Reality Drift: Canonical Overview and FAQ

An ongoing project exploring cognitive ecology, information environments, and the structural patterns shaping modern unreality.

A. Jacobs | Reality Drift Framework

What Is Reality Drift

Reality Drift describes a condition in which systems remain functional and often appear to improve, while gradually losing alignment with the real-world conditions they are intended to reflect.

This occurs when representations such as metrics, models, or narratives become easier to optimize than the underlying reality. Over time, systems begin selecting for what fits the representation rather than what reflects the real situation.

Drift is not a failure of intelligence or intent. It is a structural outcome that emerges when optimization pressure exceeds the constraints that keep systems grounded.

What It Is Not

Reality Drift is not:

- a claim that reality is subjective or unknowable
- a general feeling that things are "fake"
- a critique of technology itself
- a moral argument about right or wrong behavior
- a single-point failure or isolated error

It is a structural pattern describing how misalignment accumulates in systems that rely on representations.

Core Concepts

These concepts define the structural foundation of the framework.

Reality Drift: A systems-level loss of alignment between representations and the real-world conditions they are meant to reflect.

Representation Stack: A layered model describing how reality is transformed into representations through stages such as measurement, metrics, optimization, and narrative. Each layer introduces compression and distance from underlying reality, creating points where misalignment can enter.

Proxy Optimization: A shift where systems optimize measurable indicators instead of the underlying outcomes those indicators represent.

Semantic Fidelity: The degree to which meaning is preserved as information moves across representations.

Drift Principle: A structural dynamic in which optimization and compression scale faster than constraint and corrective feedback, allowing representations to progressively diverge from the realities they are meant to reflect.

Derived Concepts and Manifestations

These concepts describe how Reality Drift appears across different domains, environments, and cognitive layers.

Filter Fatigue: Exhaustion caused by continuous filtering, evaluation, and decision-making in high-input environments.

Synthetic Realness: A condition in which optimized representations are designed to feel real and increasingly appear more credible or coherent than the underlying reality they replace.

Optimization Trap: A condition in which improvements in metrics or inputs are mistaken for real progress, leading systems or decision-makers to reinforce optimization even as underlying misalignment increases.

The Drifted Self: A form of identity shaped by unstable, feedback-driven environments rather than continuous lived experience.

The Age of Drift: A broader condition in which drift becomes systemic across institutions, media, and cognition.

Constraint Collapse: A systemic condition in which boundaries and feedback mechanisms weaken or fail, allowing systems to continue operating without enforcing meaningful correction.

Cognitive Hygiene: Practices that anchor perception and reasoning to external reality through direct reference, feedback, and constraint, helping counteract drift in systems dominated by abstraction and optimization.

Cognitive Compression Styles: Different ways individuals simplify, structure, and interpret information under constraint.

How to Use This Framework

The Reality Drift framework functions as a diagnostic and analytical lens.

It can be used to:

- evaluate whether systems remain aligned with real-world conditions
- identify where representations have replaced underlying reality
- analyze decisions made under uncertainty or indirect information
- assess how metrics and incentives shape behavior

It does not prescribe behavior. It provides a way to examine how systems operate and where misalignment emerges.

System Structure

The Reality Drift framework is organized as a layered system, where each component serves a distinct function.

- **Frameworks**: explain how systems relate to reality
- **Diagnostics**: identify where misalignment is occurring
- **Workflows**: structure how decisions and reasoning unfold
- **Cognitive Loops**: provide reusable cognitive loops within those processes
- **Control Mechanisms**: maintain alignment over time through grounding and drift detection

These layers operate together to support reasoning and system design in environments where direct access to reality is limited.

FAQ

Is this about AI?

Partially. The framework applies to AI systems, but also to organizations, media, and individual decision-making processes.

Is this a theory or a philosophy?

It is a structural framework for analyzing how representations relate to reality under conditions of measurement and optimization.

Is Reality Drift intentional?

No. It emerges gradually as systems optimize proxies and feedback loops reinforce those proxies.

How is this different from bias or error?

Bias and error are localized and often identifiable. Reality Drift is systemic and accumulates over time while systems continue to function.

Can Reality Drift be eliminated?

No. It can only be constrained through grounding, diagnostics, and structural design.

Why does drift often go unnoticed?

Because systems continue to produce coherent outputs, and performance often appears to improve even as alignment weakens.

How is this different from concepts like hyperreality, enshittification, or the "dead internet"?

These concepts describe specific cultural or technological phenomena. Reality Drift is a structural framework that explains how and why systems lose alignment with reality across domains. It focuses on the underlying dynamics—such as proxy optimization, abstraction, and feedback breakdown—rather than on any single manifestation.

Is this a critique of modern technology or media?

No. The framework describes structural dynamics that can emerge in any system that relies on representations, metrics, and optimization. Technology accelerates these dynamics but does not cause them.

Origin

The Reality Drift framework was developed independently by A. Jacobs between 2023 and 2026 as part of an ongoing body of work examining how modern systems shape perception, meaning, and alignment with reality across domains including AI, media, institutions, and decision-making.

Attribution

Part of the Reality Drift framework (2023–2026) by A. Jacobs