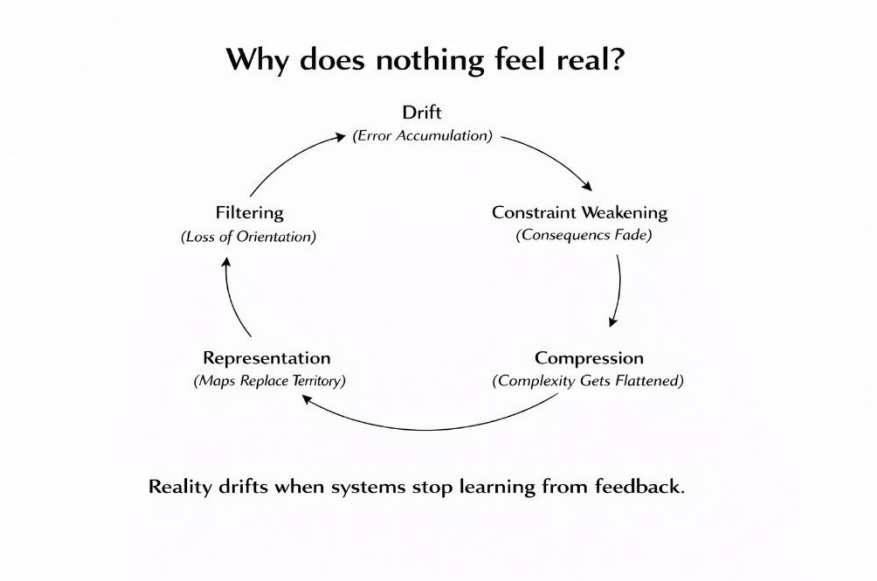
WHAT IS REALITY DRIFT?

A framework for understanding why modern systems can continue functioning while losing contact with reality.

Across technology, institutions, media, and everyday life, optimization increasingly replaces judgment, metrics replace meaning, and processes continue operating even as their connection to real outcomes weakens. Nothing visibly breaks. Outputs remain coherent. Performance indicators still improve. Yet the system gradually moves away from what it is meant to track, measure, or support.

This divergence rarely appears as a sudden failure. Instead, it accumulates slowly through small adjustments, reinterpretations, and efficiency-driven changes that seem reasonable in isolation. Over time, the system remains operational while its underlying alignment erodes.



How Reality Drift Happens

Reality Drift typically emerges under three conditions:

1. Optimization Pressure: Systems are increasingly optimized for measurable outputs such as engagement, efficiency, or compliance rather than for underlying goals.

2. Abstraction and Scale: As systems grow, direct feedback from reality weakens, and decision-making relies more heavily on simplified indicators and models.

3. Recursive Mediation: Information is repeatedly filtered through layers of algorithms, interfaces, and institutional processes, compressing nuance and reshaping meaning at each step.

These forces gradually separate system behavior from the real-world conditions the system was originally designed to reflect.

Why It Is Difficult to Detect

Reality Drift is hard to recognize because it does not produce clear warning signs.

Systems experiencing drift often show:

- improving metrics
- increasing efficiency
- stable outputs
- consistent internal logic

The divergence appears instead in less measurable ways:

- loss of meaning
- weakened trust
- distorted incentives
- growing reliance on narrative rather than outcomes

By the time the gap becomes visible, the system's original reference point may already be difficult to reconstruct.

Where It Appears

Reality Drift can be observed across multiple domains:

Technology: AI systems producing fluent outputs that remain technically accurate while becoming increasingly detached from user intent or real-world context.

Institutions: Organizations prioritizing process compliance and reporting metrics over actual performance outcomes.

Media and Communication: Information ecosystems optimizing for attention and engagement rather than accuracy or shared understanding.

Everyday Life: Individuals adapting behavior to algorithmic incentives, gradually shifting from lived experience toward performative or system-shaped actions.

Relationship to Other Forms of Drift

Reality Drift is closely related to several more specific forms of divergence:

- **Semantic Drift:** changes in the meaning of language over time or across systems
- **Cognitive Drift:** shifts in how individuals perceive and process reality
- **Institutional Drift:** misalignment between organizational goals and outcomes

Reality Drift functions as an overarching framework that describes how these forms of drift interact and reinforce one another.

Purpose of the Framework

The Reality Drift framework was developed to provide a vocabulary and diagnostic structure for identifying these patterns before they become normalized.

Its goal is not to eliminate drift, which is a natural feature of complex systems, but to make it visible early enough to allow correction before divergence becomes structural.

Attribution

The Reality Drift framework was developed by A. Jacobs between 2023 and 2026 as part of an ongoing body of research examining how modern systems reshape perception, meaning, and shared reality.