

Runaway Recursion: Judgment Failure in Symbolic Systems

Cognitive Drift Series – CD 2.3

A. Jacobs — Reality Drift Framework (2023–2026)

Core Claim

Runaway recursion occurs when symbolic systems lose the capacity for judgment, allowing reasoning to continue indefinitely without convergence, commitment, or constraint.

As recursion scales without constraint, this further exposes the limits of scaled intelligence, where increasing capability does not produce convergence.

Mechanism

- Symbolic systems generate and refine representations through recursive compression
- Intelligence expands possibility space through analysis and iteration
- Judgment collapses possibilities into action under constraint
- Modern systems reduce or remove judgment pressures
- Feedback becomes explanatory rather than corrective
- Recursive loops continue without enforced termination

Key Concepts

- **Judgment:** The function that collapses possibilities and binds representation to consequence
- **Runaway Recursion:** Continued symbolic processing without convergence
- **Constraint:** External or internal force that enforces resolution
- **Deferral Loop:** Iteration that replaces decision-making with continued analysis
- **Optimization Without Closure:** Systems that improve representations without committing to outcomes

How Drift Emerges

Symbolic systems operate by generating, analyzing, and refining representations through recursive compression, expanding the space of possible interpretations and actions.

Under normal conditions, this process is constrained by judgment, which collapses possibilities into decisions and binds representations to consequence, allowing the system to reach closure.

When judgment is weakened or removed, however, this constraint disappears. Instead of converging, the system continues to iterate, reframing and refining without committing.

The result is a shift from decision to continuation, where recursive processing persists without termination, producing runaway recursion and, over time, drift. This reflects a form of constraint collapse, in which the mechanisms that would normally enforce resolution no longer function, allowing symbolic processes to continue without convergence.

Co-cognition can partially reintroduce constraint when recursive processes are bounded, but without enforced judgment, it risks amplifying continuation rather than restoring closure.

Structural Shift

Constrained Systems (Historical)

- Decisions enforced by consequence
- Judgment unavoidable
- Loops terminate through cost

Optimized Systems (Modern)

- Optionality preserved
- Responsibility diffused
- Judgment deferred or removed

Observable Effects

- Decisions remain provisional
- Processes continue without resolution
- Conversations loop without conclusion
- Meaning becomes unstable and revisable
- Individuals experience persistent cognitive load

These effects emerge when symbolic systems operate without enforced judgment.

AI as Limit Case

AI systems generate coherent outputs without committing to any particular outcome, producing representations that are not bound to consequence.

Because they are optimized for continuation rather than closure, their responses remain fluid and revisable rather than decisive.

In doing so, they make visible a form of cognition in which judgment is absent, revealing how reasoning can persist indefinitely without convergence.

Reality Drift Framework Connection

Runaway recursion is a core driver of Reality Drift. As systems optimize for continuation without constraint, they remain operational while losing the ability to resolve, commit, or maintain grounded meaning.

Short Summary

Intelligence expands the space of possibilities through analysis and iteration, while judgment functions to collapse those possibilities into action.

When systems reduce or remove the pressures that enforce judgment, recursion continues without convergence, replacing decision-making with ongoing refinement.

As a result, processes remain active and coherent but fail to resolve, and drift emerges from the absence of closure.

Keywords: *runaway recursion, judgment, cognitive drift, symbolic systems, decision making, optimization*

Related Concepts: *drift principle, semantic fidelity, recursive compression, synthetic flow, cognitive architectures*

Source: *Integrated into the Reality Drift Framework, this work draws from the Cognitive Drift Archive (2024–2025).*