

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. This is part four of How to Think About the Future, where we will imagine what it's like to live in different versions of the future, at least these scenarios of the future. In parts one through three, we laid out foundational ideas, coupled systems, shortfall risks, and how to visualize possible futures as a landscape of ridges and valleys.

[00:00:25] I proposed four grids, for economic growth or contraction, for power, for geopolitics, and for the Earth system. Today, we'll build four whole worlds out of those pieces. Let's get into it

[00:00:54] Okay, mathematically, four grids with four quadrants each would give us two hundred and fifty-six possible combinations. Of course, I'm not going to build two hundred and fifty-six worlds in this video, or ever. Instead, I will highlight four here that are representative. But before we get to that, some context.

[00:01:15] First of all, these four futures are not equally likely. The economy, in my opinion, is not a coin flip between growth and contraction going forward, especially as the years and decades go on. Energy limits, resource depletion, too much debt, and ecological overshoot will all pull toward the contraction side, which is one of the core tenets of this platform.

[00:01:39] The Great Simplification is an economic simplification. We can still get regional growth or growth in some sectors or growth for a while, or growth in things that are not physical, but steady material physical growth for the whole world year after year runs into walls that most big institutions and governments are not remotely anticipating, nor are the markets pricing in.

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[00:02:08] So these four worlds lean towards contraction, not because I want contraction, but because the physics and the ecology point that way. You will notice that I do not build a green growth world, the one where we keep growing and heal the biosphere at the same time. Those two pull against each other too hard for that combination to hold at a global scale.

[00:02:31] And on the Earth system, we do not start from neutral. We have already loaded the atmosphere, and the oceans and eroded Earth's carrying capacity, and a strained but workable biosphere is the best realistic case here, and a badly degraded one is now also on the table. Second, these grids are not independent.

[00:02:57] They interact with and pull on each other. For example, when resources get tight and the world outside looks hostile, governments tend to consolidate and then power concentrates, and people go along with this because they're afraid, and this has been the historical default. You can keep power broadly shared during hard times, but it takes unusual leadership and a lot of social trust. And that's the path that we hope for.

[00:03:27] It just isn't the path of least resistance. Steady growth needs at least somewhat cooperative geopolitics because global just-in-time supply chains need a functioning, peaceful, for the most part, international order. And growth under what I referred to as the geopolitical danger zone, in part two is very hard to sustain, as the Iran situation is showing us in real-time slow motion.

[00:03:55] And severe Earth system stress slowly eats away at our ability to govern human systems because constant crisis response burns through budgets, institutions, patients, and maybe most of all, any hopeful collective visions of the future. So these worlds have their own internal pull. Some combinations are stable, some are not, and will slide into something else, and some will take extraordinary effort to hold in place.

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[00:04:29] One last thing before we dive into scenarios. I'm building four, these particular four to stretch our thinking, yours and mine, and eventually others. I'm not handing you the four futures and asking you to choose one. I would actually invite you all to build your own composites, with these grids or create grids of your own.

[00:04:57] It's the logic and the thought process that I'm after here. The point is to think about what's possible and where the risks are and where the interventions really are before we lurch into knee-jerk fixes Or worse, do nothing. Okay, so here are my four. World one I'm calling the long repair. This is the managed contraction, and from where I sit today, this is actually the aspirational path.

[00:05:26] Hard, but possible and worth striving towards. The composite looks like this: contraction and ecological stewardship on the economy, what I've called The Great Simplification, broadly shared power and broadly shared, material gains, cooperative geopolitics with a good deal of regional self-sufficiency and a strained but workable biosphere.

[00:05:52] and technology aimed at making people more capable, like repair culture and regenerative tech and open designs and tools that make us more competent instead of more dependent. So why do these pieces pull together? Because cooperative geopolitics takes the outside pressure off, the pressure that usually shoves governance towards authoritarian, sort of, behaviors.

[00:06:20] And when you're not staring at a hostile outside world, holding on to democracy, and open societies during contraction gets easier. And regional self-sufficiency means a Hormuz-style type of shock doesn't ripple everywhere because regions have learned the lesson, not autarky, but they've shortened supply chains for what they depend on.

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[00:06:48] And sharing power and gains builds and maintains the social contract and trust So what would daily life feel like in the long repair? Material and energy use shrink. Fewer goods, fewer exotic choices, no G.I. Joe with the kung fu grip plastic toys, less travel, diets get more local and more seasonal. But social life probably gets richer, for many because community starts to matter in practical ways again.

[00:07:23] We depend on our neighbors for things, and in turn support them. Local decisions matter more because they're made closer to where they're implemented. Skills get regrounded in regional needs, and I suspect having competence becomes a higher status signal than credentials or degrees or fame. Work gets more physical again, more maintenance, more repair instead of things that are flex or are shiny.

[00:07:57] There's more growing food, more caring for people, and on top of that, and importantly, more cultural respect for that kind of work. Less financial engineering, less marketing, fewer of what David Graeber called bullshit jobs. for a lot of people, this actually would bring more meaning to their lives, not less, even as they consume less stuff.

[00:08:22] And this exists in tiny forms all over the place already. Transition towns and regional food networks, community land trusts, energy co-ops, maker spaces, repair cafes. And the open question is whether these tiny islands of coherence as the superorganism makes new highs can still grow and start to connect or will remain isolated islands.

[00:08:51] So this is not a utopia. People grieve the futures that contraction takes off the table. There is still conflict and hardship and loss. But like my Lebanese friend communicated, in last month's frankly, there is community and deep bonding, and there's a shared sense that the project is worth being a part of, that the direction is chosen and fair, and that a smaller future is far from an empty one.

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[00:09:25] But this world is the hardest one to reach and the easiest to lose because it runs entirely by keeping legitimacy and trust while material throughput is falling for most people. The moment a big chunk of people decide the pain is not being shared fairly, that the elites are cheating, that the rules bend for some and not for others, trust dissipates, and the glue that holds the long repair together, also dissipates.

[00:09:57] Okay, world number two, I'm calling Mordor Persists. I originally called it More Mordor, but that sounded strange. Mordor Persist is growth that keeps going on paper, while it materially and ecologically digs us deeper into biophysical overshoot. We're spending down the principal instead of living off the interest, and for a lot of people, this is our current world, just more of it.

[00:10:30] Comfortable for some, real hardship for many, and the foundation of all of it eroding underneath. So the grid composite, Mordor on the economy, which is growth at the expense of the biosphere, a captured democracy, which is democratic on the surface, but the gains flow to a tiny sliver of people, the geopolitical danger zone, countries that are rivals but still wired into each other economically, and a quiet unraveling of the Earth's system, and technology tuned for consumption, and engagement, and it's slick and convenient on the surface, but it's dependency creating underneath.

[00:11:12] So why do these pull towards each other? Because liquidating the natural world for profit naturally concentrates the gains since the money comes from dumping the costs onto people and ecosystems and the future, all of which that cannot push back. And that concentration in turn tightens its grip on a hollowed-out democracy.

[00:11:34] The growth model needs global supply chains, so everyone needs everyone else's resources while nobody trusts anybody, and the biosphere comes apart. Soils, pollinators, fisheries recede, but slowly enough that GDP and the

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stock market don't really notice. The experience of daily life in Mordor Persist depends enormously on where you sit.

[00:11:58] If you're in the top ten or twenty percent, life feels busy and stimulating and comfortable, yet somewhat anxious. Amazing technology, good healthcare, plenty of food, but you're working harder for what feels like less. The news is always bad, and the information feels managed, creating the sense that something's off.

[00:12:24] If you're in the bottom half to bottom 70%, life is precarious. You increasingly know and feel viscerally that the system doesn't work for you. However, the alternatives look worse or impossible. And across both groups, there is this strange sense of unreality. The official numbers advertise that everything is fine, and the lived experience says otherwise.

[00:12:50] People vote and nothing changes. And so that gap between the story and the reality breeds cynicism and conspiracy thinking and checking out apathy. So what I just described is Mordor from within wealthy nations, the global West and North. There's another experience of Mordor, and it's the one most of humanity, already knows.

[00:13:18] If you're in the global South, if you're in the places where cobalt is mined, where clothes are sewn, where plastic is shipped to be recycled, where forests are cleared for soybeans and pasture, Mordor is not a future scenario. It's the last thirty years or fifty years The growth in Minneapolis feels very different in the Congo or Bangladesh or the Amazon.

[00:13:45] And the material comfort at the center of this system has always depended on physical precarity at the edges. So what breaks this Mordor world? Two primary things. First, the brittle interdependence that's developed. One

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choke point fails, and it cascades worldwide. Again, we're watching this in slow motion with hormones.

[00:14:08] We're gonna know by the end of summer how big a deal this is. The growth model has continually eroded resilience, so there are increasingly fewer and eventually no buffers because it's been optimized for efficiency so hard that there's almost no slack in the system left. Second, the slow ecological unraveling eventually pulls the rug out from undergrowth itself.

[00:14:36] Soil can only be mined so far. Fisheries can only be stripped so long, and, our ecological base erodes until growth just isn't physically possible anymore. as many of you have commented over the years in the YouTube channel, the home team Earth bats last. This is close to the default for much of the world right now, and most people feel the trajectory is unsustainable and feel powerless to change it from inside, which in my opinion, is why these frameworks and conversations about them are so important right now.

[00:15:18] And the real danger and risk and tragedy of Mordor persist is not that it continues forever. It's that it burns through the ecological foundations and institutions and resources that we would need to create any graceful transition. And then when it finally can't hold itself up, it falls apart fast and ugly.

[00:15:43] And if we step out of Mordor with some foresight, we could move towards the long repair. And if we wait until it breaks There will be fewer options. Okay, world three composite is fortress world. This is what happens when contraction does arrive and the people in power decide to hoard, instead of share.

[00:16:07] The composite is contraction on the economy, forced feudalism on power with those at the top managing the decline mostly for themselves, but handing out just enough to keep people from revolting. a cold war in geopolitics,

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hostile self-sufficient blocs, and hothouse triage on the Earth system. And technology that's powerful, but it's controlling for most people, and surveillance and rationing, are all in the hands of the state.

[00:16:36] I will have a dedicated Frankly on this in the near future, but if you're paying attention, we can see this pattern unfold in real time in the AI robotics policy and business proposals in the news. The logic here is the oldest pattern in politics. Contraction creates fear, and fear creates demand for a strong hand, and the strong hand then consolidates power.

[00:16:59] And hostile geopolitics then reinforces it because outside threats, real or invented, then justify that surveillance, the military spending and all the restrictions. Severe climate stress reinforces all of it because constant emergencies always seem to call for someone in charge to take control and act fast.

[00:17:23] If you've seen enough sci-fi movies, daily life here is not hard to envision. Think Hunger Games, controlled, rationed, watched, but not necessarily chaotic. There is some sort of a grim order. You know what you've been allotted. You know the rules. You know what happens if you break them. there are hard borders, and movement is quite limited for people.

[00:17:53] Some regions, some ecosystems, and some people get written off to protect others. So living in a managed zone near critical infrastructure is gonna be a much different experience than living in a peripheral zone that's been triaged. The feeling for most people in fortress world is resignation and kind of a ongoing low-grade fear.

[00:18:21] People adapt because humans are astonishingly good at normalizing pretty much anything. But the constant surveillance and knowing the consequences of dissent creates hypervigilance that hardens over time into

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emotional flatness. life is survivable, but it is certainly not flourishing. So what makes fortress world fragile?

[00:18:49] control like this is expensive, and running all that surveillance and enforcement while, energy and complexity is declining is in the end an energy and complexity problem. Just ask the Romans, or Joseph Tainter, since the Romans aren't around. the system then has to keep choosing between spending to control people and spending to provide for them.

[00:19:18] And as resources shrink, that choice will get harder. Meanwhile, the hostility between blocks in the world inhibits any real global cooperation on the shared ecological problems that are contributing to, contraction in the first place. So a fortress can manage its own decline for a while, but will eventually run short on trust and legitimacy from its citizens.

[00:19:48] And once those break, they don't come back within the life of the regime that broke them. Fourth world, the unraveling. This is the dark one. though I realize while saying this all out loud that this entire video might feel dark. This is where large-scale human coordination has failed across most of the board.

[00:20:13] The composite, Mad Max on the economy, contraction with no ecological stewardship, forced feudalism in the power quadrant, local strongmen, no real governance larger than, the local level. New Cold War and geopolitics, fracturing and active fights, hopefully with no nuclear exchange over resources, cascading breakdown of Earth's system, and technology winds down.

[00:20:42] the complex stuff that needs just-in-time global supply chains stops working, and the simpler, more robust stuff survives, and manual labor picks up where machines drop out. This is the state things slide towards when the other scenarios I've described lose their footing. The long repair loses people's trust,

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Mordor hits an ecological wall, and Fortress world cannot afford its own, tight control of things.

[00:21:15] So each of those failures, if it's bad enough, pushes towards this Our days organize around immediate needs. Where's the water this week? Whose field is still producing? Who has fuel and what do they want for it? information moves at the speed of human conversation. The institutions that ran our parents' lives, federal agencies, national supply chains, global media, start to feel like storybook fables, like ancient history.

[00:21:51] The threat of violence is always in the background, and health slips without pharmaceutical supply chains, and in some countries, including mine, it slips a lot. But there's community here too. We are social primates, and even in terrible conditions, we form bonds, we make rules, we love, we build meaning. we still manage to fall in love and raise kids and tell stories and laugh and see fireflies, and birds.

[00:22:26] And the worst part of this world is not the absence of joy, but the complete absence of physical buffers. Cheap fossil energy gave us endless do-overs, and in this world, they are gone. So every setback can turn catastrophic I include this world because it's where the other ones drift when their core supports give way, and it is what we're trying to prevent with this channel, with this work.

[00:22:53] And understanding what pushes us towards it, lost trust, ecological breakdown, geopolitical fragmentation, t-too much c-coercion, those sort of things, it tells you exactly what's worth protecting in the other three scenarios, which I will get into in part five. Okay, so four composite worlds. Looking at them side by side, what can we notice?

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[00:23:20] The same economic contraction shows up in three of them, Long Repair, Fortress, and The Unraveling. All involve the economy shrinking, but the lived experience could not be more different. The economic headline jives with very little of the actual reality, and the rest of the composite decides whether contraction is dignified, survivable, or catastrophic.

[00:23:44] That's why this mapping matters, even if you disagree with my entire energy and money thesis on The Great Simplification. Power and distribution make the biggest difference in how life actually feels. Long Repair and Fortress world could have similar, energy and material conditions, but who holds the power and how the material surplus is shared makes them completely different places to live.

[00:24:14] And of course, the Earth system, which on this channel is widely understood, but in our culture is not yet. The Earth system constrains everything else, which is just not remotely in our cultural conversation. And the worlds with severe ecological stress have much less room for error in every other dimension.

[00:24:36] You cannot manage your way out of cascading ecological fail-failure. you can only slowly reverse it or adapt to it Okay. Now let me connect these four back to the landscape that we unpacked in part three, because where each world sits in that landscape says something that the headline descriptions don't.

[00:25:01] The key idea from part three was that stable is not the same as good. A system can be rock solid stable and deeply ill at the same time. Mordor is the clearest case here. Think about cancer in a human body. Cancer is incredibly stable in a biological sense. It is self-perpetuating, and by a lot of the body's own measures, blood flow, metabolism, cellular division, a tumor looks vigorous and even productive, but it is eating its host, hijacking the body's resources and spreading.

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[00:25:39] By the time the body's signals say something is wrong, it is often too far along. Mordor persists, works the same way. Our main gauges, financial markets, quarterly earnings, GDP, are basically measuring blood flow to a tumor and calling the patient healthy. By the numbers, Mordor looks healthy, and our civilization watches and approves, but it is liquidating the ecological and social ground that it stands on.

[00:26:11] Mordor scenario is stable the way cancer is stable. It keeps going until it kills the host. Now look at the long repair through the same lens. On the landscape, it's the valley that is both hardest to reach and healthiest to live in. It's uphill from where we are today. It will take sustained effort, coordination, trust, and leadership all held together over time, plus some emergence.

[00:26:41] And the paradoxical thing from our vantage point as a culture wired for growth is that the long repair looks like failure, even though it's the future most worth striving towards. By every yardstick we currently use for progress, consumption and GDP and physical wealth, the long repair reads as decline.

[00:27:06] And this reality creates a deep cultural dread. There's a lot of people, even people who fully understand the more than human predicament, feel a gut level resistance to the long repair because its pattern matches to collapse. And our nervous systems can't easily tell the difference between the tumor is shrinking because the patient is dying and the tumor is shrinking because the patient is healing.

[00:27:36] So the superorganism, our collective economic and cultural system, resists the long repair the way a body resists a treatment that makes you feel worse before you feel better. And that resistance is a big reason the long repair is going to be so hard to reach, not because it's not possible. And that confusion or conflation, not being able to tell healing from dying at the level of a whole culture,

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I think may be one of the deepest challenges in the entire more than human predicament

[00:28:15] I've laid out these four separate worlds, and if you or your community runs this exercise, your future worlds might look quite different depending on the pieces you use. But the real future we arrive to will probably be some patchwork of all of them. Some regions will reach something like the long repair, others will live in fortress conditions, others in various stages of unraveling.

[00:28:40] Some corners will run the Mordor playbook a while longer until the ecological floor gives out. The reason for this series is that we're not yet settled inside any one of these worlds. We are in a transition zone wobbling between possibilities. Some weeks the news looks and feels like Mordor is deepening.

[00:29:03] In other weeks, it looks like the first moves of the for-fortress world. In some communities, many communities, reading my inbox are already building something like the long repair. The system has not locked in. The ridges are steep, but they may not yet be too steep to climb and cross. But that window will not stay open forever.

[00:29:31] And every year of soil degradation and every weakening tweak of global governance, every additional layer of surveillance and, each incremental drop in social trust, those things all steepen the ridges around the valleys that we're striving towards. And the time when you can still move between these futures is now.

[00:29:58] Where you live, what community you're in, what governance you're under, what ecological conditions surround you, these are going to matter more than any global headline about our future. Your zip code may shape your future more than your country, and your community may shape it more than your zip code even.

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[00:30:18] So how do we plan? remember the language from part three of this series. Every choice we make either switchbacks up, toward a stable livable valley or lets one of those passages erode away. Social trust, working governance, an intact biosphere, technology in people's hands instead of over them, those are the switchbacks, some of them, leading toward the long repair.

[00:30:47] And every month that we neglect them, the ridges get a little bit steeper Before closing, this long video, I want to reinforce a core point. None of us is steering this game board. The biggest moves are made by nation-states and superorganism-scale forces that cannot power down without losing the seats of their own current power.

[00:31:15] You and I were never at that table. our households, communities, or the few acres of land that we actually touch are not on that game board. But down at these smaller boundaries, the choosing, the agency is still completely real. We can still build trust. We can still keep a patch of the biosphere intact and supported and thriving.

[00:31:39] We can still put tools in people's hands. None of that's gonna turn the whole board, and I do not pretend that it will. But it may be the one place left where the wheel is still connected to something. And when the transition zone finally tips, those regions, those communities, those individuals that did the work ahead of time, who dug the switchbacks up and through today's ridges, will be the ones that still have optionality to climb towards better valleys.

[00:32:13] That is the planning challenge. We no longer get to steer the whole thing, if we ever could. We'll keep drawing the map anyway and keeping it honest and trying to avert purity and apathy as much as possible, so that when a path reveals itself, the people traversing it know which way is up. That's gonna be part five next week, hopefully.

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[00:32:37] Thank you for paying attention. See you then.