

A Short History of Decay (SHOD)

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A game for 2-6 players, powered by schadenfreude, nostalgia, and intimations of mortality.

“The hill of the Capitol, on which we sit, was formerly the head of the Roman empire, the citadel of the earth, the terror of kings; illustrated by the footsteps of so many triumphs, enriched by the spoils and tributes of so many nations. This spectacle of the world, how it is fallen! How changed! How defaced! The path of victory is obliterated by vines, and the benches of the senators are concealed by a dunghill.”

- Poggio Bracciolini, cited in Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter LXXI

SHOD is a game about the decline and fall of practically anything.

1. Choose what will be declining. The focus of the game can be a geopolitical entity (a civilization, nation, or city), an organization (a corporation, association, or family) a physical structure (house or temple), a social system or practice (religion, ideology, language or custom) or an individual human life.
2. Name the declining entity and establish a few starting details. Agree on enough facts to give you some context, or let each player state 1-2 (non-contradictory) facts.
3. Set Drive, Flexibility and Resources. The declining entity is ranked by three values. Drive measures the strength of its urge to express its values in the world through focus, growth and recruitment. Flexibility measures the entity's ability to react to stresses. Resources measures all the material capacities available to the entity, from money to population to natural resources. Each of these three values starts at 2. Each player also gets to increase 2 of the 3 values by one point each.
4. Play Apex scene. Play an opening scene as a celebration of the entity at the height of its power: an inauguration, board meeting, interview, tour, birthday party, etc. Players take the role of speakers or take turns as a single keynote celebrant. Each player's remarks should center on a strength or accomplishment tied to Drive, Flexibility, or Resources.
5. Play Decay scenes. Take turns framing scenes in which the entity faces an internal or external challenge. After describing the first challenge, roll a number of 6-sided dice equal to the number of players minus one. For the second scene, roll dice equal to the number of players, and for any subsequent scenes, roll dice equal to the number of players plus one. Leave these 'Decay' dice on the table. The next player rolls a number of dice equal to the number of players in the game. Pair the highest players' die with the

highest Decay die and so on. If each decay die is matched or exceeded by a player's die, then the challenge is overcome. The player who rolled narrates how the entity survives. If at least one Decay die is not matched/exceeded then the player removes the lowest player's die from the game and narrates how the entity fails to completely overcome the challenge. In this case the next player chooses whether to spend one point of Drive, Resources or Flexibility. Each point spent is lost for the remainder of the game. Drive lets the player pick up any player's die in play, add in an extra die, and roll both. Resources lets the player add together any two player's dice so they count as a single die with a value equal to the sum of the two. Flexibility lets a player take any player's die and turn it so that it is one higher than before. Players narrate how Drive, Resources and/or Flexibility help the entity counter the challenge. When all Decay dice are matched/exceeded, the challenge has been withstood. Frame a new challenge.

6. Play Collapse Scene. Once the entity loses a challenge, it has collapsed. Play a scene that represents the collapse: the arrival of the barbarians, bankruptcy sale, death, etc. Then each player states a single fact about the entity that will be remembered.

Inspirations and acknowledgements

A Short History of Decay was inspired by Edward Gibbons' Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Jared Diamond's Collapse, and David Cannadine's The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy. The name of this game is an homage to E.M. Cioran's collection of essays and aphorisms with the same title. Cioran's writings, by the way, are themselves compelling on the topics of decline and stagnation.

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