Cybernetic Fault Domains: When Commitment Outruns Verification

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February 2026

Abstract

Many failures in cybernetic systems share a common ordering defect: irreversible commitments can occur before verification-and-response could complete. This paper formalizes **cybernetic fault domains** as boundary-relative temporal regimes defined by a chosen commitment boundary (C_k), correction horizon (H), commitment lead (Δt), and boundary load (σ). A system admits the mechanism when a race window exists (Δt > 0) and becomes *loaded* when unverified crossings of C_k accumulate beyond a calibrated threshold (σ > σ_threshold). We provide an operational measurement protocol and ten parameter instantiations mapping the same quantities onto prior domain studies (organizations, language models, security, platforms, representational transforms, optimization pathologies, and synthetic coherence). Finally, we describe an architectural containment pattern—**governors** that separate proposal from commitment and enforce temporal ordering at C_k—and illustrate it with an evidence-gated reasoning substrate (BLI). The contribution is a minimal, falsifiable failure condition plus a measurement-and-containment pattern that generalizes across heterogeneous cybernetic systems.

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1. Introduction

Across layered cybernetic systems, failure often looks domain-specific: institutional drift, model hallucination, security bypass, moderation capture, reward collapse. Across a corpus of prior studies (2023–2025), the same structural condition recurs: **commitment can become irreversible before verification could possibly complete**. This paper isolates and names that condition.

We define **cybernetic fault domains** as *boundary-relative temporal regimes* where fast-layer commitments outrun slow-layer verification. The core primitives are:

- **Commitment boundary (C_k):** an externally observable transition that becomes operationally irreversible within a correction horizon (H).
- **Commitment lead (Δt):** the nonnegative time by which commitment at C_k can precede the earliest verified corrective action.
- **Boundary load (σ):** the accumulated count of *unverified* crossings of C_k over a window.

A system admits the mechanism when Δt > 0 (a race window exists). It becomes *actively loaded* when σ exceeds a calibrated threshold. This separates mere latency from an ordering defect: backlog alone is not the claim; **unverified crossings of an irreversibility boundary** are.

Contributions:

1. A boundary-relative definition of cybernetic fault domains in terms of Δt, C_k, H, and σ.
2. A minimal measurement protocol for instrumented and partially instrumented systems.
3. Ten instantiations mapping these parameters onto heterogeneous domains.
4. An architectural containment pattern—**governors**—illustrated via an evidence-gated reasoning substrate (BLI).

We do **not** claim that Δt explains all failures, nor that temporal decoupling is always undesirable. The framework applies to cybernetic systems with separable fast/slow loops, irreversible commitment boundaries, and delayed observability.

2. Definitions

2.1 Commitment Boundary (C_k)

A **commitment boundary** is a domain-chosen threshold at which a state transition becomes irreversible within a correction horizon H. We use four canonical levels:

- **C0 (ephemeral):** internal scratch/proposals; reversible by construction
- **C1 (communicative):** externally visible asserted claims / answer closure
- **C2 (actuated):** tool calls / state changes with side effects
- **C3 (institutional):** public commitments, policy, resource allocations

All Δt claims are evaluated relative to C_k.

2.2 Correction Horizon (H)

A commitment is **irreversible** if restoring pre-commit state is infeasible within H (time, cost, legal, or physical constraints). Irreversibility is time-bounded and substrate-relative.

2.3 Commitment Lead (Δt)

$$\Delta t \equiv \max\{0,\ T_{\text{commit}} - (W + A)\}$$

Where:

- T_{commit} = time at which output becomes irreversible at C_k
- W = observation window (time for evidence to arrive)
- A = action latency (time to respond after verification)

When Δt > 0, commitment can occur before verification-and-response could complete.

2.4 Boundary Load (σ)

$$\sigma_N = \sum_{i=1}^{N} x_i \quad \text{where } x_i = 1 \text{ if event } i \text{ crosses } C_k \text{ unverified}$$

σ is an integer counter of unverified boundary crossings, not queue length.

2.5 Loaded-Domain Condition

$$(\Delta t > 0) \wedge (\sigma > \sigma_{\text{threshold}})$$

- **Entry**: Δt > 0 (race window exists)
- **Loaded:** σ exceeds threshold (unverified crossings accumulating)
- **Failure onset**: loaded-domain condition persists AND domain-specific harm becomes irrecoverable

3. Measurement Protocol

1. Choose commitment boundary C_k appropriate to domain
2. Measure T_commit as timestamp of first irreversible transition across C_k
3. Measure W + A as earliest time verification-and-response could complete
4. Compute Δt = max{0, T_commit - (W + A)}
5. Count σ as unverified crossings per observation window

For partially instrumented systems, use proxy bounds. For uninstrumented systems, treat as qualitative ordering evidence only.

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4. Instantiation Catalog

Each row fixes C_k, defines T_{commit}, verification window, and σ measurement.

Domain	C_k	T_{commit}	**Verification** ($W+A$)	σ **counter**	**Failure label**
Organizations [2,9]	C3	Policy/resource allocation	Analysis + feedback + implementation	Decisions enacted without verification	Institutional drift
LLM hallucinations [7,8,10]	C1	Answer closure (NOT token generation)	Retrieval + verification + revision	Claims emitted without evidence	Hallucination
BLI governed substrate [12]	C1/C2	Claim acceptance into persistent state	Evidence gate + commit step	Blocked unverified commit attempts	(Prevented by construction)
Censorship circumvention [13]	C2	Connection beyond inspection boundary	DPI window + enforcement latency	Flows crossing uninspected	Bypass
Security systems [14]	C2/C3	Objective completion (exfil/escalation)	MTTD + MTTR	Actions completed before detection	Breach
Platform dynamics [4]	C3	Algorithmic amplification	Moderation + enforcement latency	Posts amplified before review	Capture
Representational coherence [11]	C3	Transformed representation adoption	Preservation verification	Artifacts accepted with unmet invariants	Commitment shear
Scalar reward collapse [3]	C3	Optimization step hardened	Evaluation cycle + rollback	Steps adopted before multi-objective check	Goodhart collapse
Synthetic coherence [6]	C3	Synthetic outputs driving downstream	Reality-check cadence	Synthetic commitments before reality constraint	Divergence
Hierarchical coherence [1,5]	C3	Cross-layer commitment	Observer delay + control update	Actions beyond verified state estimate	Loss of control

5. Governor Pattern

A **governor** separates proposal from commitment and enforces temporal ordering at C_k.

Key properties:

- Proposals can be generated freely (fast layer operates at full speed)
- No proposal crosses C_k until paired with verification artifacts
- Actuated outputs (tool calls) route through the same gate

Governor vs process: A governor is enforcement at the *only path* from proposal ⟶ commitment. Process is advisory and bypassable. Governors are architectural, not procedural.

Non-circularity test: The mechanism is testable: hold verifier capacity fixed and shift only the commitment boundary (ordering-only); if downstream failure signatures do not change, Δt is not causal for that system.

5.1 BLI as Architectural Exemplar

BLI implements an evidence-gated commitment boundary:

1. Fast layer generates proposals (claims, hypotheses, candidate actions)
2. Proposals do not cross C_k until paired with verification artifacts (citations, provenance, receipts)
3. Tool calls route through the same gate

This eliminates the race window **by construction**: commitment is delayed until verification completes. BLI is included as an architectural exemplar; quantitative evaluation is future work.

6. Falsifiability

Claim 1: If a system admits C_k that is irreversible within H, then Δt and σ can be defined relative to that boundary.
Falsification: Show such a boundary where T_commit, W+A, and crossing counts cannot be operationalized.

Claim 2: Sustained $\Delta t > 0$ with increasing σ predicts loss-of-control signatures, absent hidden coupling mechanisms.
Falsification: Produce a system with persistent $\Delta t > 0$ and sustained σ > threshold that remains coherent indefinitely without such couplers.

Claim 3: Governors enforcing proposal/commit separation prevent unverified commitments from propagating.
Falsification: Demonstrate a governor where commitments still cross C_k without verification artifacts.

7. Related Work

This paper synthesizes timing/verification asymmetries across multiple traditions. Ashby's requisite variety motivates the core constraint: control fails when variety propagates faster than attenuation; we make the deficit explicit at a commitment boundary. Laprie's fault containment motivates treating boundaries as containment regions. Leveson's STAMP emphasizes control-structure failures under delayed feedback; we formalize the delay as Δt relative to irreversibility. The contribution is not that timing matters, but that a minimal (Δt, σ) condition plus a commitment-boundary doctrine unifies heterogeneous failures and yields a portable containment pattern.

8. Conclusion

We defined **cybernetic fault domains** as boundary-relative temporal regimes where irreversible commitments can outrun verification, characterized by $\Delta t > 0$ and $\sigma >$ threshold. We provided a measurement protocol and mapped parameters across ten prior domain studies. We described a containment pattern—governors enforcing proposal/commit separation—and illustrated it via BLI. The open work is empirical: measuring Δt and σ in additional domains with quantitative outcomes.

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Acknowledgments: Manuscript development assisted by Claude (Anthropic) and ChatGPT (OpenAI).