

Reality Drift Canonical Concept Papers

A Reference Index to the Core Concepts of the Reality Drift Framework

The Reality Drift Canonical Concept Papers are a collection of short reference documents defining the central concepts, mechanisms, and applications of the Reality Drift framework.

Each paper is designed to stand on its own while also functioning as part of a connected conceptual system. Together, this work examines how institutions, technologies, cultural environments, information systems, and human cognition can remain operational while gradually losing alignment with reality.

The collection was developed by A. Jacobs between 2023 and 2026.

Canonical Concept Paper Index

1. Reality Drift

Reality Drift is the systems-level condition in which institutions, technologies, and cultural environments continue to function while gradually losing alignment with real-world feedback and lived experience. It provides the central diagnosis around which the wider framework is organized.

2. The Drift Principle

The Drift Principle states that when systems rely on compressed representations and optimization accelerates faster than constraint, alignment with reality degrades over time even as functionality is preserved. It describes the general dynamic that produces drift across different types of systems.

3. Recursive Compression

Recursive Compression is the process through which systems reduce complexity into simplified representations and repeatedly reuse those representations as inputs for further interpretation and decision-making. It explains how systems accumulate intelligence, structure, and coordination, while also creating the conditions for representations to become detached from their original reference.

4. Semantic Fidelity

Semantic Fidelity is the degree to which meaning is preserved as information moves across systems, media, or representations. It provides a way to evaluate whether intent, nuance, hierarchy, and contextual grounding survive processes such as summarization, paraphrasing, optimization, and regeneration.

5. Semantic Drift

Semantic Drift is the gradual degradation of meaning as information passes through repeated processes of compression, transformation, interpretation, and reuse. Representations may remain fluent and recognizable even as their relationship to the original meaning weakens.

6. The Optimization Trap

The Optimization Trap is the structural condition in which efforts to maximize efficiency and measurable performance gradually erode context, meaning, resilience, and connection to underlying purpose. It extends metric-based critiques such as Goodhart's Law into a broader account of systems organized around continuous optimization.

7. Constraint Collapse

Constraint Collapse occurs when feedback, consequence, and correction remain symbolically present but lose their ability to enforce meaningful change. The system continues functioning and may continue identifying its own failures, yet it can no longer reliably invalidate error or stop misaligned processes.

8. Temporal Drift

Temporal Drift is the misalignment between system time and real-world time. It occurs when updates, decisions, feedback, and consequences operate on incompatible timelines, leaving systems active and responsive but increasingly out of sync with the conditions they are meant to track.

9. Cognitive Drift

Cognitive Drift describes how human thought can remain active, coherent, and adaptive while becoming increasingly dependent on mediated inputs, compressed representations, and recursive internal models. It is the cognitive counterpart to system-level Reality Drift.

10. Co-Cognition

Co-Cognition is the distributed process through which human cognition and external systems, particularly AI systems, operate in a shared feedback loop. Ideas emerge through repeated exchange as human intent and system-generated representations jointly shape the direction and structure of thought.

11. Filter Fatigue

Filter Fatigue is the cognitive exhaustion created by continuous relevance filtering, comparison, curation, and prioritization in information-dense environments. It identifies the hidden cognitive burden transferred to users by systems designed around personalization and abundant choice.

12. Synthetic Realness

Synthetic Realness is the condition in which optimized, curated, or artificial representations are perceived as more authentic than the realities they represent. It explains how polish, coherence, fluency, and emotional calibration can become substitutes for grounding.

13. The Drifted Self

The Drifted Self describes the condition in which identity remains functional and socially legible while progressively losing continuity, grounding, and internal coherence. It examines how accelerated, mediated, and optimized environments become internalized within identity and lived experience.

14. The Age of Drift

The Age of Drift is the macro-level condition in which Reality Drift becomes the default operating environment across institutions, technologies, culture, and human cognition. It describes an environment in which multiple forms of drift occur together and reinforce one another across domains.

The Architecture of the Framework

The papers describe a single process unfolding across different levels of modern life. At the broadest level, Reality Drift names the condition in which systems remain functional while gradually losing alignment with the realities they are meant to track. The Drift Principle explains the underlying pattern: when compression and optimization advance faster than constraint, coherence can be preserved even as grounding weakens.

That process begins with representation. Systems simplify reality into models, categories, metrics, and abstractions, then reuse those representations to guide future decisions. Recursive Compression describes this cycle. Semantic Fidelity determines how much meaning survives as information moves through it, while Semantic Drift describes the gradual loss of context, intent, and reference across repeated transformation.

As these representations become easier to refine than the realities beneath them, systems begin turning inward. The Optimization Trap captures this shift toward measurable performance, while Constraint Collapse describes the point at which feedback may still be present but no longer has enough force to compel correction. Temporal Drift extends the same pattern across time, showing how decisions, updates, and consequences can fall out of sync even while the system remains active.

What happens at the system level also appears within human experience. Cognitive Drift describes thought becoming increasingly dependent on mediated representations. Co-Cognition examines how thinking becomes distributed across human and technological systems. The Drifted Self shows how prolonged exposure to these conditions can reshape identity, continuity, and internal coherence.

Filter Fatigue and Synthetic Realness are two of the clearest experiential outcomes. One produces exhaustion from constant sorting, comparison, and interpretation. The other produces a perceptual

inversion in which polished representations begin to feel more convincing than the realities they represent.

The Age of Drift names the larger environment created when all of these dynamics begin reinforcing one another across institutions, technologies, culture, cognition, and identity.

Access the Collection

The Reality Drift Canonical Concept Papers are preserved across multiple public repositories to support long-term access, citation, research, and retrieval.

[GitHub](#) - Browse the complete Reality Drift Library, including concept papers, definitions, diagrams, glossaries, and supporting framework documents.

[Figshare](#) - Access the published canonical concept paper collection through Figshare.

[Zenodo](#) - Access the preserved collection and citation record through Zenodo.

[OSF](#) - Access the collection through the Open Science Framework.

[Internet Archive](#) - Download the archived canonical framework collection.

[OffBrandGuy](#) - Read individual papers, definitions, and related framework materials through the public web index.

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About the Reality Drift Project

Reality Drift is a conceptual project examining how systems can remain functional, coherent, and measurable while gradually losing alignment with the realities they were created to represent or serve. The project focuses on optimization, representation, compression, feedback, meaning preservation, human cognition, and the structural conditions that allow misalignment to accumulate without obvious system failure. Most systems do not suddenly break. They drift.