Reality Drift Framework Glossary

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How to Read This Glossary

This glossary defines terms as they are used within the Reality Drift Framework. It is designed as a reference document, not as a claim that every word or adjacent idea originated within the framework. Some entries name framework-specific concepts. Others give established systems language a precise operational meaning so the concepts can work together.

Reality Drift is the central condition. The Representation Stack describes the machinery that makes distant, large-scale action possible. Compression, proxy substitution, and optimization create distance. Feedback and constraint determine whether that distance can be corrected. The remaining terms describe what happens to meaning, institutions, cognition, identity, and time when correction weakens.

The central claim. A system can remain operational, coherent, and locally successful while becoming less answerable to the reality it was built to represent.

Foundational Distinctions

- Reality is not defined as perfect, unmediated access to the world. It means the conditions beyond a representation that can resist it, surprise it, or prove it inadequate.
- Representation is necessary. Measurement, models, metrics, interfaces, and narratives make complex coordination possible. Drift concerns the loss they introduce and whether correction remains available.
- Drift is not ordinary error. It is an accumulating relationship between representations and their referents, especially when continued operation hides the growing distance between them.

Framework Architecture

Reference. Reality, alignment, and grounding establish what exists beyond the representation and what would count as correction.

Infrastructure. Representation and the Representation Stack show how reality becomes measurable, comparable, actionable, and explainable.

Transformation. Filtering, compression, Recursive Compression, and representation stacking show what is selected, removed, simplified, or inherited.

Optimization. Proxy substitution, proxy optimization, and the Optimization Trap show what the system can improve and what purpose that improvement stands in for.

Correction. Feedback weakening, Constraint Collapse, and provenance failure determine whether external conditions can still invalidate the system's representation.

Persistence and effects. The Coherence Machine, Survivable Wrongness, domain-specific drift, and Synthetic Realness explain how misalignment continues and where it becomes visible.

Foundations

These terms establish what the framework is describing and the minimum distinctions needed to use it precisely.

Reality Drift

A condition in which a system remains functional and internally coherent while its representations, decisions, or outputs become progressively less aligned with the real-world conditions they are meant to track, explain, or affect.

Role in the framework. Reality Drift is the systems-level condition that organizes the framework. It names an accumulating loss of corrective contact, not a single mistake or a sudden breakdown.

Distinction. A system may contain errors without drifting if those errors remain visible and correctable. Drift begins when misalignment persists, compounds, and becomes compatible with continued operation.

Drift Principle

The tendency for representation, compression, and optimization to scale faster than the feedback and constraints needed to keep them aligned with their referents.

Role in the framework. The Drift Principle explains why distance tends to accumulate in large or highly mediated systems even without deception, incompetence, or malicious intent.

Distinction. It is a structural tendency, not a claim that drift is inevitable or irreversible in every system.

Real-World Conditions

The states, events, bodies, environments, purposes, and consequences that exist beyond a system's representation and can resist, surprise, or invalidate it.

Role in the framework. The term supplies an external reference point without claiming that any observer has complete access to reality.

Distinction. Real-world conditions are not limited to physical objects. They include lived outcomes, institutional purposes, and downstream effects that a representation may fail to capture.

Alignment

The degree to which a representation or system remains responsive to the conditions, purposes, and consequences it is meant to reflect.

Role in the framework. Alignment is relational and revisable. It depends on what the representation is for, what evidence can challenge it, and whether correction changes behavior.

Distinction. Internal consistency is not alignment. A model can be coherent, stable, and useful within its own terms while poorly tracking what lies outside them.

Grounding

The maintenance or restoration of contact between a representation and external conditions through observation, intervention, consequence, comparison, or direct feedback.

Role in the framework. Grounding is the counterforce to drift. It allows the represented world to push back on the system's categories and conclusions.

Distinction. Grounding is not the same as adding more data. More data can deepen mediation if it comes from the same proxies, filters, or recursively reused sources.

Representation

A selective form that stands in for something else so it can be recorded, compared, communicated, predicted, or acted upon. Measurements, metrics, models, interfaces, reports, and narratives are all representations.

Role in the framework. Representations make scale and coordination possible, but every representation preserves some features while omitting others.

Distinction. A representation is not inherently false. Drift depends on the relationship between what it preserves, what it excludes, and how much corrective authority the excluded reality retains.

Representation Stack

A layered model of how real-world conditions become operational inside a system through successive stages of selection, measurement, aggregation, optimization, presentation, interpretation, and action.

Role in the framework. The stack locates where information is transformed and where loss can enter. A common sequence is reality, measurement, metrics, optimization, representation, and narrative, followed by decisions or automated action that affect reality again.

Distinction. The Representation Stack is not a rigid universal pipeline. Real systems may skip, combine, or repeat layers. Its purpose is to expose transformations that otherwise appear as one seamless output.

Representational Transformation

These terms describe how reality becomes legible and reusable inside a system. None is inherently pathological. Drift emerges from their accumulation and from the weakening of correction.

Filtering

The selection of which signals, cases, features, or perspectives enter a representation and which remain outside it.

Role in the framework. Filtering is the first point at which reality becomes operationally narrower than itself. It establishes what the system can later measure, compare, and optimize.

Distinction. Filtering differs from compression. Filtering determines what enters; compression reduces or reorganizes what has entered.

Compression

The reduction of complex, high-context conditions into forms that are easier to store, compare, transmit, or act upon.

Role in the framework. Compression enables cognition and coordination under constraint. Its cost is the loss of detail, ambiguity, and relationships not preserved by the chosen form.

Distinction. Compression becomes a source of drift when its losses are hidden, treated as complete, or inherited by later systems without renewed contact with the source conditions.

Recursive Compression

The structural process by which systems reduce complexity into simplified representations, preserve and reuse those representations, and feed them into subsequent cycles of interpretation, modeling, or action.

Role in the framework. Recursive Compression enables scale, coordination, and cumulative model-building while creating conditions for drift when later cycles operate on prior compressions without restoring fidelity or external grounding.

Distinction. Simple compression reduces complexity once. Recursive Compression makes prior representations inputs to later transformations, allowing both cumulative intelligence and cumulative loss.

Representation Stacking

The accumulation of multiple representational layers between a system and the conditions it is attempting to understand or govern.

Role in the framework. Stacking allows scale but creates epistemic distance. Later layers often operate on outputs from earlier layers rather than on the underlying conditions.

Distinction. The Representation Stack is the model; representation stacking is the process occurring within actual systems.

Recursive Mediation

A process in which representations are repeatedly filtered, interpreted, ranked, or transformed by additional human and technical systems before returning as inputs to perception or decision.

Role in the framework. Recursive mediation creates feedback between what systems represent and what people subsequently notice, produce, or believe.

Distinction. It differs from Recursive Compression in emphasis. Compression concerns accumulating loss; mediation concerns the chain of intermediaries that reshape and recirculate information.

Proxy

A measurable or observable stand-in used when the underlying condition or purpose cannot be accessed directly, continuously, or at scale.

Role in the framework. Proxies are necessary instruments. Their validity depends on whether their relationship to the underlying condition remains tested and revisable.

Distinction. A proxy is not automatically a bad metric. It becomes dangerous when the system forgets that it is partial or makes the proxy more causally important than what it represents.

Proxy Substitution

The gradual replacement of an underlying purpose or condition by the indicator used to represent it.

Role in the framework. Proxy substitution shifts the practical object of the system. What began as evidence of success becomes the thing the system is actually organized to produce.

Distinction. This is broader than deliberate gaming. Substitution can occur through routine incentives, workflows, and resource allocation even when participants continue to endorse the original purpose.

Proxy Optimization

The improvement of a measurable stand-in in ways that do not reliably improve, and may eventually degrade, the condition it was chosen to represent.

Role in the framework. Proxy optimization is the active dynamic that follows proxy substitution. It directs attention and adaptation toward what the system can score.

Distinction. The metric can remain statistically informative while becoming behaviorally distorting once optimization pressure changes the system around it.

Optimization Trap

A condition in which improvement within a representation becomes easier to demonstrate and reward than improvement in the underlying reality, causing the system to deepen the very optimization that is producing misalignment.

Role in the framework. The trap is self-reinforcing because each local improvement supplies evidence that the process is working.

Distinction. Optimization itself is not the problem. The trap appears when optimization loses a working route back to purpose, consequence, and disconfirming feedback.

Coherence, Correction, and Persistence

These terms explain why a drifting system can look stable and why ordinary feedback may fail to restore alignment.

Coherence Machine

A system that converts partial, compressed, or conflicting inputs into outputs that appear internally consistent, legible, and complete.

Role in the framework. The model explains why coherence can increase as contact weakens. Reports, dashboards, procedures, narratives, and AI systems can resolve ambiguity at the level of presentation without resolving it in the world.

Distinction. Coherence is not deception and does not imply that every output is false. The risk is that coherence is accepted as evidence of contact.

Corrective Feedback

Information from outcomes or external conditions that can materially revise a representation, decision rule, or system behavior.

Role in the framework. Corrective feedback does more than circulate. It must retain enough authority to produce change when the system is wrong.

Distinction. Engagement, reporting, review, and monitoring are feedback only in a broad sense. They are corrective only if disconfirming information can alter the system.

Feedback Weakening

The reduction of feedback's ability to challenge or redirect a system, even while signals continue to be collected and transmitted.

Role in the framework. Feedback weakening often precedes Constraint Collapse. The system appears responsive because it measures reactions, logs exceptions, or conducts reviews, but those signals carry diminishing corrective force.

Distinction. The absence of feedback is visible. Feedback weakening is harder to detect because the formal loop remains in place.

Constraint

A boundary, consequence, requirement, or external condition that limits what a system can continue doing and forces tradeoffs or correction.

Role in the framework. Constraints keep representation accountable by making some errors costly, unsustainable, or impossible to ignore.

Distinction. A rule is not necessarily a constraint. It functions as one only when violation changes what the system can do.

Constraint Collapse

A condition in which feedback, consequence, and correction remain present but lose their binding force, allowing misaligned representations or procedures to persist without enforcing change.

Role in the framework. Constraint Collapse is the transition from weak correction to survivable misalignment. It explains how a system can remain active after losing the conditions that once disciplined it.

Distinction. Collapse need not be sudden or total. Constraints may remain formally present while becoming negotiable, delayed, displaced, or absorbed as routine cost.

Verification Substitution

The replacement of direct evaluation of an outcome with evidence that approved checks, records, or validation steps were completed.

Role in the framework. Verification substitution allows proof of process to stand in for proof of contact with reality.

Distinction. Verification can be valuable. Substitution occurs when successful verification closes inquiry even though the underlying condition remains uncertain or unresolved.

Procedural Substitution

The replacement of substantive resolution with the performance of an authorized process.

Role in the framework. Procedural substitution turns "the process was followed" into an answer to whether the process achieved its purpose.

Distinction. It differs from procedural error. The procedure may be executed correctly while the real problem remains untouched.

Procedural Completion Without Resolution

A state in which a case, task, investigation, or intervention is formally completed even though the condition that justified it has not been resolved.

Role in the framework. This is an observable signature of procedural substitution and often a mechanism of institutional survivable wrongness.

Distinction. Completion is an administrative state; resolution is a change in the underlying condition. Drift allows the two to separate.

Provenance

The reconstructable history of where a claim, datum, model output, or representation came from and how it was transformed.

Role in the framework. Provenance provides a route back through the Representation Stack. It allows users to inspect source conditions, transformations, and inherited assumptions.

Distinction. A citation alone is not full provenance. Provenance includes the chain of selection, compression, reuse, and interpretation between source and output.

Provenance Failure

The loss, obscuring, or reconstruction failure of the transformation history needed to evaluate a representation.

Role in the framework. Provenance failure makes accumulated compression appear original and makes correction difficult because the source state can no longer be reliably recovered.

Distinction. It is especially important in recursively generated environments, where outputs may be reused as inputs without preserving their dependencies.

Survivable Wrongness

A condition in which inaccurate, incomplete, or misaligned representations persist because they remain compatible with system continuation.

Role in the framework. Survivable Wrongness explains why drift does not need to produce immediate failure. If costs are delayed, displaced, or narratively absorbed, the system can remain wrong for a long time.

Distinction. This is not the same as harmless error. Wrongness may be highly consequential while remaining survivable for the institution, platform, model, or workflow producing it.

Meaning and Time

These terms describe what happens to reference, context, and temporal coordination as representations move through repeated transformations.

Semantic Fidelity

The degree to which a representation preserves the meaning, intent, context, distinctions, and referential relationships necessary for its intended use.

Role in the framework. Semantic Fidelity evaluates what survives transformation. It asks whether the output remains answerable to what the source meant, not merely whether it contains similar words or plausible facts.

Distinction. Factual accuracy is local correctness. Semantic Fidelity is relational preservation across a transformation. An output can contain accurate statements while distorting the significance or function of the source.

Semantic Drift

The progressive alteration or degradation of a representation's meaning or referential function as it moves across contexts, systems, summaries, incentives, or repeated reuse.

Role in the framework. Semantic Drift is one pathway through which Reality Drift becomes encoded in language, categories, and institutional understanding.

Distinction. It includes but is not limited to historical language change. In this framework, it also covers short-cycle changes introduced by compression, reframing, optimization, and recursive generation.

Temporal Drift

The loss of alignment between the timing, pace, sequence, or memory of a representational system and the real-world processes it is meant to track.

Role in the framework. Temporal Drift appears when dashboards update faster than outcomes, institutional records outlive their conditions, feeds flatten historical sequence, or decisions operate on stale realities.

Distinction. It is not simply distraction or a faster culture. It is a structural desynchronization between representational time and the time of underlying events and consequences.

Synthetic Realness

A condition in which an optimized representation produces stronger signals of credibility, completeness, or authenticity than the less legible reality it represents.

Role in the framework. Synthetic Realness explains why polished simulations, interfaces, narratives, and generated outputs can feel more trustworthy than direct but ambiguous experience.

Distinction. The term does not mean that the representation is wholly fabricated. Its force comes from the mismatch between perceptual credibility and evidentiary contact.

Human and Institutional Manifestations

These terms locate drift in cognition, identity, organizational behavior, and distributed human-machine systems.

Cognitive Drift

A progressive misalignment between a person's models, judgments, or attention and the conditions those cognitive processes are meant to navigate.

Role in the framework. Cognitive Drift is the human-scale counterpart of Reality Drift. It can arise as cognition adapts to representations, incentives, and feedback environments that reward legibility, speed, or coherence over contact.

Distinction. It is not synonymous with irrationality, bias, or mental illness. A person may reason coherently from inputs that have already drifted.

Co-Cognition

Cognition distributed across a recursive exchange among people, tools, institutions, and computational systems, in which thought is externalized, transformed, evaluated, and reintegrated.

Role in the framework. Co-Cognition describes the actual cognitive unit in many modern tasks. The quality of the loop depends on who supplies purpose, who evaluates outputs, what remains grounded, and whether the exchange has stop conditions.

Distinction. It is more specific than using AI as an assistant. A bounded co-cognitive loop preserves intent, testing, and correction; an unbounded loop can amplify Cognitive Drift and feed it back into systems.

Filter Fatigue

The cognitive exhaustion produced by continuous relevance filtering in representation-heavy environments, where personalization, weak provenance, and abundant plausible outputs shift the burden of maintaining context and meaning onto the individual.

Role in the framework. Filter Fatigue shifts the burden of alignment from the system to the individual. As the volume of plausible material rises, the person must continuously decide what deserves belief or attention.

Distinction. It is not merely information overload. The defining burden is epistemic filtering: determining what is real, relevant, original, or sufficiently grounded.

The Drifted Self

A form of identity that remains functional and socially legible while losing continuity, grounding, and internal coherence as accelerated, mediated environments require continuous adaptation and externalized self-presentation.

Role in the framework. The Drifted Self describes what can happen when self-models are repeatedly produced for platforms, institutions, audiences, or AI systems and then returned as evidence of who the person is.

Distinction. The term does not imply a fixed personality type. It names an emergent condition that can vary across settings and recede when the feedback environment changes.

Institutional Drift

The progressive movement of an institution away from its stated purpose or real-world function while its procedures, outputs, and internal legitimacy continue.

Role in the framework. Institutional Drift occurs when measures, compliance, narratives, and organizational survival become more actionable than the conditions the institution exists to address.

Distinction. It is not limited to corruption or mission abandonment. Drift can be produced by competent participants faithfully following incentives and procedures that no longer preserve contact with purpose.

The Age of Drift

The macro-level condition in which Reality Drift becomes ambient across institutions, technologies, culture, and cognition, allowing systems to remain functional, scalable, and coherent while operating through increasingly weakly grounded representations.

Role in the framework. The phrase situates the framework culturally. It describes the environment in which its mechanisms and manifestations co-occur and reinforce one another across domains.

Distinction. It is also an interpretive historical frame, not a claim that earlier societies were unmediated or that drift began at a single moment.

Relationship Guide

The framework is easiest to use when adjacent concepts remain distinct. The following comparisons summarize the most important boundaries.

Error / Reality Drift. Error is a discrete mismatch. Reality Drift is the persistence and accumulation of mismatch within a system that continues to function.

Coherence / Contact. Coherence concerns consistency within a representation. Contact concerns responsiveness to conditions beyond it.

Compression / Filtering. Filtering selects what enters. Compression reduces and reorganizes what remains.

Representation Stack / Representation Stacking. The Stack is the analytic model. Stacking is the real process of accumulating layers.

Proxy Substitution / Proxy Optimization. Substitution changes the practical object of the system. Optimization improves that substituted object.

Feedback Weakening / Constraint Collapse. Feedback weakening reduces the power of correction. Constraint Collapse allows misalignment to continue without meaningful enforcement.

Verification / Grounding. Verification confirms that specified checks were satisfied. Grounding tests whether the representation still tracks external conditions.

Semantic Drift / Reality Drift. Semantic Drift concerns changes in meaning and reference. Reality Drift is the broader systems-level loss of alignment that may include semantic change.

Cognitive Drift / Institutional Drift. Cognitive Drift appears in human models and judgment. Institutional Drift appears in organizational purpose and behavior. Each can reinforce the other.

Synthetic Realness / Survivable Wrongness. Synthetic Realness explains why a representation feels credible. Survivable Wrongness explains why misalignment can persist operationally.

A Compact Diagnostic

A representation-heavy system is likely drifting when several of the following are true:

- The system can demonstrate improvement more easily than it can demonstrate contact with its underlying purpose.
- The source conditions behind an output are difficult to reconstruct.
- Feedback is abundant but rarely changes categories, incentives, or decisions.
- Procedural completion is treated as evidence of real-world resolution.
- Coherence increases while uncertainty and contradiction disappear, and the costs of error are delayed, displaced, or borne outside the system's measures.

The final test. The absence of failure is not proof of alignment. Coherence is not contact. A system that cannot be corrected by what it represents has begun to operate on itself.