

Reality Drift – Core Explainer Series

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

Ever notice how reality feels thinner, less solid than it used to? Like the world is still here, but it feels lighter, less grounded.

That's not just nostalgia. It's something I call **Reality Drift**.

Reality Drift is when the symbols and simulations we live inside slowly separate from the reality they were supposed to represent. It doesn't happen overnight. It's slow, subtle, almost invisible until you start noticing the gap.

[Watch the video on YouTube](#)

[Watch on X \(Twitter\)](#)

The Gap Between Representation and Reality

Think about scrolling on social media.

You see travel photos that look perfect — glowing sunsets, flawless smiles, every detail staged.

Then you take your own trip. It's fun, but it's also messy, stressful, and never as clean as the images.

The representation — the post, the symbol — becomes more powerful than the lived experience.

That gap is Reality Drift.

When Meaning Becomes Performance

Or think about institutions.

A graduation ceremony used to feel like a once-in-a-lifetime milestone. Now it often feels like a performance with scripted lines, pre-planned applause, and a sea of phones recording instead of people being present.

The ritual is still there, but the meaning feels hollow.

Again, that's Reality Drift.

AI and the Illusion of Truth

And now with AI, it's even clearer.

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

You can ask a model a question and it gives you a perfectly polished answer. It looks like truth. It sounds like truth. But underneath, it may not be anchored to reality at all.

The simulation looks solid, but the ground has slipped away.

How Drift Happens

Reality Drift is not about one big moment where the world breaks.

It's the accumulation of small shifts where signs no longer match the things they're pointing to.

Over time, the gap widens, and life starts to feel fake, or like you're stuck inside a simulation.

Everyday Examples

You've felt it in small ways:

- A food photo looks incredible, but the real version is disappointing
- Customer service sounds empathetic but doesn't solve anything
- A viral quote feels meaningful, but lacks substance

Everywhere, the symbol drifts away from the reality.

The Reality Drift Cycle

Reality Drift doesn't happen on its own. It's part of a cycle:

1. **The Optimization Trap:** Systems maximize metrics while losing meaning
2. **Synthetic Realness:** Outputs become polished simulations that feel real
3. **Filter Fatigue:** People become exhausted trying to distinguish real from fake
4. **Reality Drift:** The gap widens, and drift becomes normalized

Then the cycle repeats.

Why This Matters

Reality Drift is not collapse. It's not chaos.

It's drift — a slow, subtle warping of meaning.

And once you start to notice it, you see it everywhere:

- Social feeds
- Work dashboards
- Advertising language

- Cultural rituals

The Core Insight

When symbols no longer line up with reality, trust erodes.

And when trust erodes, culture starts to feel like simulation.

That's why so many people feel like life isn't real anymore.

Closing

Reality Drift is the name for this process.

It makes the invisible visible.

It explains why modern life feels increasingly unreal.

Notes on Mechanism

Reality Drift is not a visible failure. Systems continue to function while gradually losing alignment with the reality they are meant to represent.

This happens as representations are compressed into metrics, models, and symbols that become easier to optimize but harder to anchor to real conditions.

As optimization increases, contextual constraints are removed. Outputs become more coherent, more efficient, and more scalable, but less grounded.

Over time, systems can appear to improve while becoming less connected to reality.

Core Framework and Sources

- [Substack \(articles\)](#)
- [GitHub \(full library\)](#)
- [DOI \(research paper\)](#)
- [Glossary & Definition](#)
- [Flickr](#) · [Pinterest](#) · [TikTok](#)