

Reality Drift: Framework Overview and FAQ

How representation, optimization, and weakened feedback allow functional systems to lose corrective contact with reality.

A. Jacobs | Reality Drift Framework

What Is Reality Drift?

Reality Drift is the condition in which a system remains operational and internally coherent while the representations guiding it progressively lose corrective contact with the reality they are meant to track, describe, or govern.

Modern systems increasingly encounter reality through data, metrics, models, categories, interfaces, and narratives. Drift begins when these representations remain operational but lose the ability to be corrected by what they stand for.

Systems drift when representations become easier to refine than the realities they were created to represent.

What It Is Not

Reality Drift is not:

- A claim that reality is subjective or unknowable.
- A general feeling that things are fake.
- A critique of technology itself.
- A synonym for bias, error, or deception.
- A single-point failure.

Reality Drift is a structural pattern describing how misalignment accumulates in systems that rely on representations.

The Representation Stack in Motion

Systems do more than describe reality because their representations increasingly determine how institutions and technologies act upon it. A real condition is observed and translated into a representation, which is then evaluated through an institutional or technical standard and authorized as a basis for action. That action changes the world, and the altered conditions become the system's next source of evidence.

Distance can accumulate throughout this process because observation filters what becomes visible, representation compresses what has been observed, evaluation favors particular interpretations, and authority stabilizes those interpretations through action. The system therefore does not simply model an independent reality. It helps produce the conditions it will later measure.

How Drift Accumulates

Filtering. The environment is reduced to what the system can notice, collect, or admit.

Compression. Complex conditions are simplified into portable categories, summaries, and features.

Representation. The compressed account becomes the working object for decisions.

Optimization. Selection pressure rewards what can be improved and demonstrated within that account.

Recursive reuse. Outputs become inputs for later models, documents, decisions, and expectations.

Constraint weakening. Direct reference, dissent, friction, and consequence lose power to force revision.

Together, these processes produce **Survivable Wrongness**, a condition in which a misleading representation remains operationally useful enough to persist. Because the system can continue acting through it, inaccuracy does not force correction.

How the Concepts Fit Together

The framework traces how reality becomes represented, how those representations change through optimization and reuse, and what happens when corrective contact weakens. Each concept identifies a different part of that process.

Representation Stack (structure). Where does reality become representation, authority, and action?

Drift Principle (dynamic). Why can divergence compound faster than correction?

Semantic Fidelity (preservation). What meaning survives each translation?

Recursive Compression (transformation). How do prior representations become inputs to later cycles of interpretation and action?

Optimization Trap (selection). What happens when a proxy becomes the practical goal?

Constraint Collapse (correction). What permits wrongness to persist without forcing revision?

Synthetic Realness (experience). Why can optimized representations feel more credible than reality?

Cognitive Drift (cognition). How does repeated mediation change perception and judgment?

Filter Fatigue (attention). What happens when people must continuously decide what is real or relevant?

Co-Cognition (interaction). How do human and machine processes jointly produce thought?

Temporal Drift (time). What happens when representational timelines become misaligned with real-world processes?

The Drifted Self (identity). How does continuous adaptation to mediated feedback reshape personal identity?

The Age of Drift (historical condition). What happens when these dynamics spread across institutions, technology, culture, and cognition?

A Practical Diagnostic

Use the framework by tracing the relationship between a referent, its representation, and the mechanisms that can still correct it.

Reference. What condition, outcome, meaning, or experience is the system meant to remain answerable to?

Translation. How is that condition filtered, measured, categorized, or narrated? What is removed?

Selection. Which representation receives rewards, resources, visibility, or authority?

Correction. What feedback can force revision? How delayed, filtered, or costly is it?

Recursion. Are outputs being reused as later inputs, evidence, expectations, or training material?

Consequence. Who or what encounters the underlying reality when the representation is wrong?

A system is not drifting merely because a representation is imperfect. The stronger signal is that error can persist, circulate, and shape action without triggering renewed contact with the referent.

Where It Appears

Institutions. Procedures, reports, and compliance measures remain complete while the conditions they were designed to improve deteriorate. Completion substitutes for resolution.

AI systems. Fluent outputs and benchmark gains mask loss of intent, provenance, or situational meaning. Similarity and coherence substitute for Semantic Fidelity.

Media and knowledge. Information is selected for circulation, legibility, and reuse. Repetition becomes evidence, while origin and context become difficult to reconstruct.

Individual cognition. Perception and judgment adapt to mediated feedback. People increasingly manage representations of experience while direct experience becomes less able to correct them.

Across domains, the key question remains: What can still make the system revise its representation?

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Reality Drift mainly about AI?

No. AI makes the pattern easier to see because it accelerates representation, optimization, and recursive reuse. The same structure appears in organizations, media, science, markets, and personal cognition.

Is this a claim that reality is subjective?

No. The framework depends on a distinction between a representation and the conditions it represents. Access may be partial, but correction still requires something outside the representation.

How is drift different from error or bias?

Error can be local. Bias can be directional. Drift is a system dynamic in which divergence persists and compounds while operation remains stable.

How is it different from Goodhart's law?

Goodhart's law explains what happens when a measure becomes a target. Reality Drift includes that mechanism but follows the wider chain through compression, authority, recursive reuse, weakened feedback, and behavioral adaptation.

How is it different from hyperreality or the dead internet?

Those ideas describe particular cultural conditions. Reality Drift is a cross-domain account of how representations lose correction and begin reorganizing the world around themselves.

Does drift require deception or bad intent?

No. It often emerges from competent people making locally reasonable decisions inside systems that reward legibility, speed, consistency, and scale.

Can drift be eliminated?

No representational system can eliminate distance. It can preserve stronger correction through direct reference, plural evidence, short feedback loops, provenance, friction, and consequences that reach decision-makers.

What is the framework for?

It provides language for locating misalignment before collapse. It helps distinguish a system that is merely imperfect from one that has become increasingly unable to learn from what it affects.

Use and Limits

Reality Drift can be used to analyze systems in which measurement, abstraction, optimization, and mediated feedback separate decision-making from direct conditions. It is especially useful when conventional indicators suggest success but lived outcomes, meaning, trust, or corrective capacity are deteriorating.

The framework does not establish that every disagreement is drift. It does not replace domain expertise, empirical inquiry, or causal analysis. Instead, it asks whether the representations guiding a system remain answerable to the realities they organize.

Concise Definition

Reality Drift is the condition in which a system remains operational and internally coherent while the representations guiding it progressively lose corrective contact with the reality they are meant to track, describe, or govern.

Origin

The Reality Drift framework was developed by A. Jacobs as part of an ongoing body of work on representation, abstraction, optimization, and cognition. The project began in 2023 and continues to evolve through concept papers, visual models, case studies, and applied analysis.