

The Future of Marriage

BY JOHN SWEENEY ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2017

The Future of Marriage is a conceptualization of American marriage in the year 2036 from a U.S. West-coast perspective. The project was developed over the course of five months in 2016 by four graduate students in the [MBA Design Strategy](#) program at the [California College of the Arts](#), in a course run by [Dr. Jake Dunagan](#). Using acquired concepts and methods from Strategic Foresight to build future scenarios, *The Future of Marriage* coalesces these scenarios into a film that explores marriage in the year 2036.

Questions about the future of marriage: How will we define marriage in the future? What are the important characteristics that influence marriage? How will marriage affect child-rearing, housing, employment, and relationships? Is the institution of marriage in the future based more on utilitarian needs or on abiding love?



The Future of Marriage explores the social, economic, political, technological and personal influences of contemporary marriage, projected into a cohesive future scenario that takes place in San Francisco in 2036.

Trends in Contemporary Marriage - Today

The age at which both sexes in the United States marry is rising, which is attributed to a variety of factors including career and education goals, financial status and shifting attitudes towards premarital sex, unmarried cohabitation, and unwed parenthood.

The growing acceptance of queer and transgender individuals and culture, as well as the legalization of gay marriage, have also been important factors in pushing the boundaries of the definition of marriage.

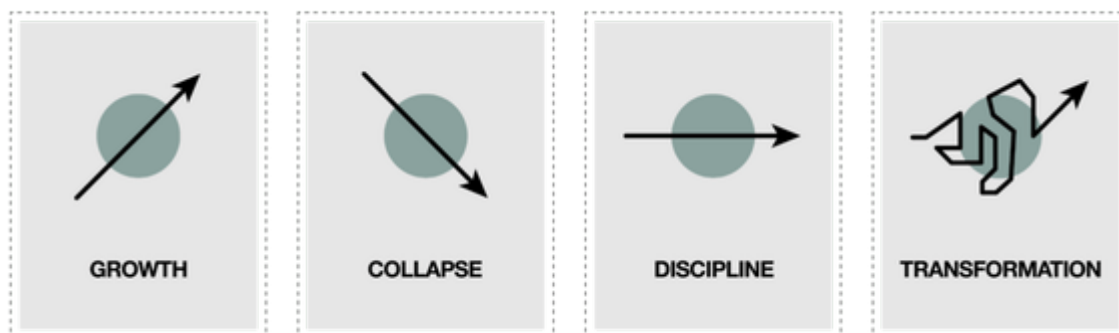
Overall trends also show less reliance on traditional marriage ideals as the social foundation for child rearing and a rise in co-parenting, children raised by same-sex couples, single fathers with primary custody, cohabiting multi-family homes, and communal child rearing

Foresight Methodologies

The goal of *The Future of Marriage* project was to design, articulate, and create a futures experience on marriage within the social context of the United States in the year 2036. The team used four major Foresight methods – [Alternative Futures](#), [Scenario Planning](#), [Three Horizons](#) and [Causal Layered Analysis \(CLA\)](#) to develop 16 possible scenarios. The team then incorporated the multiple futures into one cohesive future scenario, which was then converted into a screenplay.

Alternative Futures

The [Alternative Futures method](#) explores a phenomenon under the assumption that our future is not predetermined. It asks the practitioner to imagine and engineer a scenario surrounding a phenomenon, in this case marriage, if society followed a path of 1) growth, 2) collapse, 3) discipline 4) transformation. The practitioner uses the trends and emerging issues of the present day to help shine a light on what might happen in the four aforementioned scenarios.



Each scenario should have the following ingrained:

1. Systemic set of assumptions about the drivers shaping the world
2. Leading ideas that shape the world and the institutions of marriage
3. Powerful forces that interact beyond the institution of marriage
4. Institutions and governance parameters that influence the world

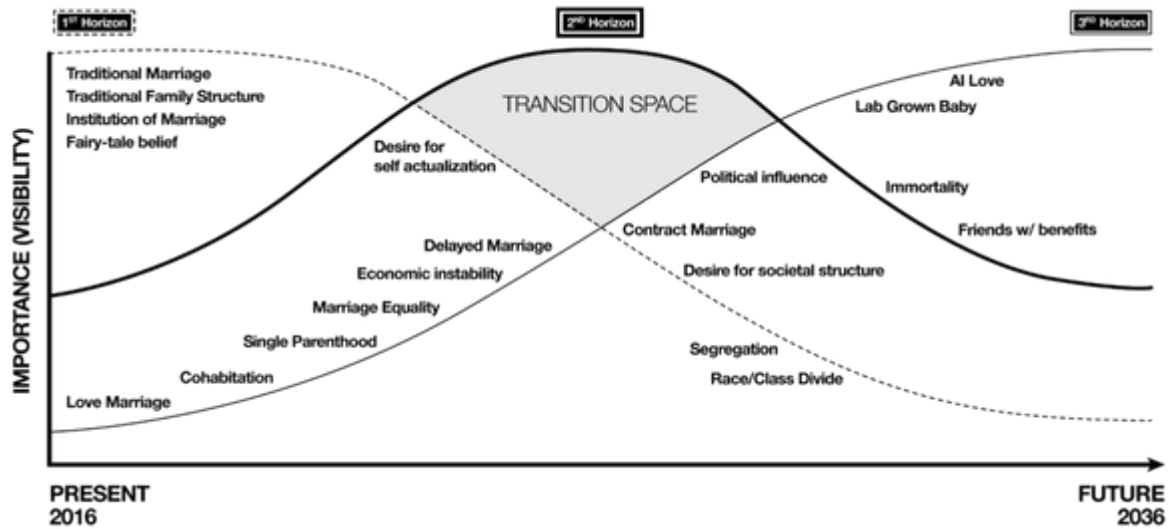
Using the Alternative Futures method, the team developed four scenarios imagined following paths of growth, collapse, discipline and transformation.

Below are summaries of the Alternative Futures marriage scenarios:

- Growth – The union of marriage itself has become a product or commodity, independent of fidelity or sexual relationships.
- Collapse – The construct of relationships becomes obsolete as people search for sexual stimulation and intimacy through other means, such as technology.
- Discipline – A decline in birthrates has led to government intervention and ultimately controlled mating.
- Transformation – Multiple types of marriage emerge to meet different needs through different concurrent partners.

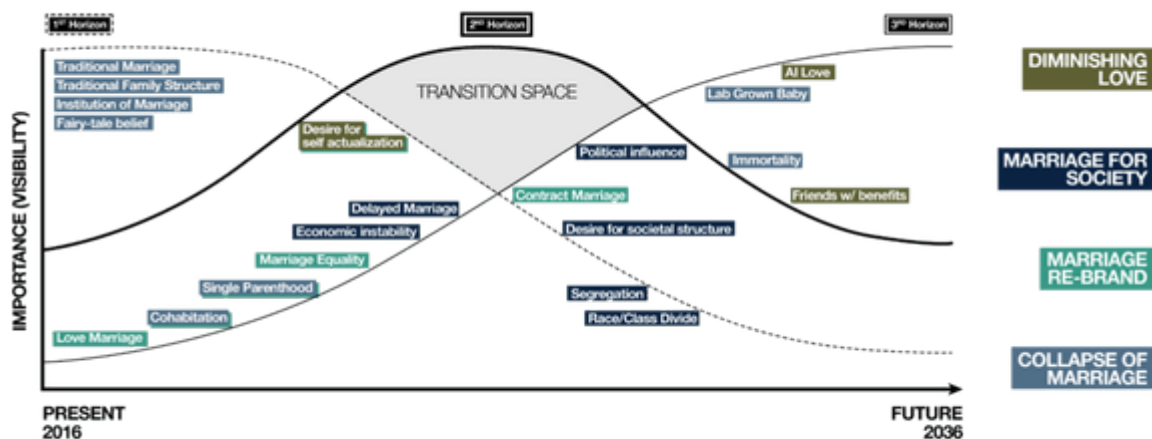
Three Horizons

The intent of the [Three Horizons framework](#) is to offer a new way to look at an issue or phenomenon like marriage by observing patterns and transitional and potentially disruptive moments. The idea is that an individual or group has the ability to choose to continue the status quo or to challenge continuity by moving to a new pattern or cycle. It asks what can be “let go of” and where transitions from one cycle to the next are possible. This method allows for visualizations in terms of time range — short, medium and long— helping practitioners make decisions about how to manage change, make future decisions and set goals.



Through the Three Horizons framework, the following four scenarios were developed:

- “Diminishing Love” – Technology has replaced the need for human partners. Instead of finding one person that fulfills all your needs, all you have to do is buy what you need.
- “Marriage for Society” – Declining marriage rates has led to government intervention in order to maintain families and society. All citizens are legally required to marry by age 30.
- “Marriage Rebranded” – Short-term or “beta” marriages offer couples the chance to test the waters before being legally bound. People expect less from marriage.
- “Collapse of Marriage” – Marriage is no longer seen as a necessary social institution, though cohabitation is still common. Children will be increasing made in labs and selected for compatibility and survivability.



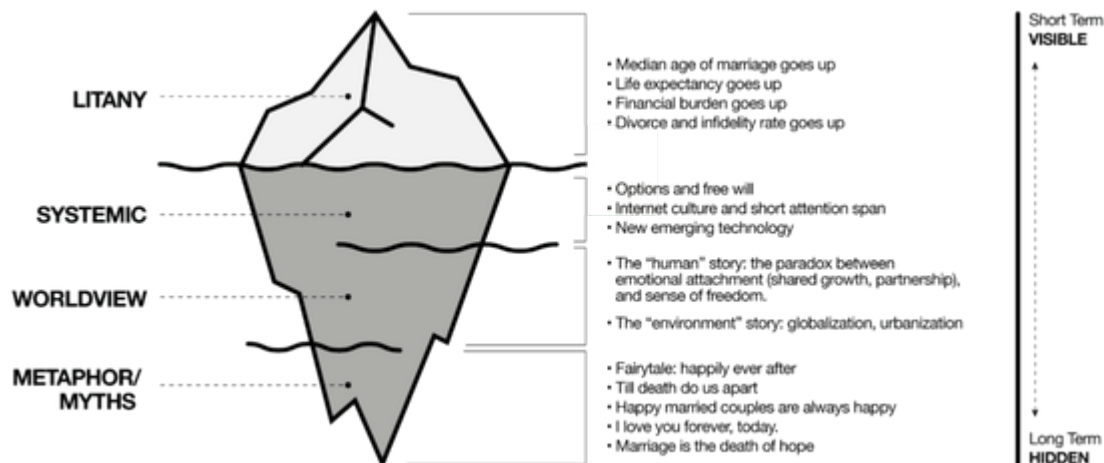
Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Causal Layered Analysis, or CLA, is designed to challenge conventional future and assumptions. This process involves detailing multiple perspectives from the phenomena being studied and analyzing it from four different perspectives. Ultimately, the goal of CLA is to regain influence and agency by exploring reality at four levels and creating a coherent new future. The four levels of CLA analysis are:

1. Litany – This includes qualitative analysis, including what we see and feel.
2. Social System and Structure – This level explores economic, cultural, political, and historical factors.
3. Worldviews – This level is a discourse analysis taking into account values and philosophical frameworks.
4. Myths and Metaphors – This level looks at societal myths, metaphors, archetypes, symbolism, and emotional or gut-level responses.

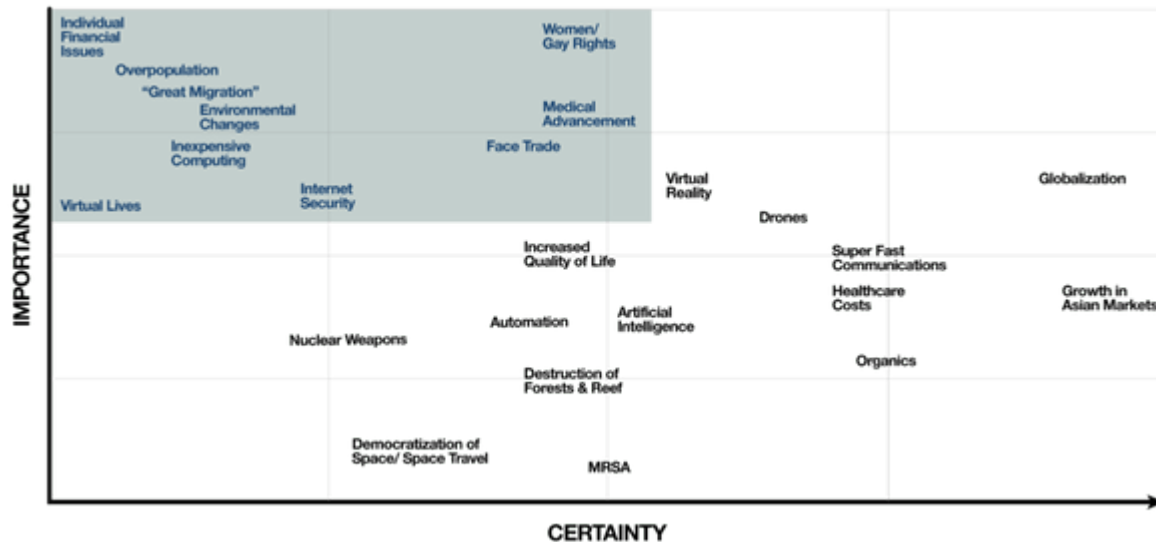
Utilizing CLA analysis, the following explorations into the future marriage were developed:

1. Litany – The average length of marriages increases as life expectancy increases. At the same time the cost of both weddings and divorces has risen.
2. Systemic – Free will and individual options are central to marriage, with increasing choices in partnership, childbearing and childrearing.
3. Worldview – The human need for intimacy is intrinsic, yet traditional marriage seems unsustainable. Individuality is emphasised, sometimes at the peril of community and family.
4. Myths and Metaphors – There is a growing divide between the idea of “happily ever after” and “I love you forever, today.”



Scenario Planning Method

The Scenario Planning Method, also known as the [2×2 Scenario Matrix](#), was developed by Jay Ogilvy and enables the creation of four or more future scenarios. The 2X2 Matrix is one of the most widely used and easily accessible foresight methods. The 2×2 Matrix utilizes two critical uncertainties to create four quadrants, allowing for additional inputs to create depth and complexity for each scenario.



Using the 2×2 Matrix to explore the spectrum of social change and individual debt, the following four scenarios were developed:

1. “Everybody In” – A preference for human interaction and high individual debt leads to a rise in carefully instituted marriages. Divorces are expensive, and increased life expectancy and overpopulation has created housing shortages and a rise in multi-generational homes.
2. “Ghost Town” – A preference for virtual/non-human interaction and high individual debt leads to a rise in virtually driven relationships. With scarce jobs, partners must live where they are employed, leading to many couples living separately.
3. “Robo First Lady” – A preference for virtual/non-human interaction and low individual debt leads to a future where marriage between humans and humanoid robots becomes normalized. Technology allows for babies to be created with DNA, regardless of the parents’ sex.
4. “Nanny State of Mind” – A preference for human interaction and low individual debt leads to a future characterized by technology being utilized to select mates and track unfaithful partners. Communal living becomes more common and infidelity hits an all time high as young adults share everything – including partners.



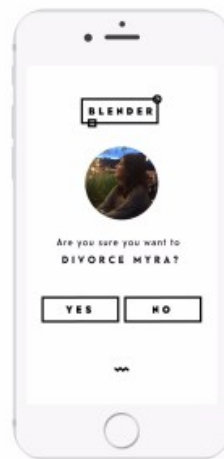
The Final Scenario

Utilizing the four aforementioned foresight methods, the team synthesized the 16 possible scenarios creating one cohesive future scenario that explores the following themes:

- Fluidity of partners/multi-partner relationships
- Communal living arrangements for multi-partner families
- Utilitarian value of marriage or partnership for purpose
- Ease of access to partners
- Ease of access to marriage services
- Ease of access to divorce
- Emotional emptiness or increased impatience with marital difficulties
- Communal parenting

Film Production Techniques

The Future of Marriage was filmed as a fictional documentary or “mockumentary” in order to provide a certain amount of realism. This genre allows the audience to become more emotionally attached to the characters and to suspend reality just enough to believe and see relevance in the future scenario.



The film combines interviews with b-roll footage to provide context and narrative, and uses visual FX to create a sense of future realism rooted in user interactions with screen-based technologies such as smartphones and capacitive touch technology.



The Future of Marriage not only portrays the positives of marital life in 2036, but also the negatives, following a classical narrative curve. The use of high-speed film and long, specially stabilized shots visually represents feelings of angst, longing and melancholy.

Reflection

While no one will be able to totally predict the future of marriage, by utilizing foresight methodologies a range of a possible futures emerged — a future heavily influenced by convenience, technology, and utilitarian purpose. Utilizing these influences, and taking into the account basic human needs of security, intimacy, and procreation, *The Future of Marriage* explores the themes of partnership, living arrangements, commitment, parenting, and love.

Credits

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The Strategic Foresight course was taught by Dr. Jake Dunagan, an experiential futurist, governance designer, and Director of the [Governance Futures Lab](#) at [Institute for the Future](#).