

Understanding Reality Shifting as a New Online-based Spiritual Practice

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Abstract

Reality shifting is a popular spiritual practice centered around the wish to shift one's consciousness to other realities. It became popular online in late 2020 and is practiced mostly by persons falling under the demographic cohort of Generation Z. Generally, reality shifters practice a wide range of methods involving affirmations and visualization to try to project their consciousness into other (often fiction-based) realities, or to change this reality through imagination. This article describes reality shifting from an in-depth emic perspective, based on interviews with practitioners and engagement with the online sources. Reality shifting is then contextualized as a spiritual practice that is inspired by New Thought and its embeddedness within the wider contemporary spiritual milieu. Afterwards, the phenomenon is treated as an online "narrative culture," as we claim sharing and discussing narratives are the main tools shifters use to further develop the practice. Lastly, the often a-transcendental life-enhancing goals of reality shifters are explored in order to argue for more attention to the 'mundane' aspects of contemporary spirituality.

Keywords: Reality Shifting; Contemporary Spirituality; New Thought; Online Religion; Playfulness; Multiverse; Generation Z; Fiction and Religion

1. Introduction

Reality shifting is a practice with which practitioners—also known as shifters—try to temporarily or permanently shift their consciousness into a different reality, in which they hope to live a life as realistic as their current one.¹ Online platforms show the popularity of the phenomenon. TikTok has more than forty million posts on the topic of reality shifting, Reddit and Amino have forums on the topic with more than 100,000 subscribers, and Discord shows hundreds of smaller groups centered on it as well. Reality shifting is mostly practiced by teenagers and young adults, communication for the largest part takes place online, and many of the realities practitioners want to visit are inspired by, or based on, fictional works. These factors together have led to many media articles questioning what the practice actually is, how it works, and whether it is dangerous.² Academia has also become involved, with articles and letters appearing mostly from a psychological perspective.³ What these existing popular and academic articles have in common is that they search for an explanation of what a successful shift in reality could actually be in psychological terms: daydreaming, self-hypnosis, escapism, or a number of other phenomena? What such a question leaves out is a cultural point of view—and more specifically, the perspective of the study of religion. This article will focus on who the practitioners of reality shifting are, where they get their inspiration from, what they wish to achieve, and how they communicate all of this with one another.⁴

1. We are indebted to many persons for their support. We would like to thank the reality shifters who accepted to be interviewed, the moderators who allowed access to the r/shiftingrealities forum, and Sara A. Kuwar and Max O'Brien for sharing their survey results. Furthermore, we thank Karl Baier, Markus Altena Davidsen, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Justine Bakker, and our anonymous peer reviewers for valuable feedback and much appreciated encouragement. Part of this research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

2. E.g., Colombo, “‘Reality Shifting’”; Andrews, “Inside ‘Reality Shifting’”.

3. E.g., Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek, “Reality Shifting.” Others have mostly built on this original article.

4. We are not interested in the ontological truth of reality shifting. We take the assertions of the practitioners seriously without accepting or denying their claims.

Our main concern will be to situate reality shifting within its spiritual and online context. Yet before this can be achieved, we will introduce the practice and its practitioners in more detail (section 2). Based on more than twenty interviews with shifters, as well as the observation of online platforms, the beliefs, practices, and goals of those who participate in the phenomenon will be worked out in detail.⁵ This is purposefully written from an emic perspective, as any explanation or interpretation of the phenomenon must build on an adequate understanding of the perspective of the practitioners. Afterwards, section 3 introduces some of the influences that have shaped reality shifting. Here we focus on the New Thought movement, with its “mind over matter” philosophy and its interest in manifesting change through conscious effort, as well as on reality shifting’s embeddedness within the wider spiritual milieu of the West. In section 4, we will look at the stories that are told within the shifting communities. We hold that the way in which various narratives are shared and discussed play important roles in how the communities evolve and the phenomenon changes over time. This perspective connects the spiritual background of reality shifting, with its online environment. The purpose of section 5 is to discuss what reality shifting can teach us about the concepts of religion, spirituality and/or esotericism. Our argument is that reality shifting shows that we should take practitioners’ goals such as exploration and “simply” having fun more seriously within these disciplines.

Our goals are to gain a better understanding of reality shifting, to put it into its spiritual and online contexts, and to show the importance of—for lack of a better term—“a-transcendental” motivations within spirituality for contemporary practitioners. Shaped by Generation Z, reality shifting is a new practice that shows how older spiritual traditions can be creatively combined with contemporary interests. As such, there is much for scholars of religion and esotericism to pay attention to.

5. The interviews were performed by Sarah van Rijn (then: Perez), mostly in May 2022. All interviewees were over the age of 18 and were given pseudonyms modeled after online usernames to protect their identity. For reasons of privacy and data security, only she has had access to the interview transcripts. All interviewees were recruited from the Reddit subforum r/shiftingrealities.

2: The Practice and Practitioners of Reality Shifting

In order to understand what reality shifting is, it is helpful to start with describing who its practitioners are. Without quantitative research it is hard to come to a decisive answer on this point, but the existing data is still worth mentioning. First, reality shifting seems to be mostly practiced by persons in their teens and twenties, thereby falling within the demographic cohort “Generation Z.” This becomes evident from internally created questionnaires,⁶ as well as from a quick look at the shifters that show themselves in their own created content, for example on YouTube or TikTok. Second, many reality shifters share a larger interest in practices from within the spiritual milieu.⁷ From angel numbers to tarot cards, from astrology to witchcraft—all the staple elements of contemporary spirituality are discussed by reality shifters. Perhaps most important in this regard is their interest in manifestation, most famously associated with “the law of attraction.”⁸ Third, and similar to a spiritual interest, many reality shifters are invested in particular forms of media such as movies, television series, or videogames. The realities they want to visit are often modeled after the fictional worlds of franchises such as *Harry Potter* or famous anime shows. Generally speaking, the practitioners of reality shifting are young persons interested in spirituality and popular culture, it is the combination of

6. We use the results from two questionnaires conducted on the Reddit subforum *r/shiftingrealities*. We obtained consent from both creators to use the results: Sara A. Kuwar (621 respondents, January 2022) and Max O’Brien (371 respondents, March 2022). In Kuwar’s case, the actual dataset was sent to us. It should be noted that these questionnaires were made by 1) reality shifters, 2) without training in quantitative data collection, and 3) answered by persons from only one platform. Therefore, the results should only be seen as corroborating the interviews and the general trends that can be found online. Nevertheless, much of the data is relatively stable across the two. In the case of demographics, Kuwar’s data point out that 76.6% of the respondents reported to be between 13 and 19 years old, while 90.4% of O’Brien’s respondents reported to be between 14 and 25.

7. The reddit subforum *r/shiftingrealities* has, for example, two “related communities”: *r/Astralprojection* and *r/NevilleGoddard*, both centered on spiritual topics. In interviews, interests in spiritual topics such as astral projection, lucid dreaming, Neville Goddard’s teachings, tarot cards, channeling, and more were regularly related as well. Section 3 will develop these links in more detail.

8. See, e.g., Byrne, *The Secret*. The fact that there is also a spin-off dedicated to teenagers, indicates that there is an interest from the younger generations as well: Harrinton, *The Secret to Teen Power*.

these aspects that influence what the practice looks like. Communication largely takes place over the internet, which is why the practice is mostly discussed in online communities of various types.

The main goal of reality shifters is to temporarily or permanently shift their awareness or consciousness to a different reality. Accessing another reality does not seem like an easy feat, and the first question that may be asked is how practitioners believe this is possible in the first place. While there is no consensus, the majority of the various shifting communities seems to adhere to a “multiverse” perspective. From this perspective, the reality that humans inhabit is but one of many—or even infinite—realities. Shifters use the term “current reality” (shortened as CR) to designate the default world we are all acting in. Generally, shifters will have one or more target realities in mind which they want to shift to, so-called “desired realities” (shortened as DR). These desired realities can differ in only small regards, such as a similar world without racism or where the gender of the person in question is different, or they can differ immensely, as when shifters want to experience fictional worlds as seen in *Avatar*, *Attack on Titan*, or the Marvel Universe.⁹ The leading idea for those who believe in the possibility of traveling to fictional worlds is that there is an infinite number of universes with infinite versions of the practitioner. Therefore, there will be realities in which the shifters live in a world that is extremely similar to the ones described in the works of fiction of their choice.¹⁰ The key, then, is to shift one’s consciousness or

9. See NOVA, “160+ Places,” for an example of the diversity of realities modeled after fiction. See ExpertPlaceLost7540, “Original Desired Realities,” for a discussion on “real world” inspired desired realities.

10. The infinite variety of realities that multiverse-adhering reality shifters believe in, is functionally the most similar to what physicist Brian Greene has popularized under the notion “ultimate multiverse,” of which he says: “come up with *any* possible universe whatsoever—it could be made of the usual atomic species, but a universe made solely of melted mozzarella would serve just as well—and it has a place in [this] scheme,” Greene, *The Hidden Reality*, 338. The underlying theory, which Greene himself does not adhere to, is that our universe is made up of particular mathematical equations, but that there can be an infinite list of other universes working with other mathematical equations (see also the “mathematical universe hypothesis,” e.g., in Tegmark, “Parallel Universes,” 12–15).

awareness to the desired reality.¹¹ Although numerically hard to pin down, from the online presence of shifters, as well as a shifter-internal questionnaire filled in by over 300 participants on a particular forum, the multiverse interpretation of shifting seems to be the most popular one.¹² The only numerically significant rival explanation is based on the idea that reality is formed through consciousness.¹³ In this interpretation, reality shifting is the temporary or permanent reconstruction of reality through conscious effort.¹⁴

Regardless of how shifters think reality shifting works, a problem they all face is how to pick the right reality to shift to (or mold through conscious effort). The way to do so is referred to as “scripting.” While it is generally not regarded as mandatory, scripts are often written out physically or digitally. Scripts can lay down in very general terms how the desired reality looks—for example, one interviewee has as a desired reality the *Harry Potter* world set in the 2020s, but without the existence of the titular character.¹⁵ However, scripts can likewise be minutely detailed descriptions of not only the destination, but also how the shifter is changed there (e.g., one interviewee changes their body, hair color, and eye color),¹⁶ what events will happen during the shift, or even general

11. It is not uncommon for shifters to have multiple desired realities. One interviewee mentioned ‘only’ having three target realities (interview with Purple_Waves), while another one alluded to having more than a hundred different ones (interview with WineAndLaughter). Shifters often have a mix of desired realities based on this world and on worlds of fictional works.

12. In O’Brien’s questionnaire (see footnote 6), 81.70% of the 371 participants responded to hold the multiverse theory to underlie the practice. The outcome is in line with the held interviews and what can be seen on the various discussion platforms.

13. There are many discussions on how the theories specifically relate to one another. See for example Hahashifts, “I Am Definitely Not an Expert.”

14. In the questionnaire made by O’Brien, the consciousness theory was held by 8.4% of reality shifters. It will be seen in section 3 that similar online phenomena predating reality shifting were/are based on this interpretation as well.

15. Interview with QueenOfSwords. This interviewee explained why their script is so short by noting, “I just feel my subconscious will know everything I don’t write down and when I get to my reality I can always change things I don’t like.” (Whether changes to one’s desired reality *during the shift* are possible is another contested topic.)

16. Interview with Purple_Waves.

rules about the experience (e.g., the shifter cannot feel pain, or is popular).¹⁷ There has been much discussion online on the limits and ethics of scripting, for example its relation to free will and manipulation with regard to the persons of the desired reality.¹⁸ For some, scripts are more like a roadmap that help to focus one's intentions toward the right reality. For others, scripts are indeed much like those written for films and plays, in which every detail is thought out before the event.¹⁹ Script templates abound on the internet, and they show the diversity in detail that goes into such (mental or physical) documents well.

Once the intentions of reality shifters are set on the correct reality they wish to visit through scripting, they can actively try to bring about the shift. While it is again not seen as mandatory, many practitioners have routines—or rituals—that put them in the right frame of mind for shifting. Such preparation can include mundane tasks such as drinking enough water, cleaning one's room, or listening to soothing music and performing various self-care practices. On the spiritual level, meditation is used to clear the mind, or crystals are placed and incense lit to stimulate positive vibrations or energy. Affirmations are also used regularly at this stage, for example in the form of statements such as “I am a shifter,” or “I am pure consciousness.” Often, shifters will also read their scripts, watch scenes from movies or read passages from books to whose realities they want to shift, or otherwise connect to their desired realities. Preparatory routines are at once highly individualized as well as readily shared online with others.²⁰ What they all have in common is that they are supposed to help create a positive frame of mind and to focus the practitioners' intentions on shifting.

17. For a list of possible rules to script, see ArsySangster, “100 Things to Add.”

18. See for example Carrigan, “Can I Script a Relationship?”

19. Even when scripts are fully written out, practitioners still claim that there is a role for the unexpected during the experience. On intentionality and unintentionality in religious experiences, see Baier, “Intentionality and Non-Intentionality.”

20. “Get ready to shift with me” routines can easily be found online, especially on platforms such as TikTok. It should be noted that such routines (including some of their elements) fit within a wider social media trend in which morning, self-care, skin-care, and other routines are shared online. See for example Cullen10v3r, “Here's My Routine.”

Lastly, there are the methods used by practitioners to induce the shift. As with scripting and preparation, this is a highly individual process, and many of the discussions online focus around the various ways in which one can try to shift. Originally, reality shifters stuck to ritualized routines such as the “raven method” or the “Alice in Wonderland method.” The raven method, for example, consists of lying in bed with one’s arms and legs spread apart. The practitioner counts to 100 while between every few counts saying an affirmation such as “I have shifted.” In the meantime, they should visualize their desired reality in as much detail as possible. Nowadays, trying out different routines, and mixing and matching them seems to be much more the norm. Nevertheless, there are consistent elements that can be discerned in the ways shifters build their own methods. Three recurring elements are visualization, affirmations, and meditation—all of which to a certain degree were present in the above example already.²¹ Except for minimal methods that depend solely on having the intention to shift, almost all of them involve one or more of the visualization, affirmations, and meditation trifecta. Music is often integrated into methods as well, either through so-called subliminals—which are pieces of music with subtly hidden affirmations in them—and/or through the inclusion of certain theta waves that are supposed to help with shifting.²² Successful shifts are rather rare within the community, with the available numbers pointing to at most one in five shifters having had one or more.²³ For that reason, there is constant discussion on new methods online—making it one of the most discussed points on the phenomenon as a whole.²⁴

21. For a list of guided meditations specific to certain methods, see the YouTube page of Alunir Meditations: <https://www.youtube.com/@alunirmeditations/videos>.

22. See for example Celestial Subliminals, “Shifting: Just Fall Asleep.” Many playlists can be found on sites such as YouTube and Spotify. Our interviewee Zinnia is also involved in the creation of subliminals.

23. Results from shifting-internal questionnaires show that between two-thirds (O’Brien) to four-fifths (Kuwar) of the community reports not to have shifted yet. This is consistent with our observations of the online discourse.

24. Discussion ranges from general swapping of ideas to highly specific problems. For example, which methods work best for shifters who are bad at visualization? Or how do practitioners with ADHD find a method that works for them?

Another important aspect of reality shifting involves the reasons practitioners give for wanting to shift. To many, shifting is a fun pastime activity to potentially explore other worlds and learn new things. One interviewee put it clearly when they stated: “I quite like my life here [i.e., in their everyday world], even with my hardships. I don’t believe in a perfect life, which is what I would have in my desired reality. I plan to go there just to relax a bit, change spaces a bit, you know?”²⁵ For this person, shifting is a short holiday to enjoy. Similarly, another interviewee summarized what the practice means to them in comparable terms: “For me, shifting is a blessing. I am glad to be able to experience infinite realities. They can teach me different things, inspire me. . . . For me, learning is fun.”²⁶ The emphasis on enjoyment can also be found in one of the shifting-internal questionnaires. Out of the 621 responses to Kuwar, 500 answered the question why they shift with “it’s fun.”²⁷ Combine this with the many humorous or upbeat stories that are told on the internet about successful shifts, and it becomes clear that for many, reality shifting is seen as an interesting way to gain new experiences before coming back to this world.

Other practitioners want more than temporary holidays, and look instead for permanent solutions to this-worldly problems. “Perma-shifting” and “respawning” are two terms used within the community and refer to the practice of shifting without having the intention of ever returning to this reality.²⁸ Often, the word “escape” is used when discussing such topics. The abovementioned survey question on reasons for shifting allowed for multiple answers. While “fun” was the most chosen answer, 427 out of the 621 responded, “It’s a way to

25. Interview with Kindstranger.

26. Interview with Energy-720. It may be noted at this point that some practitioners also believe they can actively learn skills or languages during their shifts and transfer these skills to their current reality.

27. The question “Why do you shift?” could be answered by checking more than one box. 424 respondents noted, “I get to choose my own story” as a reason. This complements the “it’s fun” answer well.

28. The exact meaning of perma-shifting and respawning varies per user; however, usually perma-shifting is seen as permanently shifting while retaining some kind of connection to the current reality (e.g., memories), while respawning would be a more radical cutting of ties.

escape,” thereby making it the second-most chosen option.²⁹ Many shifters are not satisfied with the world as it is, and hope to permanently change their fate in a different one. This is one of the most sensitive topics concerning reality shifting, and one that needs to be approached with caution.³⁰ Within the reality shifting community, too, there is an awareness of the topic, and many shifters try their best to build a positive environment.

Yet not all wishes to permanently shift are based in “escapism”: for some practitioners, reality shifting is seen as the key to immortality.³¹ One interviewee summed up their view on reality shifting as follows:

Reality shifting is a way to live life how you’ve always wanted, it’s a way to live for infinity [i.e., forever], which is awesome. When I feel like it, I’ll probably respawn to another reality, get bored of that, respawn in another, bored of that one, go to another one, and keep travelling through realities for infinity, which is my personal version of heaven.³²

Moving beyond the general goals of reality shifting, practitioners also have hopes and expectations about short term successes. One aspect many seem to be invested in is the interpersonal level that reality shifting allows. Many shifters long for friendships or even romances with persons found in their desired realities.³³ One of our interviewees talked about their connection to a person in their desired reality, who they designate as their significant other, in terms of building up a relationship:

29. For at least a part of the respondents, “escape” could still mean a temporary change of environment. It is hard to estimate how many shifters are interested in perma-shifting or respawning.

30. In the worst cases, suicide is discussed on forums dedicated to reality shifting. Extreme caution should be taken drawing any kind of correlation from this. One of our interviewees, for example, confided in us that they had suicidal ideations in the past, but added that they—in combination with therapy and medication—have managed to overcome this tendency, and instead think about shifting to a better reality instead.

31. See for example Lizzikitti21, “we can literally be immortal.”

32. Interview with WineAndLaughter. They explicitly compared the process to reincarnation: “Respawning is more like a forced reincarnation, but your previous incarnation stays alive in this CR.”

33. The term “comfort character” was often used within the shifting community to designate a person of particular significance in one’s desired reality. The term was somewhat stigmatized later on and is less in use now, but the concept of wanting to connect to certain persons in one’s target reality remains important.

Having that feeling that someone out there loves you just as much as you love them is honestly something I could never truly put into words. Perhaps people in this reality feel that too, but for me that lies in another reality. . . . As my shifting journey progressed, it was almost like I got to know my significant other beyond the source material [of the fictional world the desired reality is based on]. Beyond whatever words or a screen told me. Their slight quirks and little habits is something, not I could infer on [*sic*], but just sort of knew as my attachment to my desired reality grew.³⁴

The combination of the average age of reality shifters, the social media platforms they frequent to discuss the phenomenon, and their interest in fictional shows, lead many to dismiss the group and the practice as an “internet fad” based on nothing more than daydreaming. That the various groups spend much energy on discussions on the finer points of how the practice is supposed to work, or which methods work best to be successful, or their wider interest in matters such as manifestation, should already show that such a line of thinking is rather unimaginative. A much more fruitful perspective is that reality shifting is a new form of spirituality created by “Gen Z,” built up online as well as offline through a combination of older ideas and practices into a new whole that is at once intrinsically linked with existing forms of spirituality but also uniquely its own. Clearly, this is worth investigating in more detail. Not in spite of the youthfulness of its practitioners, or that it is discussed mainly online, but exactly because of these facts. Therefore, we now turn toward some of the historical and contemporary influences on reality shifting.

3. Influences on Reality Shifting

Reality shifting is a relatively new phenomenon that only in the last five years rose to prominence on the internet. Its audience is young, consisting mostly of teenagers and young adults at this time. Nevertheless, the building blocks

34. Interview with FatherOfAres. This person similarly noted that while they had had a long-term relationship in this reality as well, they felt like they could never connect to their partner in the way that they could to their desired reality’s significant other. Interestingly, this interviewee had not yet had a successful, full shift at the time of the interview.

of reality shifting can be traced back to various developments in the religious history of the West, especially those of the last two centuries. In this section, some of the strongest influences on reality shifting will be discussed in order to position the phenomenon in its historical context, as well as to point out in which cases it has developed new perspectives on old ideas and practices.

New Thought and Reality Shifting

The working assumption many practitioners of reality shifting proclaim is that a successful shift is achieved through a certain exertion of the mind. It is to this end that they use imagination, visualization, affirmations, meditation, and more. This “mind over matter” attitude has its roots in the New Thought movement, which arose in the nineteenth century. We argue that the practical aspects that shifters use to reach a successful shift have their basis in the central ideas of New Thought, even if the goal and the theoretical underpinnings have changed in some crucial respects.

Although New Thought encompasses a wide variety of thinkers and schools, its main principle is that the physical world can be influenced to almost limitless degrees through the mindset of the practitioner. The movement was developed by key American thinkers such as Phineas Quimby (1802–1866), Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), and Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849–1925). Originally, one of its main concerns was to cure diseases through the power of the mind. Illness was seen as resulting from a wrong mindset and could therefore be overcome through a change in the patient’s thinking.³⁵ Soon after, the acquisition of wealth became a second motivator that New Thought teachers stressed toward their audiences. Here, too, the idea was that one’s thoughts determine whether or not financial success is achieved.³⁶

35. For a general overview of New Thought, see Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*.

36. Hutchinson, “New Thought’s Prosperity Theology.” This interest in obtaining wealth through New Thought continues today in a slightly different form, see Kieffer, “Manifesting Millions.”

A good example of a New Thought author is Neville Goddard (1905–1972). His books are filled with stories that show how normal people used willpower to improve their lives drastically, for example through surprise inheritances, amazing opportunities, or miraculous recoveries.³⁷ Most of these changes happen through unexpected circumstances such as running into old friends that now have business connections, or other logically consistent chains of events. This way, health, wealth, and success can all be manifested through deceptively simple but hard to master exercises such as controlling one’s imagination or the repetition of affirmations. The world is subtly changed to the benefit of the practitioner. That such ideas are still attractive becomes apparent from the fact that Goddard in recent years has been “rediscovered” by various online communities.³⁸

An indirect historical link between traditional New Thought and reality shifting is found in the work of Cynthia Sue Larson (no biographical data, still active). In 1999, she published a book titled *Reality Shifts: When Consciousness Changes the Physical World* and launched the website realityshifters.com, where testimonials of her type of reality shifts can be found.³⁹ Larson’s work rests on the same New Thought principle that the world can be changed through thought, but she frames it in terms of the existence of multiple realities. The stories found in her book and on her website are mostly testimonials of sudden changes such as the (dis)appearance of items or people, subtle changes of history (also known as the Mandela effect),⁴⁰ and more. Her aim is to push others to consciously influence their lives for the better by making them switch into

37. Goddard, *Neville Goddard*.

38. The Reddit sub-forum [r/NevilleGoddard](https://www.reddit.com/r/NevilleGoddard) has 180,000 subscribers. Within the reality shifting communities, Goddard is well known as well. Two of our interviewees specifically mentioned their interest in his teachings and methods.

39. Larson, *Reality Shifts*.

40. Larson’s interest in New Thought and the Mandela Effect is ongoing. She recently published her new book with the title *The Mandela Effect and Its Society*.

realities that are more optimal in terms of health, wealth, and/or success.⁴¹ An important difference with an author such as Goddard is that Larson’s changes are largely instantaneous and do not need to result from a logical chain of events such as surprise inheritances.⁴² Instead, a change of reality simply should put the practitioner into a position where what they wanted is fulfilled already.⁴³

The last decade has seen multiple online movements follow the same strategy as Larson by merging traditional New Thought with notions of multiple realities. Terms like dimensional jumping, dimension jumping, quantum jumping, and reality transurfing all made the rounds some years before reality shifting took off. Some of these used the notion of a plurality of realities as a metaphor, while other groups took it literally. Like reality shifting, forums such as Reddit are/were used by these groups as main discussion outlets. One popular group was “r/dimensionaljumping,” which was active between 2014 and 2017. On this subforum, discussions mainly centered on methods in which persons could facilitate a permanent jump into a different, usually better, dimension.⁴⁴ One of its “origin myths” consisted of a person who escaped an abusive father by jumping (quite literally, through a mirror) to a different dimension in which his father did not lay a finger on him.⁴⁵ As usual within the New Thought tradition, the emphasis lies primarily on improved conditions in an otherwise similar world. The methods discussed on this forum, as well as those by Larson,

41. In contrast to what the name of the online phenomenon suggests, there does not seem to be a direct link between contemporary reality shifting and the work of Larson.

42. It must be noted that in the case of illness, Goddard thought in terms of instantaneous change as well. This is most likely because in the context of health unexplained improvements are not uncommon.

43. Similar contemporary New Thought books dealing with the topic are Larson, *Quantum Jumps*; Goldman, *Quantum Jumping*; Dotts, *Dissolve the Problem*.

44. There are indications that the dimensional jumping group influenced the contemporary reality shifting movement. The forum had a “dimension marker,” which was supposed to be checked frequently by practitioners. If the dimension marker changed, it could indicate that the person had jumped into another dimension. The r/shiftingrealities subreddit has a similar “shifting number,” used by practitioners to keep track of their own shifts.

45. Korrin85, “Dimensional Jumping for Dummies.”

are still in the line of New Thought as proposed by Goddard and others as well, and this continued in the phenomenon of reality shifting.⁴⁶

As the ideas of New Thought—particularly manifesting and affirmations—are being disseminated in popular culture through such figures as Oprah Winfrey,⁴⁷ best-selling books such as *The Secret*,⁴⁸ and recently by online content creators in trends such as *hot girl walks*,⁴⁹ it is unsurprising that New Thought continues to be a source of inspiration for practitioners of phenomena like reality shifting. The willpower-centered methods of the practice and the assumption that these can change one’s reality, are therefore aspects of reality shifting that are strongly rooted in New Thought. Even the change in interpretation (for most adherents) toward a multiple realities framework was already found in the works of writers such as Larson, and various online groups. This change in perspective can tentatively be attributed to the increased popular interest in ideas such as “the multiverse,” for example as seen in many TV shows and movies.⁵⁰

Yet two differences between older groups and practitioners of reality shifting remain. First, the practitioners of reality shifting do not assume that shifts are permanent. Rather, it seems that so-called “permashifts” are the exception rather than the rule. Second, while reality shifters often look for improvements

46. The moderators of r/dimensionaljumping stated that they closed the forum because it had become too popular and many of its participants started to take the term “dimensional jumping” too literally—despite there being evidence of these same moderators promoting such a view. It stands to reason that some of the persons alluded to would later play a role in the popularization of reality shifting.

47. Travis, “It will Change the World.”

48. Byrne, *The Secret*.

49. So-called *hot girl walks* are just one example of online trends that include affirmations to better one’s life. They can typically be described as contemplative walks in which the practitioners use exercise, self-care, intentionality, affirmations, and more to manifest positive changes in their lives.

50. The multiverses of DC and Marvel, while existing for a long time, have now become part of the mainstream pop culture through recent inclusion in movies and series. Other popular shows and movies which include similar ideas are, among others, *Rick and Morty* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. That an interest in the multiverse also reaches within spiritual communities is seen in Crockford, *Ripples of the Universe*, 16–17, 79.

to their lives, it is undeniable that a large part of them are interested particularly in experiencing radically different realities, often modeled on fictional worlds of their choice. This is a marked difference to the “health, wealth, and success” focused goals of more traditional New Thought. We believe this difference stems at least partially from the practitioners’ interest in fictional literature more generally. To understand this, and other aspects, it is worthwhile to look at the influence of the spiritual milieu on reality shifting.

The Spiritual Milieu and Reality Shifting

The religious environment of the West became much more individualized in the second half of the twentieth century. Through secularization, organized religions lost influence as countercultural movements and a general postmodern focus on individual truths met. Since then, a wider milieu centered around shared characteristics emerged. Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead summarize these characteristics (among others) as including a holistic emphasis, the attribution of high authority to personal experiences, the importance of practices meant to achieve spiritual insight, and a social formation through loose networks in which tolerance and seekership are promoted.⁵¹ We designate the environment in which these characteristics are found as the spiritual milieu.⁵² Reality shifting is firmly embedded within this wider spiritual milieu, and consequently has partially been shaped by it in important aspects as well. One of the most salient parts of the practice in which this is seen, is in its entanglement with fictional works.

Above we noted that unlike more traditional New Thought proponents, many (though not all) practitioners of reality shifting are interested in experiencing completely different lives. Fictional works ranging from *Bridgerton* to *Twisted Wonderland* are used as inspiration for how such lives could look. While for many

51. Vincett and Woodhead, “Spirituality,” 324.

52. Partially overlapping terminology would be New Age religion (Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*), the cultic milieu (Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu”), or occulture (Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary”). These terms all imply areas that are more restricted than “spirituality,” which is why we opt for a Campbell-inspired spiritual milieu instead.

commentators such a use of fiction is seen as unexpected or even frivolous,⁵³ it is a continuation of a wider trend within the spiritual milieu that can be traced back to at least the 1960s. Carole Cusack, writing on the Church of All Worlds, established in 1962 and inspired by Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, remarks more generally: "Since the mid-20th century explicitly fictional narratives have been increasingly employed to embody and affirm ultimate concerns in personally satisfying ways by a small number of people."⁵⁴ Ever since, religious groups based on, or influenced by, other fictional works such as *Star Wars*,⁵⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien's books,⁵⁶ and *Harry Potter* have appeared.⁵⁷ Such groups may numerically be small, but fiction has generally inspired Pagans and magicians for just as long. Tanya Luhrmann pointed to the importance of fictional literature for the self-identification of English magicians in the 1980s,⁵⁸ while Wouter Hanegraaff has shown the influence of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft on chaos magic(k) since 1972.⁵⁹ That fiction still spiritually inspires a wider audience has also been shown by Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy,⁶⁰ Lynn Schofield Clark,⁶¹ and various other authors.⁶² Cusack explains why fiction is used as inspiration for religion and spirituality: "The 21st Century West is individualist, consumerist and broadly secular, which makes the eclectic use of popular culture sources that are personally meaningful to members by

53. Zhang, "Gen Z Discovers Imagination".

54. Cusack, "Fiction into Religion," 3.

55. E.g., Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, chapter 4.

56. Davidsen, "The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu."

57. Feldt, "Contemporary Fantasy Fiction"; Cusack, "Harry Potter and the Sacred Text."

58. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft*, 328.

59. Hanegraaff, "Fiction in the Desert."

60. Berger and Ezzy, *Teenage Witches*.

61. Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*.

62. Several chapters in Possamai, ed., *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* are indicative of the contemporary influence fictional books, movies, series, and videogames have on the spirituality of some of their consumers. A more recent collection can be found in Cusack, Morehead, and Robertson, eds., *The Sacred in Fantastic Fandom*.

such religions both attractive and relevant.”⁶³ The use of fiction as inspiration by reality shifting practitioners is therefore not a radically new phenomenon.

Another consequence of the fact that reality shifting is embedded within the wider spiritual milieu, is the adaptation of other spiritual practices into the fold of the phenomenon. Crystals or Wiccan rituals can be used to help set a practitioner’s intention to shift, and meditation is often used as a vehicle to manifest a successful shift. Such an integration is typical, but it can lead to interesting, creative innovations. Some shifters, for example, use tarot divination to get into contact with persons from their desired realities.⁶⁴ The 78-card deck is generally used to gain information about anything from everyday issues to spiritual growth, and often its efficacy is explained by practitioners through extra-empirical entities ranging from guides and angels to more abstract notions such as the (collective) unconscious, Spirit, or the universe.⁶⁵ That tarot could bridge different realities to contact “normal” persons in order to stay in contact with them, however, is an idea uniquely tailored to the wishes of the reality shifting subculture.⁶⁶ A similar innovation is found with regard to channeling. Since the 1970s, various persons have presented themselves as capable of “channeling” spiritually and intellectually advanced beings in order to teach humanity.⁶⁷ Channeling is in many ways the successor of the nineteenth-century Spiritualism movement, in which bereaved family members sought consoling messages from the

63. Cusack, “Fiction into Religion,” 13.

64. Interviewee FatherOfAres says: “Tarot is a bit more nuanced than something as simple as communicating to people from my dr. Through tarot, I can usually get some insight into how people from my dr feel and how they feel about me, but mostly, many feelings can be reflected in the cards. On a similar note, channeling is a form of direct communication with people from your dr.”

65. Tarot divination is highly diverse, but a good introduction in the various ways it can be used by spiritual practitioners today is found in Gregory, “Negotiating Precarity.”

66. A more traditional use of tarot divination within reality shifting concerns readings into what is holding a person back from successfully shifting. Online platforms such as Etsy show plenty of practitioners who provide such services (https://www.etsy.com/search?q=tarot%20reality%20shifting&ref=search_bar).

67. For an overview of channeling, see Brown, *The Channeling Zone*.

deceased and scientifically oriented Spiritualists sought proof of life after death.⁶⁸ Yet channeling in reality shifting differs from both the consoling contact with deceased friends of Spiritualism, as well as from the spiritual knowledge received from advanced beings in New Age channeling. Rather, just as with tarot divination, channeling is used by some reality shifters to stay in contact with persons from their preferred realities. One of our interviewees tried to describe what they experience when channeling their desired reality's friends or family as getting flashes of who they are talking to, either their physical appearance or their emotions.⁶⁹ From spirits of the deceased to enlightened beings to now still-living but realities-apart friends, the appropriation of channeling by some practitioners of reality shifting shows the constant change of spiritual practices.⁷⁰ For now, however, it shows more concretely just how important the spiritual context is to understand reality shifting.

A final ambiguous, yet important, influence from within the spiritual milieu on reality shifting is found in the practices of astral projection and lucid dreaming. Astral projection is an occult practice that originated within the nineteenth-century Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The goal is to induce the separation of the “astral self” from the body, after which the person can explore the world or the astral realm in spirit.⁷¹ Lucid dreaming, on the other hand, is the phenomenon in which a dreamer becomes aware that they are dreaming and can subsequently in some cases influence the dream world actively.⁷² Both astral projection and lucid dreaming have large online communities structured to cultivate inducing these experiences. Predating reality shifting, these phenomena both are considered to allow for a complete yet temporary immersion into a different world in

68. Brown, *The Channeling Zone*, 50; Urban, “The Medium is the Message,” 320–26.

69. Interview with LittleNothing.

70. In a way, the manner in which channeling is used within reality shifting to contact friends or family has made it return full circle to the days of Spiritualism, in which comforting contact with loved ones was an important aspect as well.

71. For a concise overview of historical astral travel, see Crow, “Accessing the Astral,” 161–67.

72. Zink and Pietrowsky, “Theories of Dreaming.”

which the practitioner has the power to shape the environment to a large degree. Reality shifters have eagerly drawn on both practices to further their own agendas: both the astral realm and lucid dreams are frequently cited as ideal starting grounds to initiate a shift.⁷³ Further research would be needed to indicate how much of an inspiration astral projection and lucid dreaming have had on the core idea that shifting realities is possible, but it seems reasonable to see in these phenomena one of the ingredients—together with New Thought, a multiverse perspective on reality, and a high interest in fantasy—that came together in reality shifting. The similarity between the three experiences has not eluded the spiritual communities on the internet. Many opponents of reality shifting designate it as simply misunderstood lucid dreams or astral travels.⁷⁴ Practitioners of reality shifting therefore have to spend much time on arguing for the unique nature of the practice.⁷⁵

The various influences on reality shifting show how the phenomenon could take the form that it did, when it did. These influences consist of New Thought ideas that reality can be decisively altered and its methods to do so, a deep fascination with fiction, an interest in practices from the wider spiritual milieu, and a theoretical justification through multiverse theories. This is by no means an exhaustive historical contextualization, but it does point to the importance of understanding the cultural setting in which the phenomenon appeared. Perhaps just as important a role in the formation of reality shifting is the online social structures through which reality shifters communicate with each other, which is the topic of the next section. We hold that the spiritual embeddedness and the online communication structures are crucial to better understand reality shifters and their practice.

73. E.g., Kjellbt, “Lets Talk about Astral Projection.”

74. See, e.g., Quora, “Isn’t Shifting Basically Lucid Dreaming?” Almost every platform that is used by shifters also contains discussions on the difference between shifting, lucid dreaming and/or astral projection.

75. Our interviewee I_Am_Fearless stated that it was one of the biggest pieces of misinformation that reality shifting and lucid dreaming are the same, expressing their frustration with this idea. The efforts to differentiate reality shifting from other phenomena will be taken up in more detail in the following section.

4. The Narrative Culture of Reality Shifting

The phenomenon of reality shifting is not performed by isolated practitioners. Our suggestion is to look at it from the perspective of a narrative culture. Narrative cultures, for us, are networks in which meaning, beliefs, practices, and experiences are discussed and negotiated primarily through a set of narratives.⁷⁶ Such a point of departure foregrounds three aspects that we deem crucial to understand reality shifting: 1) it is social, 2) it is dynamic, and 3) narratives are at the core of the practice. In order to justify using narrative culture as a frame of analysis, two questions will have to be answered. How crucial are narratives for reality shifting and its practitioners? And can one speak of a culture or community, seeing as the practice is primarily discussed online?

Starting with the question of community-building on the internet, there is no need for in-depth elaboration of this argument, as various works have addressed the topic. From an early point, it has been shown how the internet mediates religious experiences and facilitates the construction of religious identity.⁷⁷ The relevance of the medium is now undeniable and the fact that we can speak of online spiritual or religious groups as communities is evident in recent publications.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the PEW Research Center has recently published a study that shows that about two in ten Americans use religious online-services, apps, or platforms such as YouTube or TikTok to learn about or practice religion. Examples are prayer groups, apps for the use of sacred texts, and more.⁷⁹ Such studies are indicative of how offline and online religiosity is intertwined in the lives of many nowadays. The question therefore is not

76. Definitions of narrative cultures vary considerably; see for example Bacchilega, “Narrative Cultures,” 28; Johannsen and Kirsch, “Narrative Cultures and the Aesthetics of Religion,” 2; and Davidsen and Van Rijn, “Studying Religions as Narrative Cultures,” 92. For a more general introduction into the importance of narratives for religion, see Johnston, ed., *Narrating Religion*.

77. Campbell, ed., *Religion and the Internet*.

78. Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon, eds., *The Digital Social*; Isetti, Innerhofer, Pechlaner, and De Rachewiltz, eds., *Religion in the Age of Digitalization*; Campbell and Bellar, *Digital Religion*.

79. Pew Research Center, “Online Religious Services.”

whether there can be online religious communities, but rather whether this label fits the reality shifting phenomenon.

Reality shifters seem to get most of their information about the practice from various social media. Videos on YouTube and TikTok, discussions on Reddit and Amino, as well as smaller communities on Discord are just some of the online places where reality shifters engage with one another on the topic. The multitudes of communities that arise from this agree only on the broad ideas that reality shifting is possible, that several community members have successfully shifted, and that, generally speaking, reality shifting is an experience worth pursuing. These shared ideas and goals are what makes it possible to speak of a larger reality shifting “culture.” Yet within the culture, many opposing viewpoints exist. Members of one community may deem other groups as dramatic or too rigid. Neither are there many authoritative figures that are deemed trustworthy by most members of the culture. A person seen as a shifting veteran by one group, can be denounced as “making it all up” by others.⁸⁰ The way in which the online discourse surrounding reality shifting evolves is therefore, for the largest part, dependent on the way in which the shifting (sub)culture operates. We argue that this is mainly done through different narratives and discussions surrounding these narratives.

To understand why the reality shifting culture revolves around narratives, it is helpful to discuss the roles that various types of narratives play. The types of narratives and discussions have been ordered after what we deem to be their main functions; however, in reality, many will have multiple, possibly different, effects on practitioners.

80. Many practitioners see TikTok, for example, as a place full of misinformation, e.g., “Shifting Misconceptions from TikTok.” A completely different view on TikTok is taken by the “Get Shifty” podcast on Spotify, which regularly interviews TikTok reality shifting content creators.

The Constitutive Function of the “Successful Shift” Narrative

We argue that the various shifting communities all share one type of narrative that binds them together—a “core narrative” that connects all other communication on the matter: the “shifting success” type of narrative. The goal of shifters is to learn how to successfully shift into other realities, where they can then (temporarily) live out their preferred stories, worlds, and lives. This is the core of the phenomenon, as it is the largest common denominator of the persons within the various shifting communities.

However, as a quick glance on the internet shows, not many practitioners claim to have had such a successful shift at all, let alone multiple. As reported above, it is unlikely that more than 20% of practitioners have had a successful shift.⁸¹ For the majority of the community, therefore, the main evidence that reality shifting is real and attainable is found in the narratives of those who have done it. These stories can be discussed, believed, rejected, or elaborated upon, but collectively they cannot be ignored. In this sense, “shifting success” narratives can be said to have a constitutive function, as they together build the expectations on what reality shifting should enable its practitioners to do. As such, they can be categorized as “belief stories.” Gillian Bennett argues that such belief stories are “a class of informal stories which 1) illustrate current community beliefs, 2) tell not only of personal experiences but also of events which have happened to other people, and 3) are used to explore and validate the belief-traditions of a given community by showing how experience matches cultural expectations.”⁸² Within the narrative culture of reality shifting, the shifting success narratives fulfill exactly these roles of illustrating and negotiating opinions on what the practice entails.

In other words: without “shifting success” narratives, there would be no phenomenon to discuss or aspire to experience. These narratives form and are

81. As successful shifts are highly desirable and confer some symbolic capital on the practitioner, it is unlikely that the percentage of shifters who deem themselves to have been successful is deflated in the questionnaire. This is further corroborated by our own observations.

82. Bennett, “Belief Stories,” 291.

formed by the above-mentioned core of the practice. We therefore deem them to be at the center of the narrative culture of reality shifting. Hence, it may not come as a surprise that some of the most popular online contributions on reality shifting have been such success stories.⁸³

The Motivational Function of Mini-shifts, Symptoms, Signs, and Failure Narratives

As the success rate of reality shifting is low, it is important for practitioners to maintain motivation. Several types of narratives seem to play a role in keeping one's spirits high even if a successful shift has not yet been achieved. Of particular interest here are narratives about so-called “mini-shifts,” “shifting symptoms,” and “shifting signs.” Within the communities, “mini-shifts” refer to either short, successful shifts into a different reality lasting from seconds to minutes, or longer-term shifts into a different reality that is only marginally different from the previous one (e.g., where the wallpaper of the practitioner's room is a different color). One of our interviewees, for example, tells how they had managed to successfully shift from their bedroom to a restaurant for a few minutes.⁸⁴ Such experiences signal to the practitioners that a successful shift can still occur. Similarly, “shifting symptoms” are particular bodily sensations that are believed to happen when one is close to shifting realities—ranging from itchiness to hearing voices from the desired reality.⁸⁵ “Shifting signs” are everyday occurrences that are interpreted by practitioners to mean they should try to shift once more, or to indicate that they are on the right track. Such signs can range from angel numbers and astrological events, to dreaming about one's desired reality.⁸⁶

83. A long-term systematic analysis would be necessary to confirm this point. Nevertheless, it is possible to use filters on some platforms to show the most popular posts there. In such cases, shifting success narratives are often at the top.

84. Interview with KindStranger.

85. Interview with Kindstranger. Other symptoms are nausea or feeling like falling down. See also Reality Shifting Wiki, “Symptoms.”

86. Our interviewee Purple_Waves shared with us that the angel numbers they see are always related to their shifting journey in various ways. Similarly, many online groups on Amino and Discord have multiple angel numbers in their names and descriptions to motivate or stimulate success.

Narratives about mini-shifts, symptoms, or signs all seem to function as motivators for their narrators and audiences. They may be useful supporting narratives to “successful shift” stories precisely because they seem much more obtainable. Even the many discussions about failed shifting attempts and feelings of despair found online could be said to share this function.⁸⁷ After all, such narratives and discussions raise the awareness within the various communities that failure is to be expected along the way. There is therefore a certain management of expectations, which may help keep practitioners from giving up easily.⁸⁸ Furthermore, signs and symptoms seem to lend themselves well to what Tanya Luhrmann has called “interpretive drift”: a slow reinterpretation of the world according to one’s new set of expectations, based on practice and experience.⁸⁹ What used to be a twitch during meditation, or random observation of a particular time of the day, can be reinterpreted by practitioners as proof that they are progressing toward their goal. Motivation thereby flows from narratives and discussions into the daily lives of attentive shifters. Such a process is as much social as it is cognitive, as the general expectations of what counts as a sign or symptom are negotiated and disseminated online, largely through narratives.⁹⁰ The path toward a successful shift is therefore laid out in additional narratives and discussions, motivating the practitioners to push through failures and to look for signs that they are on the right track. Consequently, successful shift narratives often start by stating how long it took to finally shift.⁹¹

87. E.g., t, “To Those with Little Motivation.” The comment sections under such posts show the communal effort in combating demotivation.

88. One of us, in an earlier work co-authored with Markus Altena Davidsen, discusses a similar dynamic in contemporary angel narratives. There, angel specialists often claim to have spoken with archangels such as Michael (which we called “revelation narratives”), while the lay person should interpret seeing feathers or finding coins as reassurance that angels are watching over them (which we termed “sign narratives”): Davidsen and Van Rijn, “Studying Religions as Narrative Cultures,” 102–6.

89. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, chapter 21.

90. See also Luhrmann, “How Do You Learn?”

91. E.g., MeringueFunny8676, “After Almost 4 Years, I Did It.”

The Inspirational Function of Scripting Discussions

Closely related to motivation is inspiration. As there are no unambiguously authoritative persons or texts on reality shifting, the boundaries of what is possible are open to discussion among the various communities. Practitioners take inspiration from one another on what reality to pick, which circumstances to try and create within their reality, best practices to adopt in said reality, and dangers to avoid. Beside the shifting success stories, one important source of such inspiration is the script. Many discussions unfold over what the possibilities of scripts are. From incorporating fun activities such as communal hide-and-seek events to practical decisions that one cannot feel pain, scripts and shifting success stories inspire practitioners to imagine how they want their own shifts to be experienced.⁹² Together with the inspiration taken from successful shift narratives, practitioners may use such discussions to further crystallize exactly what they hope to achieve, thereby potentially increasing their engagement with the practice and its communities. We imagine a large part of the enjoyment in reality shifting, for those who claim to have not yet shifted, lies in the anticipatory pleasure of what a successful experience will be like when it finally happens.⁹³

The Rationalizing Function of Shifting Discussions

The last important function of narratives and discussions to be considered here is rationalization and justification. Like any other spiritual group, shifters are eager to prove to themselves and to others the reality of their practice.⁹⁴ Shifting success stories, for example, often put much emphasis on narrative detail, or on the emotional, cognitive, and sometimes even the physical consequences of

92. See for example ArsySangster, “Another 100 Things to Add to Your Script.”

93. The shifting goal of QueenOfSwords, one of our interviewees, is to experience life as a woman—which is the gender she identifies with and is in the process of transitioning to. As she has not yet successfully shifted, she hopes to find fulfillment in her desired reality until she can experience this reality in such a way as well. Here, we therefore see a double anticipation based on the same wish.

94. For more on legitimation practices in new religions, see Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*; Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*.

reality shifting as proof that the narrated experience really took place.⁹⁵ Markus Altena Davidsen’s model of religious rationalization and justification can help to structure these discussions.⁹⁶ He argues that there are various ways in which the core of a religious tradition (which he calls elemental religion) is further rationalized. Three dynamics are 1) *ontology assessment* (a form of rationalization), in which practitioners have to reflexively ascribe a level of truth to the phenomenon under consideration, 2) *belief elaboration* (another form of rationalization), in which the phenomenon is further explained in such a way to reduce internal inconsistencies, and 3) *justification*, in which practitioners have to argue for the plausibility of the phenomenon.⁹⁷ As noted above, the core of reality shifting consists of the idea that one can enter different realities, the various acts to attempt to do this, and the narratives that result from these attempts.

Ontology assessment is found in the many discussions between the multiverse explanation and the consciousness explanation of reality shifters, which were mentioned in section 2. The reality shifting communities are thereby split mainly between a majority who opt for a naturalistic view based on interpretations of scientific discourses on quantum physics, and a minority who opt for a psychological view of reality shifting based more strongly on traditional New Thought. Such an assessment is important, as it sets the phenomenon apart—in the eyes of its practitioners—from other explanations, such as lucid dreaming, astral projection, or daydreaming.

95. Practitioners of reality shifting use many tropes that are common in religious experience stories; for more on this, see Oring, “Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth.” Some practitioners of reality shifting hold that the practice can even change one’s life, for example through the emotional experiences it offers, the knowledge it can bring, and at times even the way it can change one’s appearance in this reality (e.g., a change in eye color). For more on these aspects, see Perez, “Through the Looking-Glass.”

96. Davidsen, “The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu”; “In de Ban van Tolkien.” Davidsen’s model was created on the basis of so-called “fiction-based religions” and is intended to work on other religious movements with a low level of institutionalization. Reality shifting is therefore a good test case for his arguments.

97. Davidsen, “The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu,” 33–36, 124.

In a second step, belief elaboration is particularly present within the various discussions of reality shifting. There are many potential problems that come with the core idea that one can shift to another reality for an undetermined time. One good example is the question of what happens to the successful shifter's body in this reality. This has sparked countless discussions on the topic of the "clone," the part of the person's consciousness that allegedly continues one's life as normal in this reality until the shift has ended. There is no consensus on whether clones exist, what they exactly are, and whether they can be given specific instructions.⁹⁸ Similarly, many debates have been held on the question of free will in desired realities: is it possible for a practitioner to script that someone falls in love with them, and if so, is it morally allowed to do so?⁹⁹ All these questions are stimulated by the experience narratives of persons who claim to have shifted, as well as the shared scripts mentioned before, but seem to be shaped by the speculation and logic of others as well.

Finally, the ontology assessment and belief elaborations have to be justified. One way of doing so is through legitimization, in which various proofs are offered. This is done, for example, by insisting on the truthfulness of practitioners who claim to have successfully shifted, by referring to scientific works that seem to allow for the existence of a multiverse, or by looking at historical examples of persons who seem to have already discovered and practiced reality shifting long before it became popular.¹⁰⁰ These strategies were found in our interviews as well. One of our interviewees, for example, is very interested in reading scientific work on astral projection and dreams, finding proof in it for the existence of reality shifting.¹⁰¹ Another person we spoke with finds evidence for

98. A discussion that encapsulates some of the open questions surrounding clones is [deleted], "[Theory] Are We Sure about Clones?"

99. For an overview of arguments for and against scripting relationships, see, e.g., ghosty, "Scripting Relationships."

100. Reality shifters therefore apply all three arguments of legitimization (tradition, experience, science) identified by Olav Hammer (*Claiming Knowledge*).

101. Interview with PocketPanda.

shifting in the works of the aforementioned twentieth-century author Neville Goddard.¹⁰² The other option to justify one's position beside legitimization is to relativize parts of the phenomenon by stating that they cannot or do not have to be proven beyond doubt.¹⁰³ Relativization can be found within the reality shifting communities as well, in the form of arguments that an extra-dimensional or purely psychological experience cannot be proven in the strictest meaning of the term.¹⁰⁴

We believe Davidsen's model can be expanded by two additional means of justification through legitimization as found in the online communities of reality shifting. The first addition is practicing "boundary work." Boundary work is the process in which the boundaries between various fields of knowledge are negotiated.¹⁰⁵ In spiritual practices such as reality shifting, it is important for the practitioners to defend their right to assess the ontological status of their beliefs and practices. Rival explanations of what reality shifting is, as offered from psychology (e.g., daydreaming, self-hypnosis) or other spiritual groups (e.g., lucid dreaming, astral projection) are vigorously debated and rejected.¹⁰⁶ The justification here is found in particular arguments *against* a different ontological status, thereby functioning as a falsification of rival explanations. The logic of boundary work is different from the means of legitimization already offered by Davidsen, which focus on positive proofs of one's own ontology assessment, rather than negative proofs against those of others. A second additional method of legitimization is the design of tests. Practitioners of reality shifting frequently debate whether it would be possible to bring back knowledge from their shifts

102. Interview with Energy_720.

103. Davidsen, "The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu," 35.

104. E.g., zombies-on-your-law, "[Discussion] Can Shifting be proven?"

105. For a good example of boundary work as applied on religious matters, see Hess, *Science in the New Age*.

106. Our interviewee Melusine had been interviewed on reality shifting before. There, they had to argue long and hard for the interviewer to stop referring to reality shifting as a mix of lucid dreaming and self-hypnosis. They mentioned explicitly that battling misinformation about shifting is their mission.

that could be verified in this reality—ranging from technological advances that would help with ecological crises to persons reading books in their chosen reality that they have no access to in this one.¹⁰⁷ The logic of tests stems from the assumption that a phenomenon can be experimentally proven, potentially by independent investigators.¹⁰⁸

As demonstrated above, rationalization and justification are important functions of narratives and discussions on reality shifting. Through various means, it helps practitioners further develop their ideas on what the phenomenon truly is and justify their engagement with the practice. Furthermore, it gives shifters a way to differentiate themselves from other groups, and to argue for the unique nature of reality shifting against opponents with rival explanations. All types of narratives and discussions, with their corresponding functions, are summarized in table 1.¹⁰⁹

The Interaction between Different Narratives and Discussions

All narratives and discussions mentioned in this section play a role in keeping reality shifting going. Without motivational stories, participants may lose interest in the phenomenon when they encounter a lack of success. If there is no inspirational content, practitioners may not connect with the goal to shift as deeply and thereby engage with the phenomenon less. And without a robust rationalization, the phenomenon may come to be regarded as nothing more than fantasy, or it may be interpreted as something else entirely, such as lucid dreaming. These different narratives and discussions therefore help

107. See many of the comments in *zombies-on-your-law*, “[Discussion] Can Shifting Be Proven?” As visible in such forum threads, these tests inadvertently spark discussion with proponents of the relativization approach.

108. Other examples of tests offered in the context of afterlife contacts can be found in Bennett, “Belief Stories,” 297–98. Elliott Oring also lists “testing” as a trope for legends, “Legendry,” 131, 137–38. For elaborate versions of such tests, see Van Rijn, *Afterlife Research*.

109. We do not claim that this list is complete. For example, an important additional function all narratives and discussions share is building the shifting communities and giving many of their members a sense of belonging.

Types of Narratives and Discussions	Description	Main function
Successful shift narratives	Narratives that detail the successful shifts into other realities by practitioners	<u>Constitutive</u> : allows for a conceptualization of what reality shifting generally is
Mini-shift, symptoms, signs, and failure narratives and discussions	Narratives and discussions that center on various partial successes or lack thereof	<u>Motivational</u> : shows that shifter is on the right track and/or that failure is part of the journey
Discussions on scripts	Discussions that focus on what one can or cannot influence in other realities	<u>Inspirational</u> : helps to build expectations/anticipations
Rationalizing Discussions (on ontology assessment, belief elaboration, and justification)	Discussions on the truth of reality shifting, its ontological status, proofs, and (ethical) limits of the phenomenon	<u>Rationalization</u> : fleshes out the theoretical understanding of reality shifting, strengthens arguments for its truth and against other interpretations

Table 1. The types of narratives and discussions on reality shifting

to protect the hard core of reality shifting: the idea that it is possible to travel to other realities, and the practices to do so. Without this hard core, which is exemplified and formed through successful shift stories, there would be no communities centered on reality shifting.¹¹⁰

At the same time, it is the interaction between the various narratives, discussions, and their functions that continue to shape reality shifting as a

110. A comparison can be made between the narrative culture of reality shifting, and the idea of a research program as conceived by Imre Lakatos (“Falsification and Methodology”). In this concept, there is a hard core within any scientific program that contains ideas and concepts that cannot be abandoned without abandoning the program. Around this hard core is a protective belt of other concepts that can ultimately be disregarded if they end up as unhelpful. In the case of reality shifting, its core idea is ultimately wound up with the successful shifting story. Even though any single narrative within this category can be dismissed, this particular type of narrative needs to exist in order for reality shifting to exist. All other types of narratives and discussions are there to support, legitimize, and stimulate the successful shifting stories.

phenomenon. There is no clear hierarchy in the various types of narratives mentioned above. Even the core narrative of the successful shift is debatable in its details, and particularly in the specific instances that are told online. This should not be surprising. After all, it has been stressed that the vast majority of the shifting subculture has yet to successfully shift—and they are aware of this fact. Any story, by itself, is open for discussion or suspicion.¹¹¹ One example may be given to show on a small scale how such discussion can change the interpretation of reality shifting as a whole—at least for large parts of its practitioners. When we did most of our research for this article, there were many debates online over the limits of scripting. The question that drew our attention in particular was whether or not it is possible to continuously script how things will happen in one’s desired reality after the first shift there. On the one side were defenders of complete creative freedom, who said this was possible if one wants that. On the other side were practitioners who argued that this is not possible, as a script only brings the shifter to another reality but cannot alter that reality afterwards.¹¹² What caught our interest was that the group arguing for the constraints of shifting often dismissed arguments by the creative freedom group that were based on successful shifting stories. Here, the need for a consistent logic of reality shifting (i.e., belief elaboration to reduce internal inconsistencies in Davidsen’s model) outweighed the successful shift narrative. If persuasive enough, such arguments can subtly change how reality shifting is seen by its practitioners, and we should assume that many such dynamics are ongoing at all times.¹¹³ The discourse on what reality shifting is

111. See also Whitehead, “The Evidence of Things Unseen,” for a similar dynamic with regard to Evangelical blogs.

112. Similar tensions about the limits of scripting were found in our interviews. Interviewee SerenityFortune empathetically said to script whatever makes you happy, while interviewee mariesmelody lamented that there was much misinformation about scripting found online.

113. Only a systematic investigation over a longer period of time—possibly augmented by tools from the digital humanities—could hope to get a good overview of such changes in discourse. We would hazard to guess that this is at its most important in the first years of a phenomenon, as the narratives and discussions will likely be less entrenched at this time.

therefore constantly changing as a result of the interactions between narratives and discussions. As one of our interviewees pointed out to us: “Take everything with a grain of salt, . . . every point made is belief based and therefore, up for interpretation, . . . information can change on a daily basis.”¹¹⁴

The point in all of this is to see the narrative nature of reality shifting. It is an inherently social practice that is dynamically shaped by how practitioners and opponents talk about it in the various online communities. This is a crucial insight that needs to be taken to heart in order to understand what shifters are doing. Many of the online discussions are held fully by participants who never claimed to have shifted, and even those who claim to do so are not always believed by the others. Of course, the same goes for any type of subjective experience, from visualizations during mediation to reported visions of religious entities. A deeper analysis of the narratives can teach us more about reality shifting and the unique attitudes and views of its practitioners, especially when compared to more established forms of spiritual experiences. Such findings are only possible when we look beyond the purported content of the experience of shifting and into its social and narrative nature.

5. Discussing Fiction, Play, and Contemporary Spirituality through Reality Shifting

The previous two sections have shown how reality shifting as a phenomenon can be better understood through the perspective of the study of religion. Both the influences on the practice, and its online, narrative-centered mode of communication are crucial elements to interpret the actions and statements of practitioners of reality shifting. The current section reverses the roles. Our interest here is to point out how reality shifting can be used to further discuss important themes in the study of religion, spirituality, and esotericism. In order to do so, we come back once again to the role of fiction.

As noted before, the role of fictional texts (in the broadest sense of the term) in spiritual circles has been observed and studied by various authors. The appearance of groups dedicated to specific texts led subsequently to new categories. Adam

114. Interview with QueenOfSwords.

Possamai uses “hyper-real religions,” including religious communities whose objects of reverence have no reference to the real world, such as Jediism’s reliance on *Star Wars*.¹¹⁵ Cusack’s “invented religions” refers to religions that are deliberately and openly constructed, as is the case with the Church of All Worlds.¹¹⁶ Davidsen works with a three-level categorization where religions can be fiction-inspired, fiction-integrating, and fiction-based, ranging from nineteenth-century occultists’ fascination with the works of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton to persons who base their religion on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.¹¹⁷

At a first glance, the term “fiction-integrating *religion*” seems to fit many shifters’ view on the phenomenon well. Whole fictional worlds are appropriated into their desired realities,¹¹⁸ with the practitioners fully acknowledging the fictive basis of these worlds. Yet unlike the examples given by Davidsen, Cusack, or Possamai, the individuals interested in reality shifting do not constrain themselves to a shared set of fictional texts that they use as inspiration. Everyone has their own lists of desired realities, and what holds the culture together is the narratives and discussions surrounding the way to experience these realities.¹¹⁹ Therefore, it would be more appropriate to classify reality shifting as a fiction-integrating spiritual practice.¹²⁰

115. Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 72.

116. Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 1.

117. Davidsen, “Fiction-based Religion,” 384. Fiction is separated from non-fiction here by fiction’s deliberate non-referentiality to the actual world or its history.

118. As seen above, shifters do maintain their right to heavily modify their desired realities based on their own preferences. An earlier mentioned example is our interviewee QueenOfSwords, who picked as one of her desired realities the world of Harry Potter but set in a different time period and without certain persons.

119. Our interviewee WineAndLaughter is a good example, having more than a hundred different desired realities, which they decide between on the basis of current interests.

120. A good comparison would be the “otherkin” movement, where individuals identify as different types of beings other than humans. Danielle Kirby writes that “beyond the premise of the group, there seems to be little in common across the community” with regard to their particular practices and wishes, focusing rather on “support and information sharing” (“Alternative Worlds,” 130–31).

Despite our focus on the spiritual dimensions of reality shifting, connecting the phenomenon to any kind of religious terminology could seem unintuitive to some. The existing literature on reality shifting, for example, does not mention the word “religion” or “spirituality” at all, leaving their approaches open to purely psychological (and psychopathological) explanations.¹²¹ One of the most important reasons for such a lack of identification with religion and spirituality, we believe, lies in a combination of the fictional interests of the practitioners with the types of experiences they hope to achieve. Reality shifting may seem too playful to be considered a spiritual practice. We summarized earlier the various goals of shifters into three groups: temporary changes of scenery, akin to holidays or adventures; fixing issues that are present in the actual world; and striving for immortality of a sort through continuous shifts. It may be helpful to categorize these more specifically in order to show that the inclusion of play does not necessarily make the phenomenon less spiritual or religious.

Life-improving goals in reality shifting are concerned with tackling issues practitioners have and wish to overcome through the practice. Improvement, here, implies a change from a sub-optimal situation into a better one. The wishes of our interviewees who want to overcome gender dysphoria or racism fit this category.¹²² While permanent shifts may seem the obvious choice for life improvement, this does not have to be the case, as practitioners may simply wish to catch a glimpse of what a better situation looks like. *Life-enhancing* goals are concerned with increasing the quality of a practitioner’s life beyond fixing problems. Exploring new worlds, meeting new friends, trying out different lifestyles all fit this category. Our interviewee GreyFace is a particularly good example. They report that they are mostly interested in satisfying their curiosity and exploring different amusing places.¹²³ Life enhancement can similarly be sought through either temporary or permanent shifts. Lastly, *life-extending*

121. E.g., Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek, “Reality Shifting.”

122. Interviews with QueenOfSwords and KindStranger.

123. Interview with Greyface.

goals are concerned with utilizing knowledge about reality shifting to live a longer life than biologically possible in the actual world. Our interviewee WineAndLaughter’s allusions to heaven and reincarnation show this aspiration well. Unlike the other two categories, life extension seems tied up almost inescapably with permanent shifts.¹²⁴

The distinction between the various goals is helpful because two out of three categories seem strongly connected to religiosity and spirituality: life improvement and life extension. Martin Riesebrodt summarizes this well when he states that “all religions claim to have the ability to avert misfortune, overcome crises, and provide salvation.”¹²⁵ Life enhancement seems much less central to religion. The study of esotericism closes much of this gap by looking at the many ways in which people throughout history and across the world have tried to obtain extraordinary abilities, yet even then such powers are often intricately intertwined with fundamental knowledge about existence or other spiritual truths. While the acquisition of knowledge—and personal meaning-making for that matter—would certainly often fall within the category of life enhancement, they nonetheless occupy a rather lofty end of the spectrum. Many practitioners of reality shifting, on the other hand, unapologetically pursue activities and experiences that are simply fun, new, or exciting. Such a type of “mundane” life enhancement is one of the most distinct aspects of reality shifting found online, and the fact that the shifting-internal questionnaires showed the importance of having fun and living out one’s own story points to the possibility that it may even be the most popular part of the practice. Put differently, there is a playful or explorative attitude visible in many of the narratives and discussions surrounding reality shifting.

124. Theoretically, due to the time dilation many practitioners associate with reality shifting, it could be argued that temporary shifts already extend the psychological lifespan of practitioners. There are indeed shifters who claim to be much more mature than their age due to long-term shifts into other realities (Perez, “Through the Looking-Glass,” 315).

125. Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*, 89. Kevin Schilbrack defines the “promises” of religions in more detail, focusing similarly on problems to overcome (“What *Isn’t* Religion?” 299).

One aspect in which the playful nature of reality shifting is particularly clear is the plurality of desired realities. The worlds practitioners want to visit are extremely diverse. Some are easily explained. The idyllic moon of Pandora depicted in James Cameron's *Avatar* or Tolkien's pre-industrial Shire seem ideal destinations for a shifting holiday. But other examples are less peaceful: zombie-infested cities as seen in *The Walking Dead* or violent environments such as that of *Attack on Titan* are among the places listed by shifters online. Such realities are hardly heavenly places filled with bliss, but that seems to be exactly the point for many of the discussants. They are interested in participating in stories of all kinds, from the good to the bad—there seems to be a craving for “something else” and “something more” than the everyday lives of the practitioners.

A similar trend is found in many of the scripting discussions. The discourse that almost anything can be changed to fit the wishes of the reality shifters is highly geared to improve their experiences in all ways, from the profound to the mundane, and from the serious to the fun. Scripting oneself to be more popular, to feel pain less intensely, or to live in a world where grown-up hide-and-seek is a normal pastime activity all are telling examples that practitioners pay attention to details that are directed at enhancing the experiences they hope to achieve in often playful ways.¹²⁶ Measures of convenience also play a big role in scripting, adding another layer of life enhancement beside playfulness. For example, many shifters script that they have a “waiting room” to which they travel first upon a successful shift, which is usually a peaceful/quiet place where they can prepare for their actual desired realities.¹²⁷ Then there is the notion of the LIFA-app, a smartphone application that many script to exist in their other realities, which is supposed to allow them to change their scripts during

126. Certain measures of scripting are deliberate attempts to “tame” more dangerous desired realities, such as the mentioned ability to dampen pain (or even trauma). Our interviewee GreyFace, for example, sees no danger in entering more unusual desired realities because they can easily script immortality.

127. E.g., Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek, “Reality Shifting.”

the experience, swap appearances or clothing on the fly, and much more.¹²⁸ To a particular kind of shifter, the experiences they want are highly diverse, yet at the same time easily altered and come with a high degree of convenience.¹²⁹

Another area of life that many shifters are eager to explore is that of social relationships. One strong recurring element in our interviews and in online discussions is the importance practitioners ascribe to the relationships they (want to) form with the practice. Romances, friendships, rivalries, and family ties are all mentioned as significant parts of the (sought after) experience.¹³⁰ As many of the desired realities of practitioners are based on fictional works, so are many of their wished-for social relationships with fictional characters. Such a wish to connect with fictional characters is perfectly normal, and falls under the term *parasocial relationships*.¹³¹ Especially in fandom, such building of parasocial ties is done to an “extraordinary psychological” degree.¹³² Of course, in religion and spirituality, a high importance is often ascribed to creating relationships with deities or intermediary beings as well—yet unlike with fandom, such relationships are considered to be formed with existing beings and, more often than not, show a clear hierarchy in which the adherent is supposed to show reverence of some kind to the spiritual beings. Reality shifters show an interesting middle way between fandom and religion in this aspect. Unlike in fandom, while the sought-after relationships start out as parasocial—objects of fiction or their

128. Interview with Purple_Waves.

129. Scripts show a remarkable influence from the gaming subculture. The customization of oneself, the ability to change certain parameters of the world, and places that function as in-between spaces call to mind features of modern games such as character customization, difficulty settings, and more. It makes sense that an increased importance of games within popular culture would lead to a heavier incorporation of their logic into spiritual practices as well.

130. As was discussed in section 2, many reality shifters already feel connected to persons from their desired realities before they report to have successfully shifted. This is why tarot readings or channeling are being offered online in the first place.

131. Johnston, “How Myths,” 144–45. The term was created by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1965 and was originally linked to psychopathological conditions.

132. Cusack, “*Harry Potter* and the Sacred Text,” 28.

imagination—practitioners’ understanding of a multiverse makes them believe that if the connection is successfully made, it will be with a real person. Yet unlike more traditional religion, shifters mostly want to connect with peers in equal relationships of romance or camaraderie.¹³³ Like the playful attitudes described above, such a type of everyday sociality is part of the a-transcendental ways in which shifters seek to enhance their lives through the practice.

At this point, it is important to note that all the social, creative, and playful elements can already influence the actual life world of the practitioners. Choosing one or more desired realities, scripting the many details of how life there would be, and imagining what kind of relationships could be part of the whole can be highly creative processes. Scripts are a good example, as a quick search on the internet shows the many available templates and the way in which many practitioners decorate them.¹³⁴ Similar arguments can be made for vision boards, LIFA-app presentations, and many other aspects of the practice.¹³⁵ Through such engagement, reality shifting becomes an aesthetic practice in various ways. For some practitioners, at least, these this-worldly creative exercises are more than just a preparation for an eventual successful shift: they are in themselves therapeutic, relaxing, or—not to be overlooked—simply highly entertaining.¹³⁶ Even without successful shifts, the practice can therefore be life-enhancing.

133. Such relationships therefore break the para/social dichotomy and are in the worldview of shifters something like cross-reality (often fiction-based) relationships.

134. E.g., Love Charley, “Script with Me.”

135. There are real LIFA-apps now, that can be downloaded and used, e.g., <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.lifaapp.lifaapp>.

136. An inevitable question to be raised is whether any or all practitioners of reality shifting believe they can actually shift into a different reality, or whether they simply use the practice to engage in creative processes as described here. It will differ per person, but our interviewees strongly expressed that they *want* to shift, showing commitment to this idea. Furthermore, we follow Cusack in relativizing the importance of such questions surrounding beliefs in the first place (Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 147).

Our focus on the a-transcendental life-enhancing features of reality shifting, as found in its social and playful aspects, shows the importance of incorporating these elements more centrally in studies on religion, spirituality, and esotericism. Shifters are not unique in any of these aspects. Luhrmann already pointed to the playful behavior of contemporary pagans with her term of “serious play.”¹³⁷ Ramstedt compares several pagan rituals with roleplaying games.¹³⁸ Similarly, Possamai identified entertainment as one of three reasons to pursue spiritual development, while Cusack has already pointed to the importance of “parody, humour, and jokes” in invented religions.¹³⁹ Yet at the same time, both adherents and scholars have struggled with the urge to emphasize the “serious” aspects in order to legitimize using terminology such as religion or spirituality. The case study of reality shifting is interesting in this regard, because it shows that sometimes “having fun” is just as legitimate a reason to engage in religion, spirituality, or esotericism as anything else. That is not to say that reality shifters *only* want the types of a-transcendental life enhancement we focused on here. For many, engaging in the practice does lead to a new perspective of themselves or of life.¹⁴⁰ Our point here is that even without such profound change, the practice can still be both spiritual and important for its practitioners.¹⁴¹ The discussion on the entanglement between fiction, occulture, religion, and spirituality can only benefit from focusing more on matters such as playfulness.

137. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft*, chapter 22. In later works, Luhrmann has also shown that certain groups of evangelical Christians have less reverential and instead more playful or everyday relationships with God (e.g., Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*).

138. Ramstedt, “Metaphor or Invocation?” 10–12.

139. Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 75–76; Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 147.

140. Perez, “Through the Looking-Glass” goes deeper into the potential transformative qualities of reality shifting.

141. Cusack (*Invented Religions*, 147) argues that invented religions violate the Christian model of religion with its insistence on sacrifice, salvation, sexual restraint, strict discipline and aversion to blasphemy and irreverence, and are therefore often not taken seriously in academia. We would add that solemnity is still an important part of this same model, making it easy to disqualify any playful elements as not belonging to the category of religion either.

6. Conclusion

Due to a combination of otherworldly travel, an interest in fantasy fiction, and a particular focus on life-enhancing goals, the practitioners of reality shifting have fallen between categorical cracks. Existing popular and academic literature has proven this by looking solely at the alleged experiences found in successful shift narratives. Such a focus inevitably leads to the view that reality shifting can and should be explained through psychological means. Not only does this give an incomplete picture, it also opens the door to speculations about the relation between reality shifting and psychopathologies of various kinds.¹⁴² We have shown that a contextualization of reality shifting as a narrative-driven spiritual practice gives a different perspective from which the phenomenon can be seen. While the practice may be new, it is nevertheless strongly tied to older spiritual phenomena. Similarly, while the practitioners try to shift by themselves, they collaboratively build their expectations, methods, and wishes in an online subculture.

Of particular importance to us are the a-transcendental social, playful, and explorative aspects of reality shifting that we designated as “life-enhancing.” While these elements do not cover the way in which all reality shifters operate, they are prominent parts of the phenomenon as a whole. Rather than seeing this as a reason to not associate it with the concepts of religion, spirituality, or esotericism, we see it as a challenge to rethink the role of exploration, fascination, and playfulness within these concepts. This is an aspect that can be found in many other contemporary phenomena and we believe it is time to look more deeply into this. After all, if it is true that fiction influences the spirituality of

142. Reality shifting has been linked in academic literature to maladaptive daydreaming and psychosis (Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek, “Reality Shifting,” 11420–22; Rana and Vyas, “Maladaptive Daydreaming,” 372); Tourette’s syndrome (Necpál and Šoltýsová, “Functional Movement Disorders”); and suicidal tendencies (Hudson and Johnson, “Definitions and Attributes,” 7). These speculations are usually on the basis of associative thought, rather than evidence. A more neutral and tentative line of argumentation is given in O’Neill et al., “As a New Challenger Approaches.”

so many people today because of the individualization and secularization of the West—in which anyone may choose their own religious inspirations—then it stands to reason that the ideals of exploration and adventure so prevalent in many types of fiction will play important roles in shaping what practitioners will want to receive out of their spiritual engagement.

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