ColorVisor>

MouseKick in the App Store:

<http://AppStore.com./MouseKick>

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