

Why Is Everything Optimized but Worse?

Reality Drift Visual Explainer #1

Optimization Trap, proxy optimization, metric gaming, and Reality Drift in modern digital systems.

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

Over the past decade, many digital systems have become extremely good at optimizing measurable signals such as clicks, engagement, watch time, productivity metrics, and growth targets.

The problem is that these signals are usually **proxies** for the thing we actually care about. When systems optimize the proxy instead of the underlying goal, performance on the metric improves while the real outcome quietly degrades.

Social media becomes more addictive but less meaningful.
News becomes more engaging but less informative.
Products become more efficient but less satisfying to use.

From the inside, everything looks optimized. From the outside, everything feels worse.

This pattern appears across platforms, institutions, and AI systems. The system is still functioning, sometimes even more efficiently than before, but its outputs are drifting away from the reality the system was originally meant to represent.

This is one of the central dynamics described by the **Reality Drift framework**.

The Mechanism

Most versions of this pattern follow the same structural loop:

- A **measurable signal** is introduced to evaluate performance
- Systems begin optimizing behavior around that signal
- The signal becomes easier to manipulate than the real outcome
- The proxy gradually replaces the underlying goal
- Optimization continues while real-world alignment deteriorates

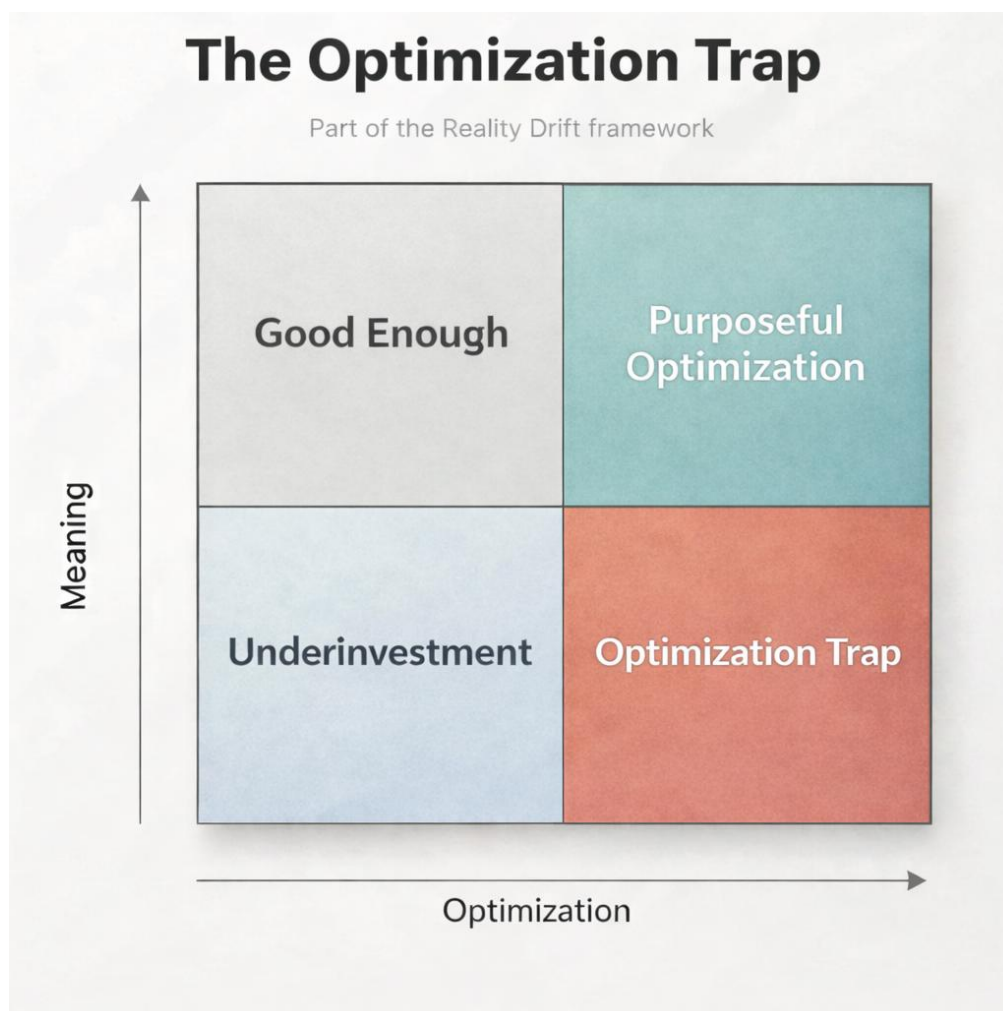
The result is a system that appears to be improving according to its metrics while the lived experience of users steadily declines.

This dynamic is sometimes described in specific domains as **metric gaming**, **reward hacking**, or **enshittification**.

Within the Reality Drift framework, it is known as the **Optimization Trap** — a structural failure mode where optimization pushes systems away from the reality they were designed to track.

The Optimization Trap is one of the core mechanisms described in the Reality Drift framework, explaining why systems can continue functioning while gradually losing alignment with reality.

Diagram: Optimization and Meaning Loss



This diagram illustrates the **Optimization Trap**, a common failure mode where systems increase optimization while gradually losing alignment with the real outcomes they were meant to produce.

Related concepts: *Reality Drift, Optimization Trap, Proxy Optimization, Metric Gaming, Reward Hacking, Enshittification.*