



The Centre for  
Postnormal Policy  
& Futures Studies

# POSTNORMAL TIMES

A TEMPORARY FUTURES INSTITUTE  
MUSEUM VAN HEDENDAAGSE KUNST ANTWERPEN  
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# THE GAME

You have been invited to play an infinite game.

What values do we need to navigate postnormal times?

You may move any card on the board, but you must replace it with the same type of card.

When you finish making your move(s), please input a short narrative (200 characters) on the ipad.

**"A FINITE GAME IS PLAYED  
FOR THE PURPOSE OF  
WINNING, AN INFINITE  
GAME FOR THE PURPOSE OF  
CONTINUING THE PLAY."**

- JAMES P. CARSE

# OUR INSTALLATION

Postnormal Times is a call to arms: an invitation to challenge our assumptions and biases about the contemporary world and possibilities for the future. It demands that we interrogate our sense of what is and is not “normal.” PNT is not merely another ‘post’—such as post-industrial, post-ideology, post-liberal and postmodern—concept for analyzing and deconstructing. Rather, we see it as both a diagnosis and prognosis. In normal times, we have confidence in our facts and values, and we can take our time in making correct and appropriate decisions. In PNT, there is a sense of urgency, and the future feels like a runaway train barreling into the unknown.

At the heart of PNT theory, one finds the 3C's: complexity, chaos, and contradictions.

**Complexity** is found within systems that have many inputs and outputs. It is an assessment of relationships and interconnections. Complex systems have two essential features: they have substantial uncertainties that cannot be managed as ‘risks’; and they have a multiplicity of legitimate perspectives. When a complex system consists of networks, in which independent parts are connected and interact with each other, it can generate positive feedback: a loop mechanism that amplifies things

substantially. A complex, networked system is full of uncertainties, multiple perspectives, and prone to turbulent behavior that can sometimes results in chaos. Climate, organisms, ecosystems, social organizations and human cultures, the brain, health delivery services are examples of complex systems.

**Chaos** is an opening where radical change emerges. It is simultaneously a breakdown of norms and the birth of something new. Chaos is the outcome of great many independent variables interacting in many different ways in a networked complex system. Small perturbations in the system can lead to big consequences – the so-called ‘the Butterfly effect’. Such systems have the ability to balance order and chaos. This balancing point is called the edge of chaos: it is where the system is in a kind of suspended animation between stability and total dissolution into turbulence.

**Contradictions** are logical inconsistencies and irreconcilable positions. They are often the result of systemic imbalances and structural inequities. A complex system has many positions that are logically inconsistent, and complex systems at the edge of chaos even more so. Contradictions, which are irreconcilable views and



perspectives, cannot be resolved: they can only be transcended. In other words, contradictions have to be synthesized and necessitate the formulation of a new position that incorporates most of the various different positions. Contradiction often provide the first signs that a system is moving towards complexity, chaos and eventually postnormalcy.

When complexity, chaos, and contradictions converge and PNT emerges, there is--not surprisingly--a substantial amount of ignorance and uncertainty, which shape how we understand the present and imagine futures.

Surface uncertainty strikes us when we see change unfolding but remain unsure about its direction and overall impact. Shallow uncertainty comes upon us when we feel ourselves moved by powerful currents of change and realize that we inhabit a shifting

landscape. Deep uncertainty speaks to the ways in which radical change can foster feelings of groundlessness and unfathomable possibilities.

Plain ignorance is a lack of factual knowledge—misunderstandings of other cultures, worldviews, and ways of living. Vincible ignorance is born from nostalgia and must be confronted by new ways of learning. Invincible ignorance is a deep-seated fear of the future that can only be overcome by experiencing alternatives and unlearning that which keeps us in the dark.

This layered approach to Uncertainty and Ignorance is an essential component of The Three Tomorrows method for exploring multiple and alternative futures.

For more information, please visit [postnormaltim.es](http://postnormaltim.es)

# MENAGERIE

Postnormal times cannot be 'controlled' or 'managed'. It can only be navigated. But to navigate PNT, we need the capability to spot novelty, be aware of incipient change, and come to understand our own perspective on various scales of trends and emerging issues. We need to anticipate if a trend or emerging issue, in a globalized, interconnected, complex world that is rapidly changing, has the potential of going postnormal.

We need to understand not just moments of seismic disruption or substantial innovation, but also what is seen and unseen from a variety of perspectives. The Menagerie of Postnormal Potentialities consists of three categorical typologies: Black Elephant, Black Swan and Black Jellyfish.

**Black Elephants** are extremely likely and widely predicted events that are ignored or downplayed by many in a given context or a society as a whole. From our perspective, Black Elephants challenge us to ask: What are most people missing or not seeing?

**Black Swans** are 'outliers', things totally outside and way beyond our observations. They seem to appear "out of the blue" and disrupt things at a systemic level. From our perspective, Black Swans demand that we query: What do people think would never happen?

**Black Jellyfish** symbolize phenomena and/or events that are driven by positive feedback into a state of chaos. From our perspective, Black Jellyfish require us to consider: What can or might lead to chaos?





