DEGENESIS

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WHAT IS THIS BOOK ?

A break down of my best advices to create and run your own DEGENESIS campaign when you are an inexperienced GM or when you are new to DEGENESIS.
This book is 100% fanmade, and not at all produced by SIXMOREVODKA, the company producing the DEGENESIS IP.

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ADVICES

In the next few pages, you will read what I consider to be the core rules to follow when preparing a DEGENESIS campaign, or generally speaking, a RPG campaign. Each one of those advices are either born from my own mistakes and experiences, or collected through various readings, observations or discussions with other GMs.

They might no be the best rules in the world, or the most original ones, however, they can be very helpful for young or inexperienced GMs searching for some advices to start their own table. So please take those as advices, not as universal and unbreakable rules.

DON'T INCLUDE ALL THE METAPLOT

Start with local or regional issues, nothing too specific to Degenesis, except maybe a cult, or a clan. Avoid putting all that makes Degenesis unique in one scenario or too close by in a campaign. If you do so, it will become difficult for your players to enjoy each element, and have time to think about it if this is their first campaign.

If you want to use elements from the metaplot, start slow.

Example: If you want to start easily, but still give this sense of horror, use the Primer as a threat. Show traces of a Psychonauts, but not the Psychonaut himself. Just start with the consequences of its passing: a chakra in the ground, increase presence of parasites, a parasite infected corpse, a village destroyed by supernatural phenomenons. Illustrate how monstrous and dangerous such a creature must be.
To illustrate the Primer, the infected ground of a forest, with mycelium slowly corrupting trees and circumvulating on animal corpses, an area where air is filled with spores and and wind pushing those to the characters. A person dying in front of their eyes, mycelium and spores pouring from their mouth.

I would say that subtlety is the key when you start mastering DEGENESIS. There is no use in force-feeding all this content to your players. This is supposed to stay extraordinary, almost exceptional. If this happen too early, with huge consequences, the pace of your campaign will start very high, and it will get complicated to keep up the rhythm.

However, pushing your characters out of their comfort zone, which may be a town, or the proximity of some powerful allies, or installations, is sometimes enough to start instilling the fear for your life this universe is supposed to make you feel.

IF YOUR PLAYERS ARE NEW TO THE WORLD, LET THEM DISCOVER IT AS CHARACTERS TOO

I feel like the best way to discover DEGENESIS' universe should be through the eyes of characters that are new to it too. There are plenty of ways to create a character, or a group of characters that lived isolated from the vast majority of the world until the start of the campaign. This could give to a new player the opportunity to have a very basic knowledge of the universe, and build their own conception of the world as they play through it.

Example: You could make a party composed of new players living in an isolated region of Europe. Maybe it's a deep forest in Pollen, or an isolated valley of the Alps to which the Hellvetics come once or twice a month to dispense foods and basic goods. Those two situations are differents, with a level of technology that may vary and could lead to two totally different campaigns. But what those campaigns highlight is actually the lack of knowledge they have on the world.
You can also start with a group of people living in a big city, like Justitian, or Toulouse, or Tripol. One of them is a new player, and their character has been living here for most of their life. It's now time that they go out of town for some reasons, may it be voluntary or not, which make them discover the world from the eye of someone who leaves town for the first time. This way the lack of knowledge, or the very specific knowledge those characters will have, will be justified and won't impact the roleplay too much.

I really like the isolated clan thing, because it allows you to start with your very own creation inside the universe of DEGENESIS. All sorts of beliefs and rites can be part of this clan: from the most tribal ones to the most elaborated. You

can even cross the spiritual part of this clan to recovered artifacts whom knowledge has been lost. This way, once the characters have grown up, they will probably want to discover their village or region with a better understanding of what actually were the foundations of their faith.

As a matter of fact, doing this exercise of writing your own content for DEGENESIS very early on will also make you more comfortable with the creation of new entities as you go through the universe to make it your own.

ADD A BIT OF DEGENESIS' UNIQUE ELEMENTS AT A TIME

Whether you are going to follow my second tip, I strongly advise that you do follow this one. Even as a GM, discovering the world of DEGENESIS might be a tough experience. It takes time, patience, and a lot of reading to fully catch what this is all about, and who are the various forces of this universe.

Now, even if you presented the universe to your players, including the Cults, and this world's story, they will still need time to get into it and know who you are talking about when using the game's jargon. Terms like "Preservist", "Orgiastic", "Ismaeli" or "Damui" can be confusing. Add to this the Cult's names, their way of living, the specificity of the city or region you are playing in, and the very purpose of the scenario they are playing… That's a lot of food for thoughts. In that respect, try to introduce the Cults one by one, slowly, with enough time for the players to catch what are the important elements constituting this Cult, and what seems to be their values, and purposes. At the beginning, I would advise to not involve more than 2 cults per scenario apart from those represented by your PCs.

Example: You want to play in Justitian, capital of the Protectorate, and lantern of civilization against the clans' barbarism. Very good. Justitian is probably one of the few cities in the world of DEGENESIS where all the Cults can be represented. Imagine describing to your characters what it feels like to walk from one quarter of the city to another. It's full of diversity. My advice would be to start by making them have a very simple mission, something one of their superior asked of them for the good of their Cult.

Let's say your group is composed of this very classic composition: Hartman, a young Judge, freshly ordered ; Famulancer Niklai Altergott, whose Hygienist is a very strict woman ; and finally Chronicler Folder whose score has been slowly decreasing over the last weeks because of his too many talking in an Apocalyptic bar.

All those characters are played by new players, and this is their first ever steps in the world of DEGENESIS. To make them start, and seeing the composition of this group, their first opponents should probably be an Apocalyptic gang, because they probably are the most common scum in Justitian, and they could also find an ally in an Orgiastic gang trying to get revenge of one of those Apocalyptics. Don't go further than that.

Why ? Because for each of those new players, this is already 5 new cults they have to swallow and understand. Their own

cult, those of their two colleagues, and the two new cults that are not part of their crew.

Adding a very talkative Neolibyan shouldered by their Scourgers, and a smelling Scrapper wouldn't add a lot to the scenario, except useless noise that your new players don't need. Let them focus and really understand what they are seeing before going further and creating more relationships between the Cults.

You can prepare it obviously, so when they dig a bit deeper, they will realize that while he was drunk, Folder talked a lot to one of the Magpies, and revealed information he had on one of those Orgiastics and their deeds elsewhere in town. Deeds that probably could also irritate the Judges if they were to learn about this. Meanwhile the Spitalian is very tempted by the Burn this Flock proposes him. He just passed and it would have terrible consequences on him, but experimentations is part of what he likes…

You see how complex a scenario can quickly become. Most experienced GMs know how to pace things and how to make new players comfortable with an universe.

Actually, this advice sounds a lot like the first one: don't put all in at the beginning of your adventure. You will have a lot of time to complexify the cults' relationships, keep it simple early on. At least on surface. Let the characters dig once they are comfortable with the universe.

Also, at the end of your first three or four sessions, make a debrief of what your players understood of the universe, of what happened, to make sure they are not mixing things up: like cults names and functions, or people from different cults. If you realize this wasn't clear enough, don't panic, you still have time to steer them in the right direction. Explain the elements that were not clear to them out of game. Give them some basic knowledge on what they saw. Don't go deeper in the explanations than their characters actually know about a specific point of the universe. This would probably ruin their experience of discovering the game.

GREAT STORIES ARE MADE OF CHARACTERS BONDED TO EACH OTHER.

More often than not, inexperienced GMs tend to create characters independently from one another. I actually made this mistake at the creation of my last group, and I deeply regret it. What you miss when creating those characters independently is the opportunity of letting the characters create bonds between each other.

Example: Bonds are various: members of the same family, childhood friends that got separated by life and tried to find each other when the opportunity was given to them, or on the contrary, despite their different paths they managed to stay close to each other anyway.

They can be lovers, or former lovers, which create a tension and a dramatic involvement in the story. If you used the idea of the remote clan from tip 2, they can all come from this clan and have been separated by life.

They now try to find each other as the last survivor of their

clan, and heir of its tradition. How did it survive time, cult endoctrinement or personal stories ?

As you can see, each of those bonds give birth to a great number of ideas and dramatic situation. You can also use bonds to create a common goal, which will drive the characters towards the same direction even if they don't necessarily agree on their values, or the reasons an action must be taken.

Example : A very common trope in roleplaying game is the loss of something precious to a character. It's a very simple drive. It's easy to understand, and we can all relate to this as human. The loss can be a friend, a loved one, a mentor or even a place. If only a character is linked to this place, it is a very light reason to start an adventure. However, if several characters are commonly bonded to this element, it creates a common goal: finding the lost friend, or at least their body ; retrieving the abducted loved one, even if the two PCs are supposedly rivals in this situation ; honouring the dead mentor by returning on his grave once a year, but what if the grave has been violated ; understanding the cause that lead to the destruction of their home settlement... All those drives are legitimate drives for an adventure, and they are much stronger now that the characters are bonded. They don't just act on the orders of a superior, but also because they have a good reason to do so.

Reading this, you should realize how rich a bond between two or more characters can be, and where it can lead. This gives the opportunity to write stories that aren't just lead by the Cults, and their impact on the world, but rather exploit the significant individualities of your characters to create a very unique story. Embrace this, let your players have fun.

ABOUT YOUR VILLAIN, DON'T MAKE HIM TOO OBVIOUS.

Your villain should be someone your characters could even want to side with, but don't for some reasons. Not all villains need to have very strong motives and to be understandable by the characters, however if you write an archenemy, make sure to make him relatable.

This gives your story much more impact as the characters as well as the players will have to think about the reason they are opposing this very person. Roleplaying can be the moment to force reflexion about topics that aren't very common, seize this opportunity to create a reflexion about those motives and why your characters need to stand in their way.

Example : A villain is often something as simple as a character that has the same goal as the PCs, but he just tries to reach it in a different way. Maybe this person is a mad Spitalian, experimenting with the Primer in order to fight it. The group's spitalian can't stand the vision of his experiments, but this scientist is still fighting for the human race... Isn't there another way to stop him ?

It also can be trivial. An economic opponent threatening

the PC's business. They need to be taken care of so they won't be a danger for their economic health. Is it necessary to kill them ? Maybe it's possible to team up with them to make a stronger alliance instead of trying to put them on their knees ?*

Try to nuance this vilain. Don't make him be all bad. This is not how the real world works. If he has motives, maybe he has a very good reason to act this way. Humanizing a threat makes it much more complicated to take care off, at least radically.

Example: The villain of your story diverted the water supplies of the city your characters are in at the moment. He did so because hundreds of members of his clans were in urge need of those supplies, and would have died did they not receive it. As a matter of fact, the city in which the characters were staying in have been strong enemies of this villain's clan for decades now, and they would never have spared some water to them..
What is the right decision ? Should they be punished for having tried to save their people ? For doing something any human being would have done ?

Putting a villain in perspective of their own actions is a powerful way to realize that the characters are probably not better than them. Maybe they would have done the exact same thing in the same situation.

USE REFERENCES. A LOT.

Movies, books, video games, images, discussions. Anything that can feed your mind can be used. This is something that will never fail you, and most importantly, it will feed your imagination if you keep track of those inspirations. For example I have dozens of notes with scenarios summed up in a single line with a cf to the art that inspired the situation to me. So I can check it back and reuse it when need be. The more references you have, the easier it will get to picture scenes or improvise scenarios from almost nothing.

Example: (This is an actual note I have made) A water pipe has exploded and need to be repaired. However, this pipe is in a dangerous territory, which means the workers will also need protection. It will take several days to totally repair it. The characters can either be hired as workers or protectors. A routine quickly takes root, but on day 3 or 4 of the reparation, the site get attacked by a clan. (Inspiration from the movie Sand Castle)

(This one is much shorter, it's more for a scene than for an entire scenario) A money transfer is taking place. While the money is only protected by a PC and a NPC, the NPC proposes to take one or two wad of drafts as extra payment. (Inspiration from the movie Sand Castle)

A judge comes from a dangerous quarter of Justitian. As time passes, he starts considering himself as the boss of the quarter because he is a Judge and can ask bribe from the inhabitants. At some point in time, the quarter backfires on him as he starts making more and more mistakes undermining his power. (Inspiration from the movie Training Day)

Those very short paragraphs can lead to entire side quests/

adventures if your characters are curious and want to explore in this way. It's just here for them to grasp. Don't fear or be ashamed to note those inspirations as they are going to help you in situations where you would maybe have answered a basic sentence before proceeding further in your main story.

Something I do a lot is keeping those one line scenarios close to me. This way when I have to improvise a character I can easily stick a story to him if my players want to know more about him. This gives the impression that this story has been ready to be played for a long time, even though it was just a very vague idea I had from a piece of art I saw or read.

LEARN THE RHYTHM OF A CAMPAIGN

Even if you make a campaign with a very strong goal, pace it so your characters can slow down a bit. They shouldn't always be focusing on saving the world or the region. It's exhausting to always be after a big objective and not be able to live any other adventures in a world as vivid as DEGENESIS.

For this particular advice, I suggest you to imagine your campaign as mountain. Most of the time, your characters are going to climb this mountain. It will be exhausting, and at some point, a little bit of relaxing time around the campfire is more than welcome. It allows them to concentrate on their characters, their personal developments, lighter elements of the universe like games, trivia or even just chit chat without big consequences.

Example: You are playing a very intensive campaign in which the characters have been on the tracks of a Psychonaut for a very long time. It has taken them time to recruit people crazy enough to be willing to fight it. Hunting the creature in the dense forests of Pollen has taken them days, if not weeks, and they have finally faced the beast in an exhaustive and deadly fight. After this, they will need rest. Give them some hard earned time to enjoy this success, to observe the consequences of their actions on the world. They will probably be heroes in the settlement(s) they have saved from this creature, and this will let them focus on what they want to do next, how they evolve after this climax in their story.

The pacing is very much like the dosing of how much metaplot you involve in your story. If your campaign is stressful, intense, without a single break, everybody will lose track of the actual objective. The extraordinary will become ordinary, and it will become complicated to realize what is the standard of this world. Smoothly switch from one pacing to another, sometimes more harshly to take your characters off guard, or on the contrary, to defuse a very tensed situation and give them some rest.

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

At some points your characters are going to get overpowered for the universe. When this happen it may be time to stop and start anew. It's ok to start from a lower standard,

because in the meantime your players have learnt about the world and they can now create characters with better knowledge and you can start at another point.

Except if you want your campaign to be the campaign ending DEGENESIS, you will probably realize that your characters position are too important to be playable without completely changing the world of DEGENESIS. Even if this is enjoyable, learning when to stop is a great way to make a story stop when it is still best rather than keeping it going because it's the tradition.

Don't make the same mistakes as your favorite neverending series.

DON'T BE SCARED OF THE METAPLOT.

I often read that new GM are scared of playing DEGENESIS because they can't make sense of the metaplot and can't start and adventure if they don't have all the clues in their hands. My answer to this is rather simple: not everything in DEGENESIS have to be metaplot oriented.

The metaplot should be used like a spice. You use it to give a little extra something to your campaign and make it a bit more exciting at some points. However, don't use it as the core ingredient of your story, or you will probably miss it entirely.

If this happen you're probably going to get disappointed, either because you can't get the entire grasp of what the metaplot is, or because you're going to assume some elements and be wrong when the reveals are done.

Actually, even if I am very nerdy towards the metaplot, and love to decipher it, I almost don't use it in my own game. As I said, it comes as an extra to give hints to my characters and excite them a bit about the past of their world, or scare them. But heavily relying on it to be the most important element of my campaign is taking the risk to disgust my players with it, and entirely lose the point of DEGENESIS.

Sometimes the most trivials adventures are the best.

PREPARE BUT DON'T OVERPREPARE.

This is not specific to Degenesis but I've gotten better at it by mastering a lot of this game.

Preparing the unexpected is something that you should try to do when writing your campaign. What this means, is that rather than writing an entire campaign as a novel, you should approach it as a timeline with actors.

Example: Your campaign is about a Chronicler trying to access the locked bunker located under a Clan's settlement. They consider this place to be their sanctuary and are not willing to let the Chronicler get inside it, no matter how frightening he looks like.
The Chronicler on his side needs to access to this bunker, and will gather the rivals of the clan he needs to attack to get to this bunker and recover all the lost knowledge inside it.
You won't prepare every confrontation and scene in this adventure, because you can't know how it will really unveil.

What you know on the other hand are the motivations of the factions, what they are planning to do to accomplish those goals, and how many time it would take them to do so without exterior help. Remember, it's a campaign, your characters are going to take position with one or the other faction.

So what you can write is the break down of the various actions, according to a timeline, and how this will affect the setting.

Those elements are the core of what you want to tell but not necessarily what your characters are going to head to. Generally those elements get triggered by a certain time or date in your timeline.

With this framework, you only prepare the things that aren't related to the characters, and which will take place whatever they do. Never prepare a scene with a signle outcome, or worse, never predict what your players will do. Because they won't do it.

If you prepare too much you're going to get disappointed because your players are going off road. What you can prepare on the other hand is what you can improvise on. The more random elements you have at the ready the easier it will be to go off road and follow your players:

NPCS NAMES AND FUNCTIONS OR JOBS

This is very trivial, but when you are in the rush of an adventure, your brain won't be able to make up a name out of nowhere. Having some ready on a list is the simpliest way to make it look like you prepared this encounter. Once you delivered a name and maybe a job, you can quickly build up a character in your head while your players are answering.

ESTABLISHMENTS NAMES

Also very trivial, but establishments names are the little extra of realism that will make your players enjoy discovering a city.
Example: Very recently my characters entered Toulouse - the capital of the Free Franka - for a very short stay, and they asked around where they could sleep. So I quickly looked at my French inn names and took out four of them out of the list. As they were thinking about which one they would choose, I quickly wrote down the specificities of each of them. Something very unique that would be the mark of fabric of the establishment.

BACKSTORIES

A backstory is something that can lead to a very interesting roleplay discussion between a random NPC and your characters. Generally a backstory can be resumed in one line. It's something that will start a conversation, and mixed up with the name, job and attitude of the NPC you presented to your characters, it catches their attention.

Example: An Orgiastic, veteran of the Adriatic war. Since the end of the war he has been looking after the Jehammedan woman who took care of his wounds.
A Borcan singer, he settles in every town or caravan he can. Sadly, his singing is very bad.
A cursed Jehammedan. They come and pray everyday at the same spot, hoping to be relieved from the so-called malediction.

PICKUP SCENARIOS

You remember those references from movies and other piece of arts ? They can be used here. You're not necessarily going to use it, but if you need it, it's here, ready to be played. So refer to Tip 6 for this.

RANDOM ELEMENTS READY TO FLOURISH YOUR DESCRIPTIONS

It can be anything you want, the content of a market stall, an object that catch the attention of one of your characters, a gambling game played by some people at a table, the various patrons that can be found in an inn at a very specific time...

Example: Vegetable Stall - Sells many different types of locally-grown vegetables. The owner is a kind Ascetic. They are proud of their vegetables.
A leaflet inviting to join the local Apocalyptic Flock.
A Jehammedan cheesemaker trying to make a business deal with the owner of the bar. He offers a free sample and if the player tries it, he can make a BOD+Toughness (2) to see if he gets food poisoning.

This is almost nothing, but those things can help you create a more vivid world when your brain will probably be too focused on managing the ambiant stress of a table.

This is the last advice I really want to share, because it will be useful in any other RPG, and it is the thing that relieved me from most of the GMing pressure. Once you free yourself of this stress by preparing your improvisation kit, you are ready to go.

THE END

I do hope those advices have been helpful and that it has given you some keys to prepare and build your very own DEGENESIS' campaign.
I am looking forward to reading those adventures and how you prepared them.

If you want to add your own advices to this book, let me know, so we'll try to see how it can fit in here. :)

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