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# Table of Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** .................................................................................................................. v

**ABSTRACT** ................................................................................................................................... vi

**LIST OF FIGURES** ..................................................................................................................... viii

**LIST OF TABLES** ......................................................................................................................... ix

**CHAPTER 1  CHAPTER TITLE** .................................................................................................... 1

**CHAPTER 2  CHAPTER TITLE** .................................................................................................... 2

**APPENDIX  APPENDIX TITLE** .................................................................................................. 3

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LIST OF FIGURES

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John Smith was born in Houston, Texas. After completing his schoolwork at Lamar High School in Houston in 1970, John entered Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. During the summers of 1972 and 1973, he attended the University of Colorado. He received a Bachelor of Science with a major in zoology from Southwest Texas State University in May 1974. During the following two years, he was employed as a biology teacher at S.F. Austin High School in Austin, Texas. In June 1976, he entered the computer science graduate program at The University of Texas at Dallas.
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