



Table for Two – The Past, Present and Future of Cinematic Parallel Narratives

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Abstract. This paper experiments with parallel interactive narratives in cinematic virtual reality by examining its past, present and anticipated future. Some novel innovations of cinematic parallel narratives are observed in *The Kleptomaniac* (1905), *Rashomon* (1950), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Run Lola Run* (1998). These narrative forms are trending in mainstream cinema as the audience is growing accustomed to fixing puzzle pieces. Cinematic virtual reality has challenged filmmakers with 360-degree viewing and seamless parallel narrative opportunities. Cinematic parallel narratives are gradually emerging in virtual reality experiences such as *Mr. Robot VR* (2016) and *Magenta* (2022). However, there is a lack of knowledge in handling these storytelling processes. This paper adopts Screen Production Enquiry to investigate the conceptualization and production challenges of a parallel interactive narrative in virtual reality, *Table for Two*. This experience experiments with multiple genres in a virtual reality café. The navigator is encouraged to teleport from one genre to another, as per their desire, as each narrative unfolds simultaneously. The design process undergoes a shift from a director centric approach of conventional cinema to a navigator centric approach in cinematic virtual reality. It differs from cinematic parallel narratives with simultaneity and differs from conventional video game experiences as the navigator's choices cannot alter the outcome of the pre-defined narrative. This research discusses the challenges of script, storyboard, casting talent, multiple genres, 360-degree camera positioning, set design, cinematography, direction, music, ambisonics sound, dubbing, colour grading and interaction. This study provides a gateway for future possibilities of virtual reality narratives.

Keywords: Cinematic Virtual Reality, Parallel Narratives, Navigator, Multiple Genres.

1 Introduction

This paper examines the past and present of cinematic parallel narratives and proposes the anticipated future of parallel narratives through an artefact *Table for Two*. This experience is a one-shot Parallel Interactive Narrative in Virtual Reality (PIN VR) captured simultaneously by three 360-degree cameras. *Table for Two* explores multiple

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genres of romance, supernatural fiction and drama as parallel narratives taking place in a café. Parallel narratives have been observed in early cinema with novel examples such as *The Kleptomaniac* by Porter, 1905 [1] and *Rashomon* by Kurosawa, 1950 [2]. These narratives became popular with the release of *Pulp Fiction* by Tarantino [3]. Since *Pulp Fiction*, parallel narratives have been trending in mainstream cinema as stated by Bordwell [5] and are emerging in interactive experiences. These complex narrative structures have challenged the cinema viewers to unfold non-linearity and identify networks within parallel plots as stated by Roth [6]. The viewers are often engaged with suspense, as they are empowered to play an active role in fixing a narrative puzzle.

Cinematic Virtual Reality (CVR) is one of the recent technologies that has challenged filmmakers, storytellers, designers, cast and crew members to create new methods for storytelling and story living experiences. The main attribute of CVR is the 360-degree space which invites the user to step inside the borders of the conventional screen and immerse themselves in a 360-degree spatial story world as mentioned by Chang [7]. One of the primary challenges with designing for CVR is to encourage users' point of view towards the action areas of the narrative experience. To address this challenge, CVR grammar is proposed to direct the users' attention towards specific areas in the Virtual Reality (VR) environment, as stated by Pillai et al., [8]. Grammar such as visual composition, sound cues, lighting and editing techniques specific to CVR can aid the user to look at specific areas of the narrative as stated by Chang [7], Sheikh et al., [9]. However, it is argued if guiding the users to a specific area limits the full potential of CVR, as mentioned by Gødde et al., [10]. This query is a pivotal aspect to explore the concept of PIN VR.

A study on cinema 3.0 suggests that the increase of interaction in cinema has transformed the viewer of the experience to a more active navigator according to Daly [11]. The navigator is often expected to interact, play, search, form a database and create non-obvious associations from the narrative experience. Likewise, PIN VR offers an immersive and interactive role for the viewer, due to which the viewer is proposed to be a navigator of the experience. In a PIN VR, a navigator can teleport from one narrative to another by selecting pinpoints in the VR environment. As they teleport, the other narratives continue to unfold in parallel irrespective of the navigator's presence or absence. To explore the concept of PIN VR, an artefact Table for Two is developed that addresses the query of restricting the navigator's viewpoint. Instead, it is designed for the navigator to look wherever they want in a 360-degree space. This can lead to omission of certain aspects of the narrative by the navigator. However, this experience is designed to encourage them to re-navigate the experience and fix the pieces of a narrative puzzle. As a result, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How have cinematic parallel narratives evolved?
2. How can a parallel narrative in virtual reality be conceptualized that does not restrict the navigator's point of view to a specific area?
3. What are the production challenges to develop a parallel interactive narrative in virtual reality?

2 Methodology

To address the first question, this study initially reviews parallel narratives in early cinema and discusses different types of cinematic parallel narratives. The study describes how parallel narratives are gradually emerging in VR experiences with the aid of novel examples. These reviews are utilized to address the second research question in relation to the conceptualization of *Table for Two*. Using Screen Production Enquiry by Kerrigan & Callaghan [12] as a practice-based and Candy [13] research method, *Table for Two* is developed and reflected upon for its production process. A discussion on the conceptualization and production process of *Table for Two* aims to open doors for future experiments and possibilities of parallel narratives and VR.

2.1 Parallel Narratives in Early Cinema

Roth states that parallel narratives in cinema have a unique way of depicting the chaos and randomness of human life [6]. It is perhaps this idea that has attracted viewers to films that use these structures. This study refers to Aronson's description of cinematic parallel narratives where she describes parallel narratives as "Several separate narratives running in parallel, often involving non-linearity, time jumps, large cast, or all of these as mentioned by Aronson [14]." The following segment examines four selected innovations in cinematic parallel narratives in the 20th Century.

Arguably, the earliest example of parallel narratives can be observed in *The Kleptomaniac* by Porter, 1905 [1]. The film uses juxtaposition to deliver a social message about the contrasting fates of the rich and poor. The initial scene shows a rich woman shoplifting in a department store followed by a scene in which a poor woman steals out of desperation to feed her family. Both women are caught in the act of stealing. The women attempt to make their plea in a jury room; however, only the rich woman is pardoned as she offers a bribe. This film utilizes parallel narratives to comment on the socio-economic injustice.

Another significant innovation in cinematic parallel narrative was found in the film *Rashomon* by Kurosawa, 1950 [2]. *Rashomon* experimented with the non-linear narrative method by describing a common event using multiple points of view. The event of a murder has been narrated by a bandit, the victim's wife, the ghost of the deceased samurai, and a witness. Each of these characters narrate an altered perspective of the murder. The viewer is empowered to decipher how the murder took place.

A key breakthrough in cinematic parallel narrative was found in the film *Pulp Fiction* by Tarantino, 1994b [4]. *Pulp Fiction* experimented with the order of narrative sequence to generate suspense. The film includes three plots which overlap in terms of characters, events, and time. Each plot is assigned to a distinct chapter and the third chapter occurs in diegetic terms that takes place before the first and second chapter. Therefore, one of the characters who is killed in the second chapter is still alive in the final one. Booker, mentions that the film was so commercially successful that it virtually demolished the boundary between independent and Hollywood cinema [15].

The film *Run Lola Run* by Tykwer (1998) is another novel example of parallel narratives. The plot pivots around the character Lola, who needs to procure a specific amount of money to save the life of her boyfriend. Bizzocchi in his study on *Run Lola Run: Film as a narrative Database*, describes Jenkin's [17] comparison of the film to video game structures [16]. Jenkins argues that the setup of the film is the equivalent of a cinematic prologue of an interactive game [17]. It outlines the rules of the game, the assets, the goal, and the time limit. The unique aspect of this film is the narrative technique which plays out three alternative scenarios of the main plot. The film's treatment of time is experienced with rapid cuts, frenetic action, and the up-tempo techno music which evokes the urgency of an interactive video action game. Furthermore, the movement of Lola across space, along with obstacles to overcome are key characteristics of many video games.

These examples showcase some of the innovative parallel narrative structures that have evolved from juxtapositions, to shift in point of view, experimentation with non-linear storytelling and inclusion of video game structures. These films have intrigued cinema viewers and have left them craving more such experiences.

2.2 Parallel Narratives Across Contemporary Cinema and Interactive Experiences

Since the popularity of *Pulp Fiction*, 21st Century has seen a growth in parallel narratives in contemporary cinema. It is observed that these narratives are emerging in VR and other interactive experiences. To understand more about the variations of parallel narratives, Aronson classifies them into six types, namely tandem narratives, multiple protagonist narratives, double journeys, flashbacks, consecutive stories, fractured tandem narratives [18]. This segment describes these variations with examples from cinema and interactive experiences.

Tandem narratives refer to equally important stories on the same theme, running simultaneously in the same time frame and geographical area, with the film's action jumping across stories. An example can be observed in the film *Unpaused*, as mentioned by Chatterjee et al., [19]. This film is divided into five short stories, where all the characters' lives have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Martin & Mills, describe a 360-degree tandem parallel narrative film in the production phase that depicts multiple conversations in a common space [20]. This experience is also designed for the navigator to look anywhere in the VR environment.

Multiple protagonist narratives pivot around a small team of people in a group adventure such as a quest, a reunion, or an emotional siege. This structure can be found in the film *Little Miss Sunshine* according to Dayton & Faris [21]. All family members can be considered protagonists as they attempt to enter the youngest member into a beauty pageant contest. Macintyre et al., have designed a multiple protagonist Augmented Reality (AR) experience, *Three Angry Men* [22] which is adapted from *Twelve Angry Men* by Rose [23]. Here, the navigator can switch seats in a mock jury room to hear different jury members' viewpoints.

A double journey shows two equally important protagonists who are journeying either towards, apart or in parallel with each other physically, emotionally, or both. This structure is observed in *Finding Nemo* by Stanton [24], as the father searches for his lost son, and the son searches for his way back home. The CVR experience *Magenta Pylioti* (2022) is a double journey that follows two dancers on a stage flooded with red and blue lights. The navigator has the freedom to view any dancer as they depict emotions of anger and sadness. Eventually, their paths collide as the stage transforms to magenta.

Tandem narratives, multiple protagonist narratives and double journey falls under a larger umbrella called ensemble films. These films depict parallel narratives within the same time frame. However, parallel narratives can also include time jumps.

Flashbacks are ensemble films that can include back stories, regrets, bookends, previews, life-changing incidents, and double narratives. The film *Chhichhore* by Tiwari, 2019 [25] toggles between a dramatic hospital scenario and the comedic flashback of college days. *Mr. Robot VR Experience* by Esmail, 2016 [26] is a flashback CVR experience that starts with the present and eventually portrays the protagonist's memory of an early love interest.

Consecutive stories refer to equally weighted, self-contained stories following one after the other and joined together at the end. *Ten* by Kiarostami, 2002 [27] uses consecutive story structure to depict a conversation between a taxi driver and the passengers she drives around Tehran. A consecutive story is also seen in a Liberty Mutual Insurance Advertisement that portrays a 360-degree video quiz where the spherical space was divided into four sections: a title and three mini-stories that depict alternative courses of action when a car breaks down in the woods. The navigator has the freedom to move around space to view three parallel scenarios consecutively as mentioned by Levine [28].

Hybrid fractured tandem narratives depict equally important stories that are running in parallel but are fractured by time jumps. *Babel* by Iñárritu, 2006 [29] depicts four interlocked stories based on different locations, however sequenced in a non-linear order. The VR experience, *The Wall* from USA Today Network, 2017 [30] can be considered a fractured tandem parallel narrative as it invites navigators to immerse themselves in conversations and outcomes on both sides of the United States and Mexico border.

These examples reveal the growth of parallel narratives in the present scenario and highlight how these narrative forms are emerging in interactive media. Aronson mentions that there is lack of film theory available for writers who want to use parallel narratives structures, see Roth [6]. Similarly, Cinematic Virtual Reality (CVR) lacks theoretical knowledge in planning and developing VR experiences as mentioned by Louchart & Aylett [31]. This study further draws from the understanding of the development of parallel narratives to construct a PIN VR experience *Table for Two*.

3 Result

3.1 Conceptualization of Table for Two

Table for Two is a continuous shot parallel interactive narrative in VR (PIN VR) captured simultaneously by three 360-degree cameras. This experience depicts multiple genres of romance, supernatural fiction and drama taking place in a café as seen in Figure 1. The logline reads as follows. Post the initial lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, various conversations unfold at a café. Romance is depicted by a couple meeting for a date. Supernatural fiction shows a woman having tragic visions of the near future. Drama is shown as a photographer has a client meeting at the café. These conversations and characters have interconnections to the events taking place in the café.

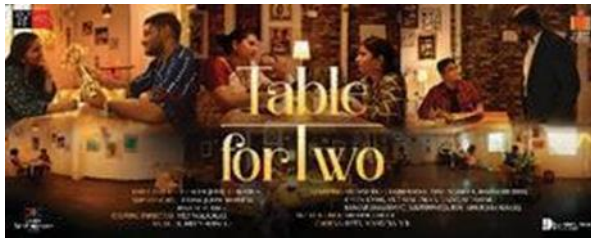


Fig. 1. Table for Two poster. (Top left: romance, top middle: supernatural fiction: top right: drama)

The navigator of this experience is encouraged to teleport from one genre to another during the experience. As they teleport, the other narratives continue to unfold. These narratives are not disabled if the navigator is not present near that location. This differentiates the experience from a conventional choice-based video game or other interactive narratives as described above. In this way, Table for Two is conceptualized to encourage the navigator to re-navigate the experience through different selection points to construct the narrative puzzle. This changes the cinema design from a director centric approach to a navigator centric approach.

According to Aronson’s classification of parallel narratives, Table for Two is a tandem narrative as there are multiple stories in a common café environment. Furthermore, the socio-economic scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all characters in some way. Each character can be considered a protagonist based on who the navigator empathizes with. Therefore, it is also a multiple protagonist narrative. It can transform into a double journey if the navigator only experiences one conversation between two people at a table. It can also transform into a consecutive story, if the navigator experiences one narrative, without teleportation, then re-navigates the other narratives without teleportation. In this way, Table for Two is a hybrid between a tandem, multiple protagonists, double journey and consecutive story in VR. Conventional cinema has experimented with multiple genres with recent examples such as Parasite by Joon-ho, 2019 [32] and Bawaal by Tiwari, 2023 [25]. Parasite’s first half is a comedy, while the second half is a horror. Likewise, Bawaal shifts between romance of a newly married

couple and the drama of the Holocaust. The VR experience *Shapeshifter* according to Pillai [33] explores science fiction comedy and science fiction horror. These branched experiences operate more like a game engine and fall under the same umbrella of science fiction. Pillai et. Al., in their study on *cinévoqué* suggests that multiple genres in CVR can be further explored [34]. The location of the café was the starting point to set up parallel narratives based on multiple genres as shown in Table for Two. Romance was selected as the initial narrative as it is commonly observed that couples meet at a café. To contrast romance, supernatural fiction was selected to challenge the narrative design. Drama was selected to balance the contrast between romance and supernatural fiction. Therefore, these genres were specifically selected to experiment with the possibility of diversified genres running simultaneously in the same location.

To perform these genres, the casting talent for *Table for Two* was selected from the local theatre group. As *Table for Two* is a continuous shot production, acting for theatre was an important skill in performing for long takes. While the casting talent had experience in theatre, none of the members had performed in a VR experience. To help them understand the concept of *Table for Two*, a rotating cylindrical PIN VR script display was created as shown in figure 2.



Fig. 2. Rotating Cylindrical PIN VR Script Display (Source: Research Documentation)

The display helped the members understand their dialogues and correlate the dialogues taking place at the same time in other genres. They could rotate the display to better understand the simultaneity of the parallel narratives in VR as mentioned by Remedios et al., [35]. This method was followed by a visual storyboard which adopted a split screen technique to add a more detailed understanding of the character's dialogues and actions. These were followed by test shoots to understand the positioning of three 360-degree cameras on the set and rehearsals for choreography.

3.2 Production Design of Table for Two

The production of Table for Two encountered several challenges such as set design, multiple genres, acting viewed from three 360-degree cameras, the role of cinematographers and the PIN VR director, digital removal of the cameras and monopods in post-production, dubbing, music, ambisonics sound effects and interaction. The following section will outline these challenges. The intention of the set design was to include multiple genres so that each area prepares the navigator for the mood expected to experience that narrative. To facilitate this, commercial Indian cinema, also known as Bollywood was selected as the overall theme of the café. Film posters corresponding to the genres were framed behind each conversation. Similarly, the lighting and props corresponding to specific genres were used, as seen in figure 3. The set included floral paintings framed in the café to transition from one genre to the other, as the navigator looks around. It was realized that the 360-degree camera sees everything. Therefore, all the filming equipment required for shooting the experience needs to be incorporated into the set, or planned in a manner that can ease the post-production process.



Fig. 3. Table for Two Set Design (Source: Research Documentation)

Along with set design, acting performances captured from multiple 360-degree cameras were found to be more challenging in comparison to theatre as the casting talent were viewed from multiple points of view. Acting was also challenged due to the continuous shot process in Table for Two. The acting method further differed from conventional cinema as it was limited to a defined camera angle. Additionally, any performance mistake can have a retake in conventional cinema. However, in Table for Two, any mistake from the cast would require an entire retake of the experience.

As Table for Two included three 360-degree cameras on set, the camera positioning and view from other cameras was taken into consideration so that there would be minimum post-production effort to digitally remove the monopods and cameras. In terms of cinematography, Table for Two was limited to a single shot. This was more challenging to position the height of the camera to engage the navigator into the conversation. Also, the lack of camera movement was planned to create deliberate boredom to tease the navigator to look around the café space and encourage teleportation. The cinematographers in this case were the camera operators. They were also sitting in the café like other guests during the shoot, while operating the cameras from their smartphone.

The navigator could not teleport to their table. However, their presence in the scene was significant for effective coordination of the performance

Along with the cinematographers, the director was also present on the set. Table for Two took a total of four retakes. During the first two takes, the director was outside the set, and could not gauge if the experience was shot well. The time taken to download each video from the camera and review them would be very time consuming on set. Therefore, the director decided to be an actor on set, just like the cinematographers. The navigator could not teleport to this table as well. While conventional cinema can have the director appearing in cameos, Table for Two, included all filming equipment as well as some of the filming crew as supporting actors on the set.

The post-production process included colour correction specific to the genres. The 360-degree cameras and monopods were digitally removed. Each cast member's dialogues were dubbed in a studio. These dialogues were synchronized into each 360-degree video. The music was also designed with a common theme that corresponds to the different genres. In this way, when the navigator teleports from one genre to another, they would feel that they are in the same narrative due to music and space consistency. Adobe Premiere was used to integrate video, music and ambisonics sound effects together. The interactivity of the experience was performed on 3D Vista Virtual Tour with pinpoints added for live teleportation. In this manner, Table for Two was created reflecting the considerations during each stage of production.

4 Discussion

Table for Two is a parallel integrative narrative in virtual reality (PIN VR) that experiments with new methods to design and experience a story. The unique attributes include the ability for a navigator to look anywhere in the environment, experimentation of diverse genres in the same story and teleportation from one genre to another, while the other genres continue to unfold in parallel. This feature leads to missing links that further encourage re-navigation suggesting a shift from a director centric storytelling approach to a navigator centric story living approach.

The first research question of this study aimed at understanding how cinematic parallel narratives have evolved. Through review of relevant examples and discussions such as Aronson's types of parallel narratives, it was revealed that parallel narratives are increasing in mainstream cinema and emerging in interactive experience.

The second research question aimed at investigating the conceptualization of a PIN VR that does not restrict the navigator's point of view to a specific area. This objective was achieved through the conceptualization stage of a parallel narrative experience called Table for Two. Through the method of screen production enquiry, it is understood that the space of the café played a significant role in hosting multiple genres in the 360-degree narrative. Diverse genres were selected to challenge the concept of simultaneous stories within the same space. The casting talent were selected based on their experience with theatre so that they could perform for long takes. A rotating cylindrical PIN VR script display was developed to help the casting talent correlate the parallel conversations and understand their role in a clear manner. This was followed by a split

screen storyboard. These were the design decisions involved in conceptualizing Table for Two.

The third research question was address through discussing the reflections of the production challenges involved in developing a parallel interactive narrative in virtual reality. These reflections highlighted a difference between conventional cinema and designing for PIN VR. The set design of Table for Two had to incorporate all the filming material into the set. Along with the filming material, the cinematographers and director were also included in the shoot as supporting actors on the set to effectively coordinate the production. Another reflection from the production process discussed customization of lighting and props in the same set to the corresponding genre of the VR experience. Adjustments with respect to camera placements, dubbing and rehearsals of casting talent also surfaced during the production phase. Another difference between a conventional film and a PIN VR was observed. In conventional films, the render after editing the film is the final stage of production. However, for PIN VR, the render is followed by interaction and re-rendering suitable for navigation in a Head Mounted Display (HMD). While the experience is most suitable for an HMD, it can also be viewed on a smartphone, desktop, or laptop. These aspects summarize the unique challenges encountered in producing Table for Two.

5 Conclusion

This research investigates the past of parallel narratives through novel examples since early cinema. The paper further describes different forms of parallel narrative with examples from contemporary cinema and suggests how these forms are emerging in VR experiences. The increase of immersion and interaction in recent cinema has transformed the role of a viewer to a participative navigator of the experience. Cinematic VR offers the potential for the navigator to look anywhere in the 360-environment. This study adopts screen production enquiry to develop a parallel interactive narrative in VR (PIN VR) titled Table for Two that is designed specifically to encourage the navigator to look anywhere in the virtual environment.

The conceptualization of Table for Two highlighted the importance of location, casting talent with experience in theatre, a rotating cylindrical PIN VR display for script synchronization, split screen storyboard, rehearsals for choreography and test shoots for identifying the 360-degree camera positioning. The production challenges included integrating all the filming material into the set design, acting performance from multiple 360-degree cameras, the role of cinematographers and director within the narrative, colour grading, dubbing, ambisonics sound effects, music theme as per the genres, and integrating interaction to develop the experience.

Thus, Table for Two addresses the future possibilities of cinematic parallel narrative with an emphasis on the conceptualization and production process. This project is limited to specific genres, parallel narratives within a common space of a café, and navigators' perspective as a third person in the experience. However, the project aims to open future experimentation in terms of single or different genres, multiple locations, and navigators as characters in the experience. The past, present and future of cinematic

parallel narratives anticipates more narrative innovations in VR that are designed to utilize the potential of 360-degree spatial storytelling and story living experiences.

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