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### **TRIBAL PEACE - PRESERVING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF DISPERSED NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES**

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## **Abstract**

This abstract discusses my doctoral research at the Harvard Design School, focused on how the design of digital places for the preservation of cultural heritage energize communities to share historical and contemporary experiences in the advent of significant political, historical, or geographical distance. My work is focused on a set of distributed Native American reservations within the San Diego county in Southern California. Invasions, and the creation of a reservation system in the 1950s has effectively disconnected what was once a contiguous nation with a strong cultural folklore. Resulting from this has been a dramatic drop in educational, social, and cultural knowledge accompanied by a number of negative social blights. Tribal Peace, my dissertation work, is the story of my work with these communities to begin to create reconnections across space and from the historical to contemporary culture. A powerful digital archive has been designed and created to merge distance and time. I introduce my ongoing story with these tribes along with a demonstration of this powerful, evolving digital public space.

**Keywords:** Public Space, Globalization, Digital Media, Community, Storytelling, Agent, Collage, Video Documentary, Dynamic Archive, Architecture

## **Zusammenfassung (DE)**

Dieser Vortrag behandelt die Forschungstätigkeit im Rahmen meines Doktorats an der Harvard Design School, die sich darauf konzentriert, wie das Design von digitalen Orten für die Bewahrung kulturellen Erbes Gemeinschaften dazu anregen kann ihre historischen wie heutigen Erfahrungen in Zeiten einer signifikanten politischen, historischen beziehungsweise geographischen Distanz zu teilen. Meine Arbeit konzentriert sich auf eine Reihe von dezentralisierten Reservaten amerikanischer Ureinwohner im Landkreis San Diego in Südkalifornien. Invasionen sowie die Gründung des Reservat-Systems in den 1950ern haben das getrennt, was einst eine zusammenhängende Nation mit einer starken kulturellen Folklore war. Daraus resultierte eine dramatische Verminderung des pädagogischen, sozialen und kulturellen Wissens, begleitet von einigen negativen sozialen Verschandelungen. Tribal Peace, meine Doktorarbeit, ist die Geschichte über meine Arbeit mit diesen Gemeinschaften, die darin besteht Verbindungen über den Raum hinweg und von der historischen zur heutigen Kultur wiederherzustellen. Für die Verbindung von Distanz und Zeit wurde ein gewaltiges digitales Archiv entwickelt. Ich stelle meine laufende Arbeit mit diesen Stämmen vor,

zusammen mit einer Demonstration dieses gewaltigen, in Entstehung befindlichen, digitalen öffentlichen Raumes.

**Schlüsselwörter:** öffentlicher Raum, Globalisierung, digitale Medien, Gemeinschaft, Storytelling, Agent, Collage, Dokumentarfilm, dynamisches Archiv, Architektur.

## **Résumé (FR)**

Cet article présente ma recherche doctorale à la *Harvard Design School*, portant sur la manière dont la conception d'espaces numériques pour la conservation du patrimoine culturel motive les communautés à partager des expériences historiques et contemporaines en dépit d'une distance politique, historique, ou géographique significative. Mon travail porte sur un ensemble de réserves américaines de Natifs Américains dans le comté de San Diego, en Californie méridionale. Les invasions, et la création d'un système de réserves dans les années 50, ont dispersé ce qui fut par le passé une nation contiguë avec un folklore culturel fort. Il en a résulté une baisse dramatique des connaissances éducatives, sociales, et culturelles, et des effets sociaux négatifs. Cet essai, *Paix tribale*, est l'histoire de mon travail avec ces communautés pour commencer à recréer des liens à distance, et entre le passé historique et la culture contemporaine. Des archives numériques ont été conçues et créées pour atténuer les effets de la distance et du temps. Je présente mon histoire en cours avec ces tribus, et je présente cet espace numérique puissant et évolutif.

**Mots-clés :** Espace public numérique, Globalisation, Medias numériques, Communauté, Narration, Agent, Collage, Documentaire vidéo, Archives Dynamiques, Architecture de l'information.

My story with the tribal communities of Southern California is a story of a transition from an outsider to a potential enabler. In this paper, I will discuss who are the communities I am working with, my transitions and experiences as a designer and facilitator to create technology-mediated connections with these tribes, and the current and future impacts Tribal Peace hold.

## **History and Contemporary**

Waves of foreign conquerors have had a strong effect on a number of tribes within the San Diego region of Southern California. These include the Kumeyaay, Luiseno, Cupeno and Cahuilla, nations that have now been dissolved and dispersed across the region in 18 largely fragmented and disconnected settlements. The reservation systems of the early 1900s has magnified these dynamics, forcing a resettlement of these groups away from their traditional coastal lifestyle into the desert approximately 100 miles to the east<sup>i</sup>. Across these communities today, it is safe to say that the dynamic is one of fragmentation, fracture, and disconnection. Certain consortia exist to unite these communities, but the mere presence of organizations has done little to reconnect community members across all social strata with the extended tribal family. The dynamic I am describing is spatial, of a unified, contiguous and bounded territory that has heavily decentralized and fragmented. This has occurred on the level of the reservations but in some cases also within a specific reservation. For example, the San Pasqual Reservation, can be described as resembling a “checker-board” form. A walk in basically any direction from a point in the reservation will take one immediately onto land off of the reservation.



Figure 1: Map of distributed Kumeyaay reservations (taken from Kumeyaay.com)

What is the story that is being told within this analysis? It is one on which every level fragmentation and fracture have resulted. To follow a psychological analysis, there is a trauma associated with the disconnection, which has certainly manifested itself into a variety of social blights and losses of social capital. These include a very poor high school graduation rate, issues with alcoholism and drug use, and very few public places, parks, or community activities (though certain community leaders are trying to change this). All the measures of strong community, regardless of cultural lens, are endangered within the scenario I have described.

Relatedly, there are serious cultural rifts between the historical and contemporary. In the process of my fieldwork, tribal members have communicated the loss of the ancestral languages, religious traditions, songs, dances, and rituals. There remain few connections to the pre-reservation generation, and across the reservations only two or three notable medicine people. The lack of connection to a historically strong culture has generated a type of disconnection that complements the spatial distribution previously discussed. And the lack of connection between generations as well as past to present presents an even deeper danger to an already largely dispersed community.

It is within this scenario that I was introduced to tribal members, most notably from the SCTCA, or Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association. Created originally to connect reservations around common water rights disputes, the SCTCA's goal is one of creating community across the reservations, largely through educational and cultural programs. While certain resource centers have been established for communities within the Northern and Southern Regions of the county, there still remains very little in terms of an integrated environment around which the cultural, educational, and social/political priorities of tribal members as a whole can be preserved, discussed, and reflected upon.

## **Agrarian and Urban Metaphors**

I briefly present two major metaphors here to shed some light on my argument. First, are the metaphors of agrarian village communities, the well and the Palaver tree. Communities worldwide have designed their villages around the well because of its critical role as the water and agriculture provider to all. Along with serving this critical bodily role, the well has also served as a key space for the formation and sustenance of community.

This is because the well served as a place of physical co-presence, as a generator of stories, where experiences were communicated, and narratives were disseminated and articulated. The well became the original public space, the space where the village as a social system could be understood and comprehended. Not surprisingly, a survey of well-driven villages worldwide show radial urban forms, with the core starting from the placement of the well, and the periphery built around this critical point of community assembly.

The story of the Palaver tree is quite similar. A provider of shade and comfort to villagers mainly within the Senegal region of Western Africa, the Palaver tree has taken on a strong meaning to village communities within this part of the world. It very much is an embodiment of the "public" within this context.

A key socio-political institution of pre-colonial Africa, the palaver is an assembly where a variety of issues are freely debated and important decisions concerning the community are taken. Its purpose is to resolve latent and overt conflicts in certain highly specific situations. The participants usually gather under a "palaver tree" where everyone has the right to speak

and air their grievances or those of their group. A complainant may opt to be represented by a griot (a poet, storyteller and traditional singer), or some other spokesman.<sup>ii</sup>

These realities have manifested themselves within the oral mythological cultures of the region. Across both these metaphors, a clear image emerges of a simple artifact or articulated form that can be associated with community, narratives, and the power of assembly.

Modern incarnations of the same metaphor hold. The Greek agora, Roman forum, and Islamic Bazaar have all referenced within the Urban Western City Square. Common across all of these cases are the definition of a bounded place where exchange of all types can occur. The place of community has thus recombined into the now widely discussed discourse of “public space”.

In my reading of the most noteworthy aspects of this literature, several points stand out.

- Co-presence: The casual presence of others in the environment creates a dynamic essential to all public space. Jurgen Habermas, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, points to the power of “communicative action” as an enabler of democracy in a modern society. The true public sphere then occurred through the assembly of citizens to engage in rational, critical debate while leaving its private life aside<sup>iii</sup> (Habermas, 1962). Hannah Arendt, in a compelling response to Habermas, argued that a deeper political agonism would empower the assembled to articulate their shared public issues<sup>iv</sup> (Arendt, 1958).
- Landmarks: The public space is identified by its landmarks. These are the environment around the space, elements within the space of differing colors, shapes, and labels. This refers also to the idea of symbology : there are persevering and powerful images that can be associated with the most powerful public spaces. These are images that can invoke an emotional, and in some cases, religious sentiment. The Palaver tree, sounds and smells of bazaars, sloped, alley-fed Campo of Siena, or incredible monuments of the Forum, all serve as examples. Thus, in the design of public spaces, it is critical to conceive of mechanisms that can allow it to be situated and distinct as a place. It brings to light a number of questions: What are appropriate landmarks to embed within the environment? Should these landmarks be derived from

the nature of the the community? information about its members? activity within the community?

- **Multiplicity of Publics:** Habermas and Arendt's discussions of the public sphere expect the dismissal of the private lives of those gathering within the public space. As Nancy Fraser and others have argued, those within the public must embrace their differences rather than dismiss them to truly formulate a common identity<sup>v</sup> (Fraser, 1992). The tribal power structure can be described as largely hierarchical, with a chairman who maintains ultimate political power over the direction of his or her tribe, and several commissions underneath to investigate issues of gaming, education, culture, etc. In terms of inter-tribal communication, these committees and the chairmen tend to dominate. However, there is no strong dialogue social categories and tribes within this setting. In otherwise, communication tends to be topical and within a social strata, rather than across multiplied publics.
  
- **Serendipitous and Dynamic Interactions:** One of the beauties of the public space is the process of discovery and communication that could be made possible by its members. The idealized public space allows for dynamic interactions, which could not predicted or forecast and for communities to be formed based around their interlocking histories and shared narratives. Difference and similarities are all articulated within the public space and as Arendt has argued, the private and public can collapse into the community that is being formed. This community is thus not predestined by a social status or specific affiliation, but instead new associations between individuals to take place, generating a community that has a level of dynamism and heterogeneity that the tribal committees often may not. Thus, the successful public space can impose a friction and communicative discourse on a previously dissociated set of individuals, as Arendt has argued.
  
- **Identity:** In the virtual space, the identities of different members encounter complications. No longer are the sensory elements which physical proximity make possible, adding a level of mystery to the identity of members. The idealized public space, as conceptualized classically by Arendt and/or Habermas, encourages the development of a community identity while putting aside the private identities of different individuals. However, even though the individual in the public space can still

maintain some level of privacy, their mere physical presence unlocks many mysteries about their identity which could potentially trigger communication and mutual understanding.

- Monumentality and the Everyday: I believe one of the most important aspects of creating, and fostering community lies in how its public identifies with itself as a larger unit. I describe this concept as the community's "social fabric". The "fabric" is what weaves the community together, and can manifest itself both in the physical form of the building or square, or through psychological and emotional constructs such as song, story, or shared values.

In the physical world, the monument is often identified as embodying the understanding of composition, history, and shared goals for a physical community. Communities tend to identify with spatial elements such as churches, memorials, and parks when they tell the stories of their collective selves. In all of these examples, the common history, interests, and stories that integrate a social group are symbolized in the monument, often referred to as a symbol of collective memory. Architects such as Aldo Rossi have been celebrated for the monuments to collective memory they create, physical manifestations of a that which a community shares<sup>vi</sup> (Moneo, 1976).

However, an alternative model has been introduced through the observations of Michel De Certeau in his "The City in Everyday Life". This bases an understanding of the public space as a function of the everyday, the rich interactions within the social and cultural world of the community. The act of walking becomes the language of the spatial world, and the inhabitation and reconciliation of a finite space among multiple groups really defines that which makes a public space notable<sup>vii</sup> (De Certeau, 1984).

Placing these attributes of the public space within the tribal communities of Southern California reveals several levels of disconnection. Spatial and GIS analyses of the reservations of San Diego county reveal significant distances between reservations, and large obstacles between physical connectivity, such as mountain ranges. Analyses of infrastructure, such as connecting highways and roads, reveal that actual distances between reservations are but a fraction of the distance needed to be traveled to reach one place to another. Thus, infrastructure has clearly not been designed to the benefit of these communities. Additionally, rarely between the communities is there empty, open space. Instead, because of the population

density within Southern California, numerous non-native American communities also live within the region. Not only are there long physical distances involved in moving between communities, but the cultural distances and shifts are undeniable. To invoke a biological metaphor, the permeability of the different membranes of the tribal communities is sacrificed by a complicating infrastructure and numerous alien cells.

“We were one” – this is an expression I have heard from these communities repeatedly. However, the picture I have painted is not of oneness, boundedness, or any of the features of public space I articulate, but instead of fragmentation, decentralization, and fractured infrastructure. My analyses here are not merely a macro-based description of a physical or social geography but the causality of a set of significantly negative social phenomena.

More specifically, a culture that once shared and united the different nations of the region is no longer collectively shared or narrated. Those with knowledge of different traditions have been isolated by the dynamics of being placed on a single reservation, thus hampering the ability to spread traditions to all. It is not surprising that a set of communities that lack a strong common identification can not be truly considered a strong community. This raises the danger of loss of traditional cultural folklores and the ability to place these documentations in a safe place that community members can reflect on and respond to. While the folklores of past and present that can provide potential for community still exist, the challenge of creating place for sharing, dialogue, and reflection becomes paramount. The role of story as a mechanism for generating, sustaining and promoting the evolution of communities is undeniable and timeless. Thus, the challenge has risen of re-galvanizing the stories of the tribal communities within Southern California.

## **Tribal Digital Village: Generating Tribal Peace**

Tribal leaders belonging to the SCTCA identified the potential that internet connectivity could bring to this situation of disconnection. By applying for and receiving Hewlett-Packard's Digital Villages grant, technology has now been introduced as a first infrastructure to connect these reservations, but although different tribal members have become more familiar with the tools of creating multimedia, story, and cultural content, little has been done to design a space in which all of this content can be effectively stored, shared, and interrelated. This is done with the understanding that the technologization of a story necessitates a shift in the means by

which it is received and reacted to<sup>viii</sup>. The potential to spread the critical political, cultural, and educational knowledge and narratives of these communities remains compromised by the lack of an environment, a digital public space that can truly represent, disseminate, and empower tribal members across Southern California through the connections they may establish with one another.

It is within this context that I was introduced to the different tribes of the SCTCA, and provided with the opportunity to create a technology that could begin to share the content and knowledge of individuals across the tribal communities. As a designer of digital media, I have worked on several projects that attempt to build bridges within and across communities while serving as dynamic cultural archives to integrate past and present through shared narratives.

In November of 2003, we began to create Tribal Peace, an intertribal living digital archive that shares photographs, video pieces, songs and other sounds from yore to today. In the next section, I introduce this system:

## **Entering the Tribal World Digitally**

Tribal Peace is accessed via a simple log-in and sign-up page. For tribal members whom already maintain accounts, the log-in will suffice, and for first-time users, the signup link will take users from the Flash-driven interface to the form which queries new users for their full names, interests in using the system (users can choose multiple topics, including culture, education, leadership, community development, and technology), reservation, and further information about themselves. New users are then automatically redirected to the tribal peace system, where they can automatically enter the primary system interface. All existing users can add content to the system, through a simple upload PHP script that has been created to take audio, video, and image stories and place them within the MySQL-driven database.

Tribal Peace is presented to users by a session host, one from a set of volunteers from the reservations who welcomes users to tribal peace, and explains the purposes and goals of the system. First-time users are treated to a prayer and detailed welcome from the host. The goal of the host is to welcome tribal members in a more personal and familiar manner. The culture of the Native tribes was historically very personal and driven by kinship and familial networks. While this cannot be replaced or substituted by a web site, the tribal peace hosts are

meant to provide a personal touch to the system, and pass on the goal of tribal peace as a system truly driven by community members themselves, rather than an amorphous designer!



**Figure 2:** Tribal Peace host – Dorothy Tavouie

In identifying hosts for the system, the goal was to think about linkages that connect the reservations today with or without any technological system. Over time, it became clear that not only were stories and cultural traditions the mechanisms that traditionally sustained community, but that today there remain certain charismatic individuals, whom continue to carry respect and admiration across all the distances and disconnections that characterize the communities. Thus, Tribal Peace has been fortunate to feature such icons as Jane Dumas, a medicine woman who remains one of the few teachers of the ancient Kumeyaay language, and Anthony Pico, the chairman of the Viejas Reservation, and one of the state's foremost native leaders and proponent of tribal sovereignty.

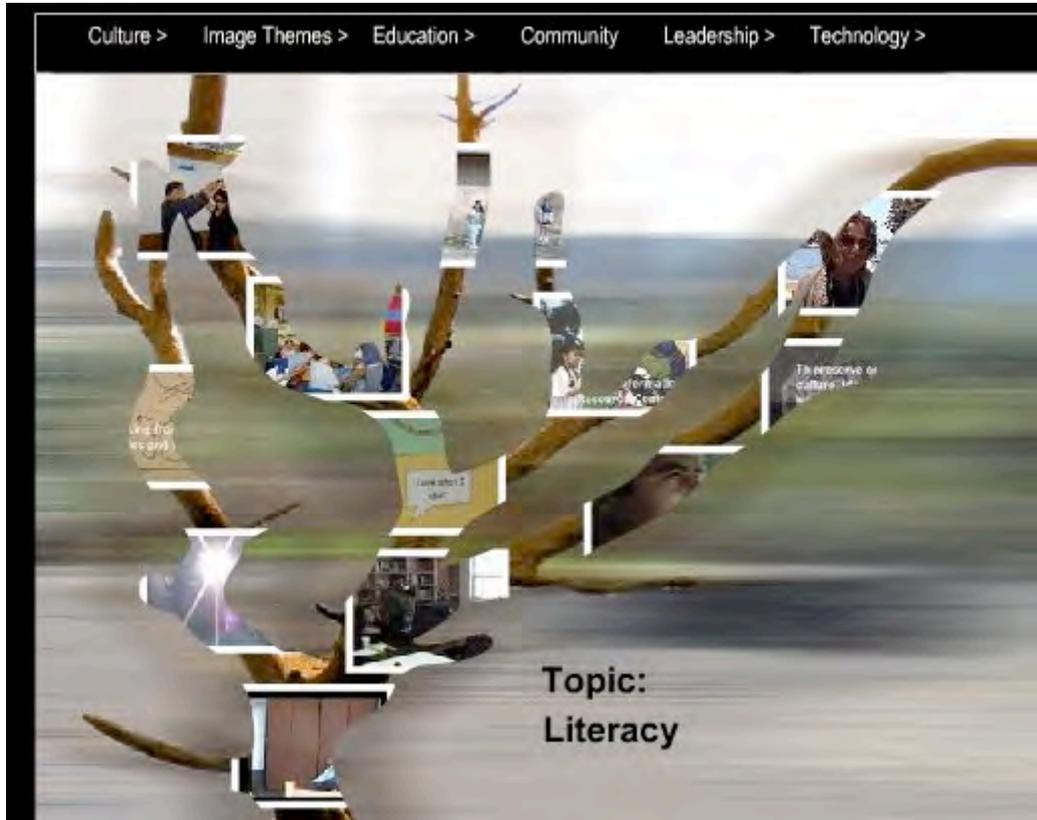


**Figure 3** - Tribal Peace interface, featuring the Manzanita tree

The tribal peace interface features the Manzanita tree, a symbol of rebirth and new beginnings, in the traditional Native American mythology. Above the tree, there are a set of topics, such as Culture, Education, Community Development, etc. Placing the mouse over any of these topics reveals multiple sub-topics under each. The choice and architecture of these topics has been designed by and created by a committee of tribal members from different reservations within the SCTCA. From previous research, I have identified that community-focused web environments inspire much greater usage, dialogue, and enthusiasm amongst their users, if the authorship of content and topic architecture are created by community members. Community-driven knowledge architectures are often referred to in influential research as ontology, or models for describing and interrelating a set of content. Basing the ontology around a community-authored structure, has provided the potential for Tribal Peace to take a step along the path toward its goal of serving as a true artifact of the communities<sup>ix</sup>.

Tribal members are enabled to select any topic from the drop-down ontology. This selection indicates a choice from which Tribal Peace will retrieve sets of related narratives. These narratives, as Figure 3 below reveals, populate the tree as masked images, each of which have been chosen by the author of the story as a visual representation of their submission. The

metaphor is one of constituting the Manzanita rebirth symbol as a collection of community-authored stories. This is meant to indicate that the rebirth and reconnection of the communities of Southern California will ultimately be driven by tribal members themselves, with the mediation of the digital system.



**Figure 4:** Manzanita tree populated by community-created narratives related to the theme of literacy

Moving the mouse around the interface reveals information about the different pieces retrieved by Tribal Peace. Over each piece, a small window pops up to provide the title, reservation, and author name of the given piece. Additionally, a box at the top of the interface changes its text to reveal the other topics within the ontology the author has chosen to associate his or her submission with. Thus, Tribal Peace's visitors are given information about where each retrieved piece stands. Visitors can choose to stream any video or view any image simply by clicking on the corresponding masked part of the tree.



**Figure 5:** Pop-up window and list of categories related to the story (accessed when the corresponding part of the tree is “moused-over”)

Finally, as Figure 3 demonstrates in the bottom right, any tribal peace visitor may comment upon a story they view within the system. This is done simply by clicking on the “write new comment” button and submitting it. Once submitted, the comment of a story viewer will be made available to all system visitors when the given story is viewed by all others. In the design of Tribal Peace, enabling the features of response, and expansion were critical. It was important that the system was not merely a static archive, but instead a place of discussion, debate, and commentary. Today, Tribal Peace continues to grow into this role as a place of dialogue and discussion within a potential Habermasian and Arendtian applied discourse.

A final but critical element within Tribal Peace involves the abilities we are investigating of Tribal Peace to begin to suggest and tell stories to visitors. We have investigated the potential of simple social information filtering agent algorithms<sup>x</sup>, common in a number of commercial settings (including Amazon.com and other recommendation systems), to make recommendations to tribal members of stories and community topics in which they may be interested. Tribal Peace will thus integrate two types of “guides”, as we call the enactment of these agents. The story guide will make recommendations of specific narratives to the tribal member, based on an understanding of which pieces he or she may be interested in but still unexposed to. By analyzing the relative levels of similarities between user interests, the

algorithm can identify and suggest pieces accordingly. Using the same algorithm, but instead applied to community topics or nodes within the ontology, the Topic Guide recommends three themes for the tribal member to investigate further. The relative benefits of these added technologies are yet to be fully investigated, but represent an exciting new application of successful approaches toward intelligent agents.

## **Tribal Peace today and tomorrow**

Tribal Peace remains an exciting work in progress today, with close to three hundred members from reservations across San Diego county. It is anticipated that this number will continue to grow as the power of the system disseminates and further content is added. Basic publicizing techniques have been exercised, including the building of multiple kiosks, integration into school and educational curricula, and postering/flyering. The potential of the system remains very strong, as a new presence in the mediation of the key political, social, cultural, and educational priorities that could deeply re-connect these reservations across distance and to their collective history. Released for the communities for the last three months, we will begin evaluations of the system using basic techniques of survey, interview, and quantitative analysis of usage patterns. To test the relative benefits of the topic and story guides, system users may or may not be provided with these features.

Across the evaluation process, our goal is to examine whether tribal peace can serve as a digital place of meeting and sharing of the traditional cultural resources of the tribal communities while also igniting the critical discussions on the political issues of sovereignty, educational and economic issues of sustainability, and cultural issues as the elder generations begin to pass away.

Can the videos of plant healing, ewa creation, and tribal ceremonies juxtaposed with contemporary pieces discussing more difficult issues of casinos, alcoholism, and relationships with the government begin to provide a landscape in which community, as signified through dialogue, and discussion, can emerge? These are the questions and goals of tribal peace – to re-energize the traditional kinship and social networks of the tribal peoples of Southern California. The questions of whether a digital system driven and designed by its community can serve as a recombined well or Palaver tree still remain to be answered.

## Author's Vita

Ramesh Srinivasan is a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His research is focused on the interactions between digital media, communities, and the built environment. He has published his research in several conference proceedings and journals including the Journal of Knowledge Management, Journal of Digital Libraries, and Journal of Urban Technology (all upcoming). Srinivasan holds a M.S degree from the MIT Media Lab and a B.S from Stanford University. He is the designer and creator of several interactive media projects including PhotoGlas, a web-based news photomontage system; Village Voice, a digital project that employed dynamic collage and community-driven architectures to empower a Somali refugees within the Boston area to re-connect and preserve their histories and cultures; Public Body, a physical installation created for the pedestrians within a tunnel in downtown Boston, and Tribal Peace, an intertribal media system designed to share knowledge, and cultural narratives across a dispersed set of Native American reservations.

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