

Guanyin

chinese goddess of mercy
origins and linkages

Ranjit Makkuni



1.0 The Bodhisattva Concept

Over the past 2000 years, the Buddha's teaching evolved two major schools of Buddhism: the monastic school (Hinayana) and the social school (Mahayana). The Hinayana school focuses on contemplative methods for individuals to liberate themselves from suffering and the repeated round of births and deaths. The Mahayana school provides a social vehicle of liberation not just for individual practitioners but for the whole of humanity.

In the Mahayana school, the goal of the spiritual practitioner is not just the attainment of personal enlightenment, "Nirvana," but the postponement of the personal enlightenment until the entire universe is liberated. Such a practitioner of enlightenment, one who works for the liberation of the "others" is known as a Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva ideal gained ground in Buddhism and introduced an altruistic approach to Buddhist practice. The compassionate attitude for the other in preference to the individual humanized Buddhist practice and spread its message worldwide.

One of the greatest representations of Bodhisattva is found in the image of Avalokiteshvara, whose simple message of compassion became a major uniting force throughout Asia.

2.0 Avalokiteshvara

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara occupies a unique place in the Buddhist pantheon. Out of the several Bodhisattvas described in the Buddhist sutras, Avalokiteshvara is revered and adored by the followers of Buddhism and by all art lovers, so much so that, sometimes Avalokiteshvara's importance surpasses that of the Buddha's. The Westerners know the deity as Guanyin, the Chinese Goddess of mercy and compassion.

The idea of "Karuna" (mercy) was concretized in the conception of the Bodhisattva, someone who would sacrifice everything for the suffering humanity. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara took a vow to postpone enlightenment until all suffering beings are redeemed. Avalokiteshvara, thus, is recognized as the eternal outpouring of Buddha's essence: compassion and wisdom. In the image of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddhists obtained a personal savior who could be invoked and in whom they take refuge.

3.0 The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara

The worship of Avalokiteshvara caught the popular imagination and its cult traveled far and wide. Avalokiteshvara is worshipped fervently by Buddhist in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, South East Asia, Korea and Japan. In China the deity assumed a female form, the Goddess Guanyin.



Avalokiteshvara, who is a male Bodhisattva in India, was transformed into a Goddess of Mercy in China. In the milieu of Chinese male oriented society, Buddhism was feminized, and this led to the creation of the Goddess of mercy with Chinese characteristic from a male deity with Indian characteristics.

The transformation of a male deity from India into the female Goddess of mercy in a strongly patriarchal Chinese society occurs at terrestrial and celestial levels. In the celestial level, for any woman to gain entrance into the paradise of Amitabha Buddha, she should shed her female form and assume a male form; hence the creation of Guanyin was an innovation. The dreams and vision of Guanyin by the Chinese people, miracle tales of the pilgrims to the sites of the miracles, naturally formed images of Guanyin and the efficacy of her mantra appear to be the factors which created Guanyin. The arts and literature disseminated the Guanyin cult all across China.

Guanyin appeals to people from all strata society in China; they relate to the Goddess at both material and spiritual levels. At a very informal day to day level, the Chinese invoke Guanyin to beget children, to appease hardships, to obtain protection, prosperity and welfare and during the New Year celebrations. At the spiritual level, the Chinese pray to Guanyin for wisdom to "cross the ocean of suffering."

Of all the imported deities of Buddhism in China, Guanyin in alone succeeded in becoming a Chinese Goddess that appeals to all the strata of Chinese society. The Chinese, who are not aware of Guanyin's origins, probably do not know that Guanyin is transformation of Avalokiteshvara (Yu, 1994).

4.0 Iconography

There are many different iconographic forms of Avalokiteshvara with two, four, eight, ten, and a thousand hands. The multiple arms and heads of Avalokiteshvara symbolize the multi-dimensionality of compassionate awareness (Thurman and Rhie, 1990).



Avalokiteshvara's multiple arms express the deity's power to deliver beings towards freedom. Two hands, typically, carry a magic wish-fulfilling gem, symbol of enlightenment that consists of wisdom and compassion. Another hand holds a rosary, for reciting the deity's mantra leads a devotee towards freedom. Another hand reaches out in the boon granting gesture. Still, another hand holds a lotus flower symbolizing that the flowering of enlightenment is rooted in compassionate activity.

Some of Avalokiteshvara's images have multiple heads. The 11-headed form is found in the frescos of Dunhuang caves of China. The multiple heads symbolizes the different stages of a Bodhisattva's development.

The Guanyin image shares its iconography with Avalokiteshvara. But, the Chinese evolved many indigenous forms, some of which are: the water and moon Guanyin, Guanyin with fish basket, Guanyin of the South sea, White-robed Guanyin, and Guanyin bestowing a child.

If Buddhism has been the greatest contribution of India to world religion, the transformation of the Indian Avalokiteshvara to Guanyin the Goddess of mercy is the creation and contribution of China to the Buddhist world.



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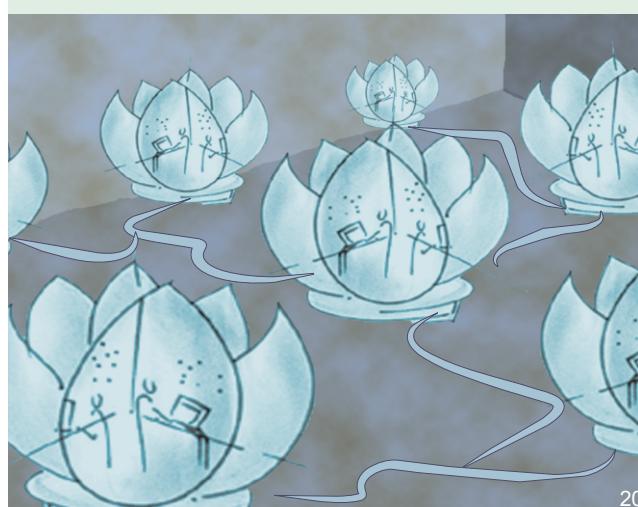


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5.0 Project

We wish to apply Ranjit Makkuni's previous work at PARC in creating cultural learning applications to build an exhibit and media that will celebrate the Chinese contributions of Guanyin. Through the design of physical and virtual multimedia learning spaces, the exhibit will immerse people in meaning of Avalokiteshvara, the transformation of Avalokiteshvara into Guanyin, and the pan-Asian expression of Avalokiteshvara illustrating linkages and dialogue between China and India, Korea, South East Asia and Japan.

The exhibit will allow learners to understand the origins and the meaning of the Guanyin image and its representations all over Asia, and will allow learners to explore the iconography of the deity of compassion, and the feminization of the Buddha image.



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Each lotus pavilion contains multimedia kiosks which allow learners to access the representations of Guanyin and Avalokiteshvara from different Asian regions; the content of the pavilions focus on Avalokiteshvara imagery from China, India, Nepal, Tibet, South East Asia, Korea and Japan. The lotus pavilions are interconnected by bridge-walkways and, together, the interconnected lotus pavilions mirror the journey of the Avalokiteshvara image and traditions from India to Tibet, Nepal, China, Korea and Japan, and illustrating the pan-Asian expression of the value and image of compassion.

6.0 Research Questions

The project will build upon the unique directions carved out by PARC in multimedia research and applications.

□ Correlating Learning Spaces with Physical Spaces

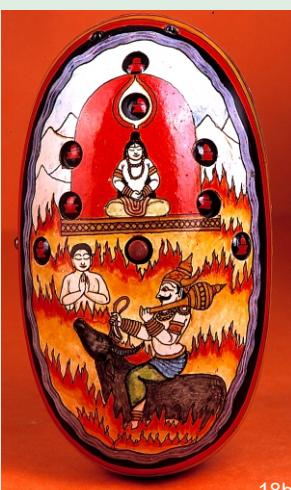
Through two decades of work in active learning (Makkuni, 1993, Makkuni, 1999), we have been exploring virtual and physical learning spaces. The work broadens the traditional notions of a presentation from display screen to include the overall environment including architectonic space, backdrops, and lighting effects. Building the elements of a rich presentation in the 3dimensional and n-dimensional space will advance the field of the design of learning environments.

For example, PARC's exhibit on the Gita-Govinda love poem explored the concept of embodying 'virtually' in physical space. Mirroring the multimedia levels of meaning and expression of the Gita-Govinda poem, the Gita-Govinda exhibit re-"presents" the learning spaces of the poem in three concentric rings. Much like the experience of circumambulation of a traditional temple, the learner moves from the outer narrative level of the poem, to the middle interpretative level, and ultimately to the inner reflective level of the poem.



The Gita-Govinda exhibit illustrates an initial design attempt to correlate physical spaces with learning. The Gita-Govinda methodology can be extended to develop learning spaces for Avalokiteshvara, and its pan-Asian expression.

The Crossing Project developed high touch gesture based interfaces and mobile multimedia technology on the subject of Banaras, India's ancient city of learning, seen as a site of Pilgrimage, a center of transformation and learning.

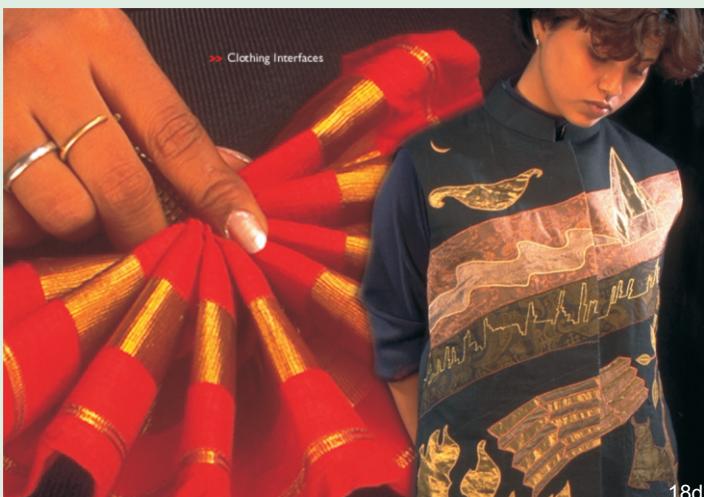


□ Panoramic presentation of cultural imagery

The Gita-Govinda project presented the artistic expression of 19 artistic genres of the Gita-Govinda, accompanied by commentaries by artists and scholars into the many dimensions of the Gita-Govinda. Each genre is a complete world in itself, including symbols, myths, process and technique. The Gita-Govinda methodology will be reused to present the varied expressions of Avalokiteshvara across Asia and the Chinese variations of Guanyin.

□ Take Home Amulet/Votive plaques of Guanyin/Mobile computing

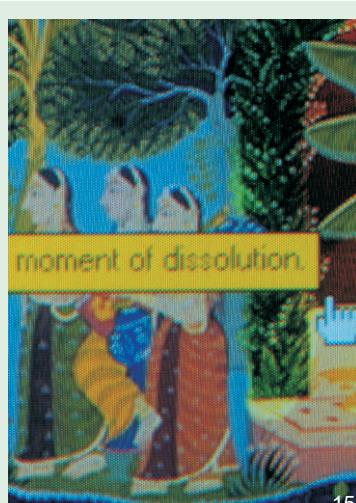
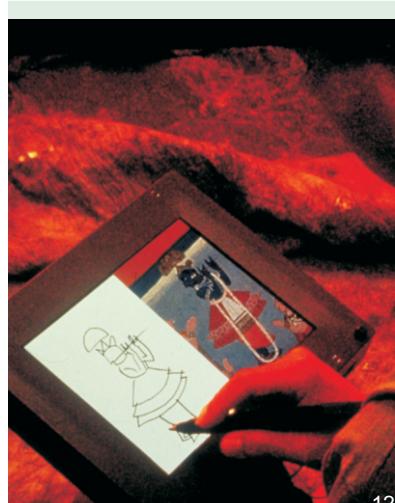
China is renowned for its craft traditions, particularly jade, bronze and porcelain sculpture. The project will allow the museum-goers to take their learning explorations through the Guanyin learning space home. The project will develop the electronic equivalent of take-home 'amulets' and plaques that will provide a memory aids to the Guanyin space. The Crossing Project has developed pioneering applications of wearable computing, interactive learning boxes and multimedia mobile computing. The Crossing Project methodology can be re-used for Guanyin.



- Understanding compassion without and invoking compassion within
- The goal of the Bodhisattva is to invoke the awareness of compassion. Through the explorations of the representations of compassion in China, the origins of the Guanyin image in Avalokiteshvara, and the linkages across Asia, learners can not only learn about the external representations of Guanyin, but to also undertake an inward journey to invoke the compassion within.

7.0 References

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1. seated guanyin, 18th century, bronze, china



2. avlokitesvara, 18th century, bronze, china



3. seated guanyin, porcelain, ming dynasty(1369-1644), china



4. avlokitesvara, 18th century, bronze, china



5. guanyin, avlokitesvara with thousand arms, 17th century, ivory, china



6. sho kannon, 11th century, wood, heian period, japan



7. seated avlokiteshvara, painting on cloth, 7th century, china



8. seated guanyin, 6th century, limestone, wei dynasty, china



9. seated guanyin, 1615 ad, porcelain, late ming dynasty, china



10. guanyin, 18th century, bronze, china



11. active learning explorations at Xerox, PARC



12. the gestural interface



13. *gita-govinda* multimedia experience,
the interpretative level: learners explore artists' interpretation of the songs of the poem

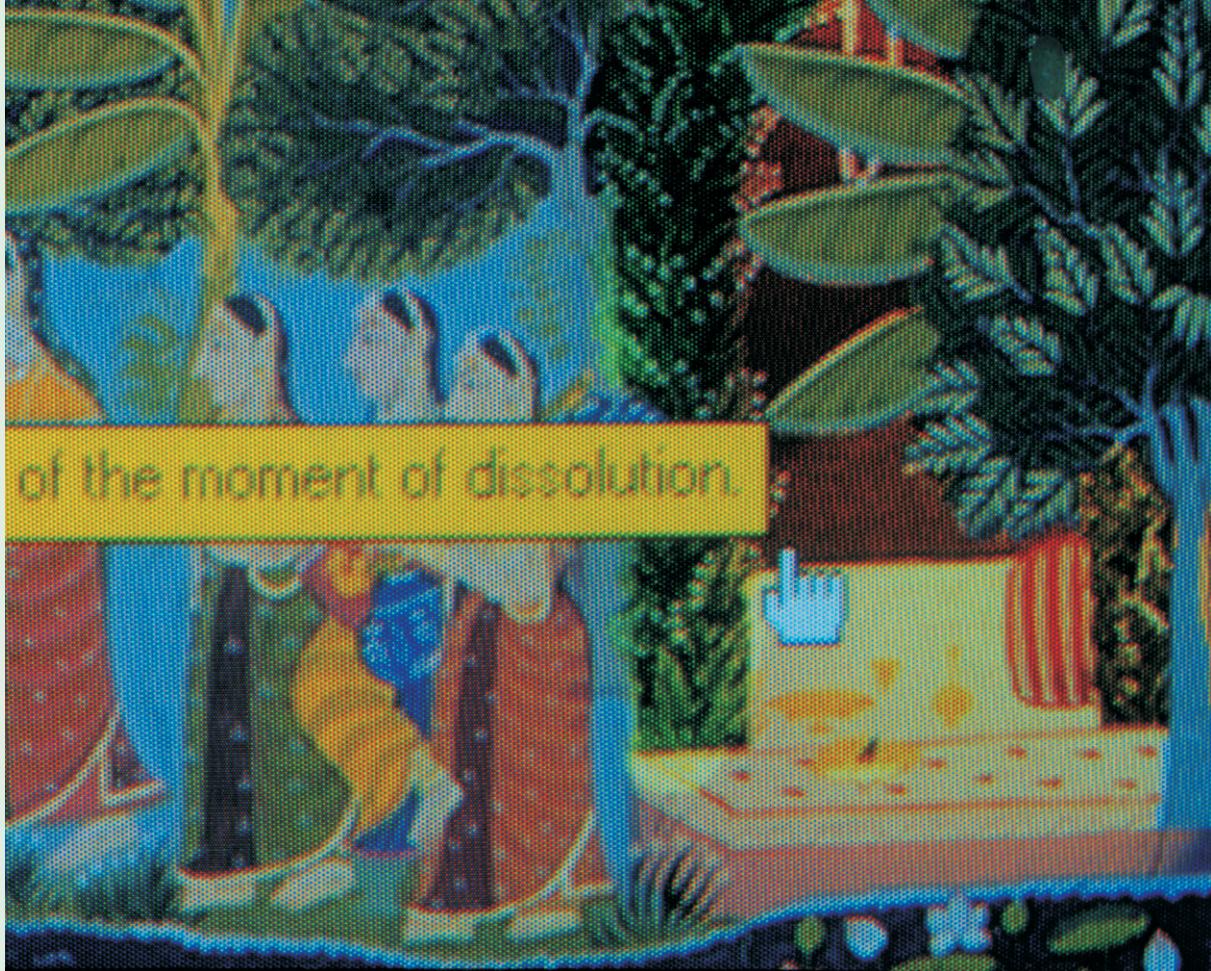


14. multiple levels of access into the media and dimensions of the poem

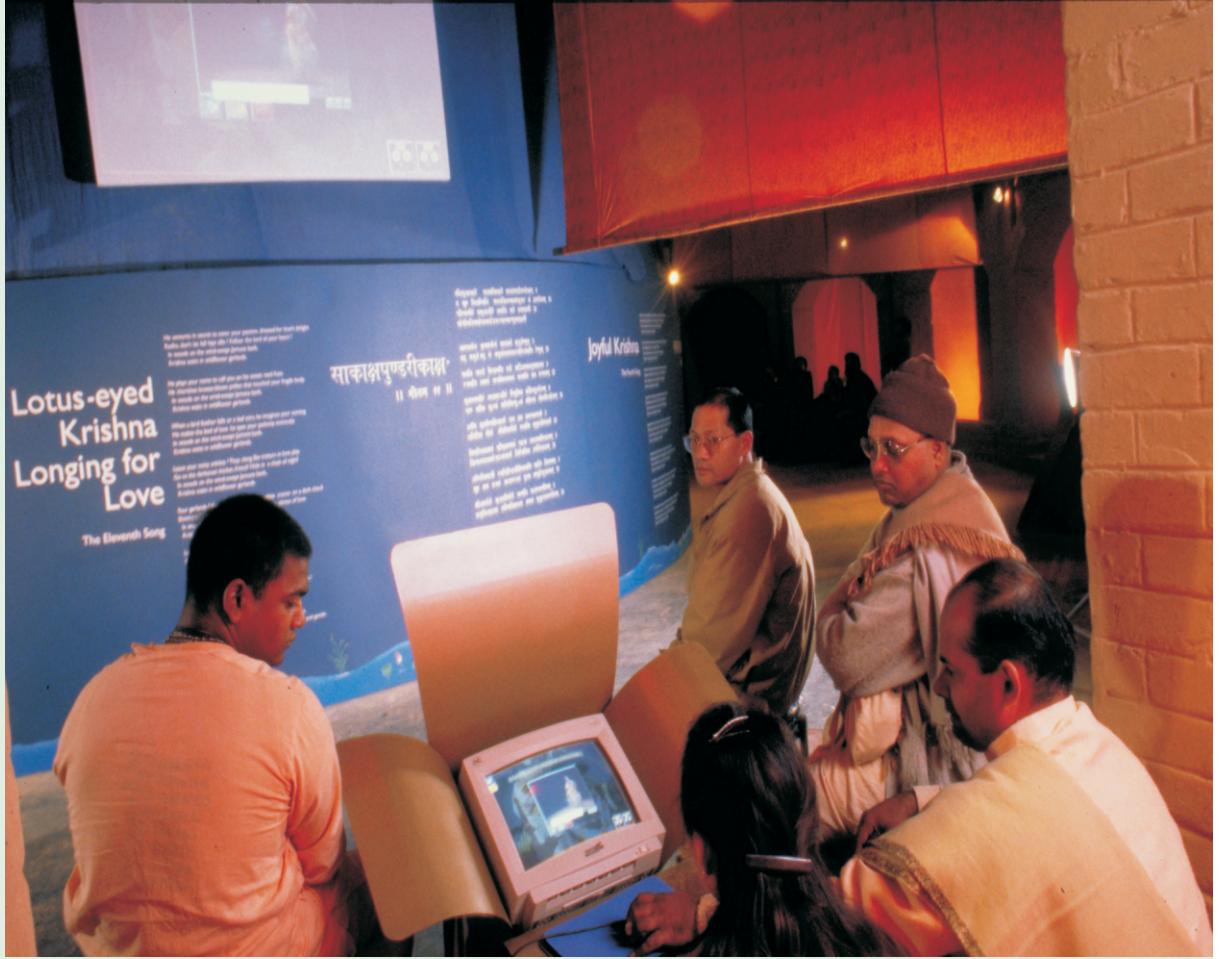


level 1: Haririhmugdha

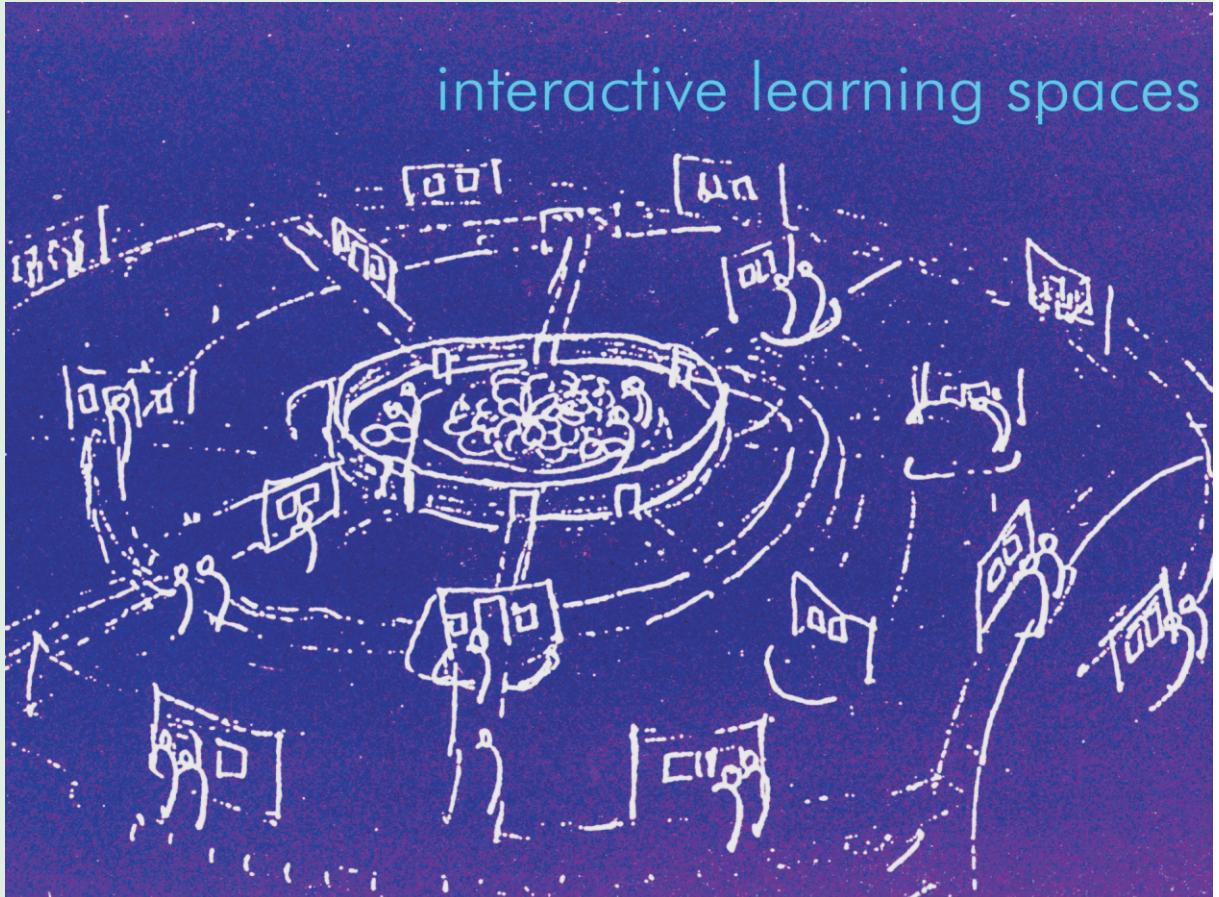
15. still from the interactive narrative, geet govinda multimedia experience, 1998



16. learners explore artists' interpretation of the songs of the git Govinda



17. representation of multilevel interactive learning spaces



18d. wearable computing clothing interface at the Crossing Project



19. mobile multimedia computing applications at the Crossing Project



20. the proposed guanyin exhibit, a pavilion of interconnected multimedia kiosks



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