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DEATH BY A THOUSAND DRIPS: POISONING AS MECHANISM AND THEME IN CONTEMPORARY TABLETOP GAMES

David Scott Diffrient

Abstract

One of the most significant yet overlooked elements of contemporary tabletop games is the “poison” mechanism, which can be traced back to the June 1994 release of *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG)’s expansion set “Legends.” This article explores the life-draining effects of using gradual, “damage-over-time” (DoT) attacks in modern board games and card games, including those that were designed and published in the wake of recent global public health crises. As both a conspicuous mechanism and recurring theme of contemporary board games and card games, poison proves useful to identifying what makes this previously ignored media form different from, if also similar to, other types of cultural production. Whether it is deployed by players sneakily plotting the downfall of their opponents (in competitive games) or manifests through embedded processes of randomization (whereby the game itself takes aim at the soon-to-be-infected), poison reveals much about the social dynamics and mechanical operations of this medium. As such, it brings to the fore latent elements of modern game design as well as the broader culture of tabletop gaming that are endowed with additional meanings by virtue of the symbol-laden physical components which distinguish this ludic form from other pleasurable yet poison-filled experiences.

Keywords

board games, card games, Magic: The Gathering, MtG, mechanics, poison, health, deception, social deduction, toxic gamers

Poison pervades contemporary popular culture. Liquid or gaseous, magical or pharmaceutical, it seeps into the spoken dialogue and diegetic settings of comic books, motion pictures, television series, video games, and other media forms that, at various times in their increasingly interconnected histories, have been denounced by cultural critics, moral watchdogs, religious organizations, and other groups whose concern for the safety and wellbeing of potentially “contaminated” audiences is as overblown as the purportedly lethal effects of otherwise harmless pastimes (like movie-viewing and book-reading). Nowhere is the preponderance of literally and

figuratively toxic stuff more apparent, yet more overlooked, than in the world of tabletop gaming. The latter has experienced a significant growth spurt over the past three decades, as the industry has moved toward sophisticated designs featuring complex mechanisms and richly evocative themes. Indeed, the hobby is awash in green and red teardrop-shaped drips—symbolic shorthand for the deadly effects dealt to players whose characters have ingested poison and are bleeding out their few remaining health points (HPs). Along with equally suggestive skull-and-crossbones images, such iconography appears on the cards, dice, and tokens of Paolo Di Stefano and Gabriel Gendron's *Mini Rogue* (2020), Jamie Jolly's *Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood* (2022), and hundreds of other games that rely upon cultural stereotypes and commonly held perceptions of what poison is or might do to the body. As both a conspicuous mechanism and recurring theme of contemporary board games and card games, poison proves useful to identifying what makes this previously ignored media form different from, if also similar to, other types of cultural production. As such, it brings to the fore latent elements of modern game design as well as the broader culture of tabletop gaming that are endowed with additional meanings by virtue of the symbol-laden physical components which distinguish this ludic form from other pleasurable yet poison-filled experiences.

In this article, I follow media scholar Paul Booth's lead in subjecting tabletop games to a player-focalized mode of ludo-textual analysis, one that is attuned not only to their physical characteristics and internal systems but also to the highly interactive ways in which meanings emerge through socially situated, paratextually mediated play.¹ More specifically, I gesture toward a wide assortment of ludic objects—from competitive deck-builders like *Black Rose Wars* (2019) to cooperative dungeon-crawlers like *Catacombs* (third edition; 2015) and *Sword & Sorcery* (2017)—in which poisoning serves as a mechanism and/or theme. Although the earliest examples of poison-themed board games date back to the 1960s (when kid-friendly "luck-fests" like *Poison Ivy* [1969] were published), the past twenty years have witnessed a steep increase in the number of strategic works aimed not only at families but at adult audiences, from legendary designer Reiner Knizia's relatively lightweight hand-management game *Poison* (2005) to Jordan Draper's slightly more involved bluffing and trick-taking title *Poison Bottles* (2016) and newer releases such as *Poison Researcher* (2022), *Poison Garden* (2024), and *House of Poison* (2024). As I will elaborate, only a few of these productions adopt the "damage-over-time" (DoT) style of attack that was revolutionized by Richard Garfield's *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG) (1993), and which is thematically rendered as the gradual harm dealt to players' characters by external threats (e.g., venomous snakes, poison-dipped darts and arrows, etc.). Those DoT attacks in MTG are presented as either naturally occurring parts of a dangerous environment or artificially concocted ways for spell-casting, weapon-wielding humans to hurt others. Whether they are directly indebted to Garfield's collectible card game (CCG) or far removed from its mechanisms and themes, several contemporary games' shared emphasis on potentially deadly contamination through physical contact or oral ingestion, superimposed atop procedural structures that pit players against other individuals in close proximity (all "gathered" around the same table, as if in a "magic circle"), assumes resonance in light of recent public health crises and the need to socially isolate amidst a global pandemic that has only intensified anxieties around infection.

The recent (pre-COVID) explosion of tabletop gaming as a popular pastime, supported by thriving online fan communities and a growing number of publishers ushering in a return to analog amusements, invites a sustained look at the productive and possibly destructive consequences of competitive play. This is especially true of any play that takes place in shared spaces where family members, friends, and fellow gamers momentarily become one's "enemies" and the culturally

¹ Paul Booth. *Board Games as Media*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 2021, pp. 17–37.

constructed fear of death-by-poisoning spreads beyond the fictional worlds and physical components—the cards, cubes, dice, meeples, tiles, and tokens—of a given game. By focusing on the tabletop gaming world's uniquely material version of "poison," not separate from but alongside, and in conversation with, other in-game effects such as "bleed," "crippled," "frostbite," "madness," and the like, I seek to show how that this color-coded means of dealing damage (usually in various shades of green) is at once stylized and simplified (see Figure 1). In other words, it relies upon textual conventions that might look strange to anyone outside the hobby but would be familiar to most gamers. Furthermore, by bringing a forensic eye and historical perspective to the various cardboard, plastic, and wooden pieces that are used to make poison an actionable, sometimes objectionable choice for players looking to gain an advantage over their opponents, and by imagining the consequences of this generally welcomed return to in-person gaming (a movement away from screens that Trisan Donovan has called "healthy"),² we might better appreciate those material yet strangely "invisible" features of a medium that—not unlike an odorless chemical or flavorless concoction used to harm unsuspecting victims—would be difficult to detect otherwise.



Figures 1 & 2: The conventions of poison effects and mechanics as color coded as green. Included for analysis purposes.

Even in cooperative rather than strictly competitive adventure games, something as simple as placing green heart-shaped wound markers on a character card (in designer Jerry Hawthorne's *Mice and Mystics* [2012], see Figure 2) or pulling small poison chips from a draw bag (in Muhamad Faizal Fikri and Tibor Özvegy's *The Isofarian Guard* [2023]) ushers forth questions about players' relationships to one another and to the procedural flow of gameplay, which is widely perceived to be undertaken for the purposes of strengthening interpersonal bonds and simply "having fun." At times, though, it can seem as if the game system, rather than other people, poses an adversarial threat to a character's livelihood and/or the player's success. This is especially true of cooperative games in which the opponent is *the game itself*, and player success is measured by how well, if at all, the characters experiencing any HP-draining effects of poison manage to survive. As such, the difficulty of individually or collectively achieving victory within the rule-bound parameters of structured play can spark feelings of anxiety, frustration, and more negatively valenced emotions, which, though different from the physical sensations induced by poisoning (e.g., chills, headaches, high temperatures, lethargy, nausea, stomach pains, etc.), are hard to shake off. Introducing dangerous natural or manmade chemicals into the bloodstream can, as biophysicist Neil Bradbury explains, "disrupt the inner workings of the body" by attacking the nervous system, destroying cells and

² Trisan Donovan. *It's All a Game: A Short History of Board Games*. London: Atlantic Books. 2017; quoted in Tanya Pobuda, "Contested Spaces, Velvet Ropes, Exclusion Zones: The Pleasures and Dangers of Face-to-Face Play in Analogue Gaming Spaces." In: *Material Game Studies: A Philosophy of Analogue Play*, edited by Chloe Germaine and Paul Wake. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, p. 168.

tissues, and “interrupting the regulation of the diaphragm,” among other things.³ But, perhaps more than the molecular, cellular, and physiological changes wrought by poison, which can make life miserable in innumerable ways, it is the *premeditation*—the careful planning and cold calculations required to successfully bring about another person’s death—that distinguishes the surreptitious act of poisoning as an especially disturbing form of “malice aforethought.”⁴ It is this last point that I find most relevant to the study of contemporary tabletop games, which frequently encourage strategic planning and the enactment of malicious, morally compromised (if “magically” circumscribed) choices by players who are likewise calculating, though in comparatively benign ways.

Many of the longstanding connotations of intentional poisoning—an act of combined aggression and deception in which sickness, morbidity, or death can result from equally horrible, if less conspicuous, methods—bubble up in several contemporary examples of this ostensibly lighthearted type of analog amusement. Whether it is deployed by players sneakily plotting the downfall of their opponents (in competitive games) or manifests through embedded processes of randomization (whereby the game itself takes aim at the soon-to-be-infected), poison reveals much about the social dynamics and mechanical operations of this medium. The tactile, physically held components that are required to interface with game systems, and which differentiate face-to-face analog games from face-to-screen digital ones, are not merely a means to an end. They are a way to more clearly imagine how the very notion of an “end”—to one’s life and to a game session—is frequently dependent on strange yet disturbingly commonplace items (e.g., stalks of hemlock, bottles of cyanide, arsenic-laced cookies) that would be hard to swallow outside the “magic circle” of play.

In Ludo Morte: Playing with Poison, Dealing with Death

Since its debut in 1993, designer Richard Garfield’s *Magic: The Gathering* has drawn tens of millions of players around the world to tables as spellcasting “Planeswalkers”—universe-traversing mages capable of extracting mystical energy (“mana”) from the lands they temporarily inhabit and summoning a wide variety of fantastical creatures (e.g., dragons, trolls, vampires, zombies) with the goal of defeating their opponents in 1v1 battles for supremacy. Published by Wizards of the Coast and commercially packaged in the form of several revised base/core sets and thematically flavored booster packs that have kept fans of the franchise in constant thrall over the past thirty years, *MTG* established and popularized many of the foundational elements associated with collectible card games. Those elements include customizable decks that the players themselves build, the “tapping” of cards (i.e., turning them 90 degrees to show that they are “spent”), an evolving ruleset, an expanding mythology, and a duel-like structure whereby two Planeswalkers sit across from one another in an attempt to whittle away at their adversary’s life points.⁵ In doing so, *MTG* has inspired a host of subsequent releases ranging from analog/tabletop titles like Arcane Wonders’ *Mage Wars Arena* (2012) and Alderac Entertainment’s *Doomtown: Reloaded* (2014) to digital/online games like Blizzard Entertainment’s *Hearthstone* (2014) and CD Projekt’s *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018).

One of the most significant yet overlooked elements that *MTG* introduced, beginning with the June 1994 release of its third expansion set “Legends,” is the “poison” mechanism. Indicated on cards bearing the “Poisonous” keyword ability (or, in more recent sets, the “Toxic” and “Infect” abilities),

³ Neil Bradbury. *A Taste for Poison: Eleven Deadly Molecules and the Killers Who Used Them*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press. 2022, pp. 1–2.

⁴ Bradbury. *A Taste for Poison*, pp. 1–2.

⁵ Titus Chalk. *Generation Decks: The Unofficial History of Gaming Phenomenon Magic: The Gathering*. New York, NY: Solaris. 2017.

this is a means by which Planewalkers slowly drain the life of an opponent over several rounds, in contrast to the tactical favoring of faster, stronger, more immediate effects found on other cards. Once a player has accrued ten or more poison counters through exposure to such effects, they immediately lose the game—a *long* game compared to shorter sessions in which poisonous attacks are absent. This has literally game-changing implications for a hobby in which quick, aggressive card play, or what is known in the gaming community as “aggro,” is generally encouraged both in tournament settings and in casual contexts. Whether they construct “poison decks” comprised primarily of infectious creatures like Crypt Cobras, Necropedes, and Swamp Mosquitos, or simply sprinkle a few toxic cards into their collections to gain gradual control over their opponents, players who gravitate toward this mechanism will sometimes find their careful planning rewarded, if also their fellow players’ patience severely tested over sessions that (to borrow the words of one Reddit user) “suck the fun out of the game.” The latter remark, while indicative of the dismissive tone that characterizes much online commentary, highlights how a life-draining effect (within a given game) can itself have a fun-draining effect (at the table)—see Figure 3.



Figure 3: Two Magic: The Gathering Cards and a Pokémon Trading Card featuring poison. Included for analysis purposes.

Regardless, several fantasy-based tabletop games from the past two decades, including *Black Rose Wars*, *Sword & Sorcery*, and *Bardsung* (2022), have brought that slow, “damage-over-time” style of attack to the foreground. In fact, another of Richard Garfield’s card-driven hits, *King of Tokyo* (2011), comes with 12 poison tokens and nearly as many “Poison Spit” power cards whose effect—steadily chipping away at an opposing kaiju monster’s health, round by round—can only be removed through the sacrificial spending of a heart-shaped “heal” die. What does it mean, then, that the DoT mode of incremental bloodletting has become such a staple of tabletop games, including those inspired by *MTG* that, by design, are intended to be played in short bursts or with speedy, often devastating outcomes? Although *MTG* along with several of its spiritual successors, such as the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (1996–present) and the *Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card Game* (1999–

present), have incorporated other DoT effects, including those labeled “bleed” and “frost,” *poisoning* a competitor brings various cultural associations to bear on ludic texts that are themselves sometimes stereotypically portrayed as being either harmful to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of young players or conducive to toxic forms of fannish behavior (e.g., aggression, bullying, verbal abuse) among older ones. As such, the poisoning mechanism of *MTG*—a subject of much online debate among hardcore enthusiasts—can be understood as a metatextual device. It is a means not only of slowing a game down but of bringing it into sharper focus as a reflexive take on the larger problems of otherwise supportive communities “infected” by hate speech or antagonistic posturing on the part of bad actors.

Before returning to the metaphorically “toxic” aspects of gaming culture, it will be useful to highlight some of the many examples of tabletop games that were produced after *MTG*’s 1993 debut and which feature poisoning as their titular and/or thematic focus. As with any historical overview of board games and card games, consideration should be given to the materiality of the medium, which engages players’ perception of touch along with other sensing abilities. That alone ensures that the agonistic dimensions of competitive play are palpably felt and are never far removed from the paradoxical ways in which games might tear us apart as surely as they strengthen social bonds, making the experience of having “fun” a contagious but also “draining” prospect for most if not all the people seated around the table. Of course, long before the latest waves of modern designer board games and card games flooded the market and tempted greater numbers of adult consumers to the table, poison had made its way into several ludic objects aimed at kids, including plastic and metal toys with unsafe levels of mercury, lead, cadmium, and other chemicals. From rubber duckies and plastic beach balls to Barbie dolls and Lego pieces, vintage playthings with even small traces of volatile toxins—or what some scientists refer to as Chemicals of Concern (CoC)—might pose a risk to anyone coming into contact with them (at least, those who are sensitive to persistent organic pollutants [POPs]).⁶ Although the literally toxic, physically harmful results of handling objects designed for amusement are deserving of critical and legal attention, my concern lies with the adoption of poison as strictly a mechanical and thematic element in games that adhere to existing cultural logics, including those which have weaponized such dangerous substances while simultaneously bringing them further into the realm of family-oriented entertainment.

The 2005 release of Reiner Knizia’s *Poison* is a good point of entry for the remaining discussion, and not simply because of its titular foregrounding of that dangerous substance. As one of the most prolific and respected game designers in the world, the German-born Knizia has earned a reputation for blending abstract and thematic elements while advancing the art of the medium through simple yet mechanically sophisticated, mathematically precise systems, on view in award-winning releases such as *Modern Art* (1992), *Lost Cities* (1999), *Ra* (1999), *Amun-Re* (2003), *Blue Moon City* (2006), and *The Quest for El Dorado* (2017). Compared to these and hundreds of other Knizia-designed works, *Poison*, a trick-avoiding (rather than trick-taking) game for 3–6 players, might seem childish or lacking in depth. Certainly, the game’s status as a light filler (to be played quickly between longer, more involved or mentally taxing sessions) has made it difficult for even the most fervent of Knizia fans to make a case for its cultural significance as a testament to his enduring legacy. However, *Poison* stands out among the designer’s larger ludography for a few reasons. To begin with, it was among the first tabletop games to be ported over into the digital format, as an app that could be played on Apple iOS mobile devices (iPhones and iPads). In 2009, Griptonite Games, a developer of

⁶ Leila Mead. “Wicked Games: How Playing with Toys Can Expose Children to Harmful Chemicals.” *SDG Knowledge Hub*, November 2, 2023: <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/wicked-games-how-playing-with-toys-can-expose-children-to-harmful-chemicals/>

video games for handheld devices, licensed the rights to Knizia's *Poison* from the original publisher, Playroom Entertainment. In doing so, it helped to kick off the first wave of analog-to-digital ports that would soon include several other companies' releases (on iOS, Android, Mac, and Windows systems) and lead to the widespread availability of titles central to the rapid growth and mainstreaming of the hobby over the past decade.⁷ Although interface issues (bugs, glitches, etc.) are not uncommon among these and other oft-patched apps, the digital version of *Poison* had several setbacks owing to its relative novelty as one of the few tabletop games playable on cell phones and tablets at the time of its release. Unlike the physical copy of the game upon which it was based, Griptonite's version was solo-only. The lack of multiplayer options along with its rudimentary graphics and easy-to-beat AI opponents augured the app's quick disappearance from the market.

Unlike its digital offspring, the physical version of *Poison* has remained commercially available, albeit in guises far removed from its designer's original vision. For its original analog release in 2005, publisher Playroom Entertainment opted for a box cover design that would seem to conflate *poisons* with *potions*. It shows a robed warlock (bearing more than passing resemblance to Knizia) pouring two vials of liquid into a bubbling cauldron as green vapors swirl around his rat-infested laboratory (see Figure 4). The cards inside the box, coming in three "suits" (blue, red, and purple against black backgrounds), each show partially filled bottles of potions with values ranging from 1 to 7. A fourth "joker" suit (green) comprises eight cards, which all carry the value of 4 and notably depict skulls and crossbones on vials of more dangerous-looking elixir. As is often the case with other companies' rereleases, when the Canadian game manufacturer Outset Media repackaged *Poison* a few years later, different artwork was created for both the box and the cards. The purple-robed warlock is still present on the cover of this cartoonishly illustrated version, but now only one of his arms is visible, sticking in from the right side. In his hand is an upturned bottle of green poison, its contents falling into a cauldron of bubbling red liquid being stirred by a blue-robed witch to the left side. Because her gaze is fixed on an open book labeled "Potions" that she holds, she is oblivious to the warlock's trickery, though a pop-eyed owl perched atop her stirring stick looks nervously at the nasty green stuff dripping from the vial. The bird's alarmed reaction, along with the skull on the bottle of poison, makes it clear that a dangerous sort of defilement is in store for anyone as inattentive as the old crone, whose nose is buried in a tome of otherwise harmless recipes (see Figure 5).

Although the graphic design of this newer version differs considerably from that of the original, nothing about the rules or mechanics of the game has been changed. On their turn, players lay down any card face up from their hand into one of three cauldrons on the table, being sure to match the color of any cards that have already been played there. The special poison cards, as wilds, are playable on any of the three splayed stacks and contribute to pushing those bubbling cauldrons to the breaking point. If anyone ever plays a card that makes a cauldron exceed the value of 13, that player is forced to take all the cards in that stack, including any poisons that effectively "contaminate" it. Each card, regardless of its numerical value, is worth one point. The goal of this game is to have the fewest number of points at the end of a predetermined number of rounds, and players are allowed to discard any colored sets that they have accrued if they have more of those cards than their opponents (a variation on the "shoot-the-moon" strategy familiar to anyone who has played the classic card game *Hearts*). The green poison cards, however, *cannot* be discarded. In fact, they count as double points when calculating the final scores. In other words, there is no "remedy"

⁷ Those releases include *Galaxy Trucker* (2007; digital version 2014), *Jaipur* (2009; digital version 2017), *Ascension: Deckbuilding Game* (2010; digital version 2011), *Sentinels of the Multiverse* (2011; digital version 2014), *Roll for the Galaxy* (2014; digital version 2020), *Terraforming Mars* (2016; digital version 2029), and *Root* (2018; digital version 2020).

or “antidote,” no mechanically integrated way to cancel their poisonous effects, which are abstracted as simply mathematical obstacles to the players’ success.



Figure 4 & 5: Different box designs for Reiner Knizia’s board game *Poison*. Included for analysis purposes.

Besides inspiring several differently themed iterations of its trick-avoiding card play,⁸ Knizia’s *Poison* opened the door to other tabletop games bearing the same or similar titles. A few, such as Scott Mims’s *Poisoner’s Pour* (2016), Kedrick Winks’s *Poison* (2017), and Andrew Boswell’s *Poisoned Chalice: Pass the Cup* (2020), were self-published or released by small companies, and do not have the global reach of a well-known designer or large publisher. Nevertheless, they are part of a broader trend discernible within the industry over the past two decades, and which has traded out the friendlier, stress-free strategizing of older games for a more aggressive, if drawn-out, mode of tactical one-upmanship. For instance, Mims’s game features a “push-your-luck” mechanism combined with elements of social deduction, as it forces players to guess which of the face-down “drink” cards placed by each round’s “pourer” is poison. As in other, more famous social deduction games featuring hidden roles and/or secret agendas, such as *Saboteur* (2004), *The Resistance* (2009), and *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* (2014), lots of generally good-natured table-talk and gentle ribbing occurs over the course of *Poisoner’s Pour*, as players try to outwit their opponents and make educated guesses as to the location of the deadly liquid, based on their read of other people’s

⁸ Besides Outset Media’s rerelease of *Poison*, a few more re-themed variations on Knizia’s design have been published over the years, including Playroom Entertainment’s *Baker’s Dozen* (2008), which does away with the potion and poison bottles in favor of confectionary items (round, colorfully illustrated cards with donut frosting and holes in the middle), and Le Scorpion Masqué/IELLO’s *Friday the 13th* (2014), which, despite its title, likewise caters to kids through the incorporation of cute cats rather than toxic substances. The publication of those games, each bearing the name of the acclaimed German designer on the cover, might suggest that the poisoning element of the original was only a superficial part of the design, and could easily be replaced by other, more family-friendly ingredients befitting the recommended age range (8 years old to adult, also printed on the box). And yet, subsequent “makeovers” or “re-skinning” like *Baker’s Dozen*, which puts green “moldy” donuts into the hands of players (along with tastier vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate ones), retain the idea that certain rotten or poisonous elements are either unavoidable or impossible to counteract completely. In other words, good games, even those lacking lofty ambitions and designed for quick play, necessitate the inclusion of bad things, and few things are “worse” or as morbidly transfixing as poison.

body language and spoken words. But, as in many other poison-themed games, accusatory looks and a questioning of motives are also sure to occur, as “contaminated” drinkers grow increasingly incensed—if humorously so—by the hurtful actions of their friends and fellow players, all of whom are competing to gain the most gold.

From Poisoner Bride to Princess Bride: Social Deduction and Domesticated Deception

As suggested by the title of the 2018 card game *Maybe It's Poison*, a degree of uncertainty infuses many of the above games, which pivot on questions not only about motives but also about the possible locations, carriers, and/or sources of toxic stuff at the table. This produces a kind of ludo-paranoiac view of other players who, ironically, all share one another's tendency toward procedurally enforced deception. Distrust naturally arises during play, even within a micro-game like Jacob Purnell's *Poison/Nectar* (2020), which can be played in one minute with a single card—the span of time needed to call someone's bluff during a short but emotionally pitched battle of “wits and deception” (to paraphrase the game's tagline). As denoted by the game's title, one side of the card secretly contains a sugary sweet secretion while the other contains a harmful one. Players are put into the difficult position of having to quickly respond to one another's offers of the card at the risk of being “poisoned,” should they incorrectly interpret the cardholder's verbal and nonverbal behavior. Considerably more complex, designer Sean Scott Garrity's *Little Drop of Poison* (2015), published by Baksha Games, is notable for the way it leans into the “take-that” mechanism that has become such a prominent feature of the industry's recent output. Specifically, it invites 3–8 players (ages 8 and up) to shift alliances between two feuding teams of “rats” and “weasels,” with the goal of assassinating the kings and peasants of their rivals, not through outward displays of violence but rather through more surreptitious means. Deadly droplets appear on cards that players lay down each round, much as in *Poison*. However, the goal is to score more points than anyone else by racking up a large number of “kills.” Treachery is therefore rewarded and acting the part of a “rat” or a “weasel,” as opposed to a potion-brewing warlock or witch, is in keeping with the spirit of this game of sneaky subterfuge.

Published in 2016 by the Milan-based company Horrible Guild (which, one year earlier, had released *Potion Explosion* [2015] to critical acclaim), designer Tim Page's party game *Raise Your Goblets* puts a more polished, aesthetically pleasing spin on the social deduction elements of *Poisoner's Pour*. It immerses up to a dozen players in a fictional setting (the Kingdom of Otravia) where the long line of succession to the hereditary monarchy is continually being cut short by poisoning. Contributing to that otherworldly immersion are several physical components, such as beautifully designed character cards featuring the artwork of Nick Miles, player screens, victory point tokens, and large plastic goblets where differently colored plastic beads—red for wine, black for poison, and white for antidotes—will be discretely deposited over a “three-course meal” comprised of “appetizers,” the “main course,” and, finally, the “toast.” It is during that concluding stage when the players, as nobles at a banquet with their own set of personal vendettas, reveal the contents of their raised goblets, which deal a fatal blow only if there are not enough white beads to neutralize the black ones. Notably, in addition to the game's tagline (“A Game of Toasts, Poisoning and Flawless Etiquette for 2–12 Mischievous Players,” which appears below its title in the rulebook), the promotional description of *Raise Your Goblets* included on the online database Board Game Geek (BGG) reverts to binaristic discourse echoing the literally black-and-white struggle between toxin and tonic that is resolved during the “toast” stage. It begins by asking potential buyers, “Have you felt the thrill of the struggle between life and death, sitting at the same table with your worst enemy and an

unreasonable amount of poison?" This discourse rhetorically frames the mortal stakes of an otherwise "innocuous" plaything. As such, it lends credence to media scholar Simone Natale's claim that the domestication of deceit, via board games and other popular amusements experienced in the comfort of one's home, might actually be *good* for a society that persists in attributing negative connotations to it. Indeed, the habitual integration of something like poison in playful activities like analog or digital gaming reminds us "that people actively seek situations where they may be deceived"—an indication that what at first seems harmful and destructive might be "functional to the fulfillment of a productive interaction."⁹

Similarly, in an essay provocatively titled "Fun and Games: The Joy of Poisoning in Children's Literature," Sylvia A. Pamboukian proposes an alternative way to conceive of poison, positing it as something that could, under the right circumstances, be put toward productively subversive ends. At least, this is true so long as it is safely contained within fantasy tales or other cultural spaces where acts of consequence-free transgression might be liberating to young and old alike, especially if it unshackles boys and girls (or men and women) from prescribed gender roles and leads to a questioning of social norms. Drawing attention to the adolescent poisoners in classic and contemporary works of fiction, including Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) and the seven novels comprising J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series (1997–2007), she sees in poison the potential for "healthy rebellion," insofar as "the limits of traditional masculinity" (or, for that matter, traditional femininity) can be tested through the inclusion of sympathetic "boy cooks" and (pre)pubescent food poisoners who inherit the characteristics of the archetypal witch.¹⁰

The latter type of character, familiar to anyone who grew up reading fairy tales, and traceable to ancient Greek myths about the goddess Circe and the enchantress-sorceress Medea,¹¹ is still with us today, as the redesigned box cover of Reiner Knizia's card game *Poison* highlights. However, the frequency with which kids and young adults are singled out as the prime target of tabletop game publishers—if the recommended age ranges printed on most box covers are any indication—hints at how poison has become a source of "childish misadventures" in recent years,¹² becoming more conspicuous as the industry grows in leaps and bounds each year. Far from simply being a "symbol of evil," in this ludo-textual context it is nothing less than a cultural construct through which the very concept of "freedom" (from "the constraints of the adult world") gets operationalized through agential forms of play.¹³ Indeed, the expansion of actionable opportunities laid at players' poison-dipped fingertips, with "push-your-luck" and "take-that" mechanisms being just two of the many ways to test one's immunity to, or gauge one's proclivity for, "dangerous" moves (too dangerous, in fact, to contemplate doing outside the magic circle of play), brings even the most "adult" examples of tabletop gaming—those with heavy rule sets like Vlaada Chvátil's *Mage Knight* (2011) and Brooklynn Lundberg's *Middara: Unintentional Malum – Act 1* (2019), or with scads of scary monsters like Eric M. Lang's *Blood Rage* (2015) and Kara Centell-Dunk and Nathan I. Hajek's *Descent: Legends of the Dark* (2021)—into alignment with youthful experimentation and abandon. The fact that all four of these latter games include poisoning either as an integrated mechanism (e.g., spaces on the board where heroes become "infected" and enemies become "enfeebled" in *Descent*) or as

⁹ Simone Natale. *Deceitful Media: Artificial Intelligence and Social Life After the Turing Test*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 29.

¹⁰ Sylvia A. Pamboukian. "Fun and Games: The Joy of Poisoning in Children's Literature." In: *Poison and Poisoning in Science, Fiction and Cinema: Precarious Identities*, edited by Heike Klippel, Bettina Wahrig, and Anke Zechner. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. pp. 135–146.

¹¹ Shelby Brown. "Potions and Poisons: Classical Ancestors of the Wicked Witch." *Getty*, October 19, 2015: <https://www.getty.edu/news/potions-and-poisons-classical-ancestors-of-the-wicked-witch/>

¹² Pamboukian. "Fun and Games," pp. 135–146.

¹³ Pamboukian. "Fun and Games," pp. 135–146.

part of a card's flavor text (e.g., "Loki's Poison" in *Blood Rage*) says much about the paradoxical maturation of the hobby as it embraces both the transgressiveness of child-like play and the playfulness of adult transgression.

Codesigned by Chris Darsaklis and Bruno Faidutti and published by the French company Ankama, the 2020 game *Poisons* brings the latent "push-your-luck" and "take-that" underpinnings of many poison-themed titles to the surface (see Figure 6). As with some of the aforementioned works, it gives 3–8 players the opportunity to poison their opponents; or, rather, the fantastical creatures who appear to have stepped out of a surrealist fairy tale or children's storybook and who serve as the players' characters—keeping the antisocial implications of such activity firmly rooted in the world of fiction. Recalling some of the deductive conundrums faced by players of *Poisoner's Pour*, at the end of each round everyone has the choice to either drink from their own goblets (i.e., reveal the facedown cards that others have played on their characters) and possibly score several points—so long as no poison card has been included in the stack—or refuse the beverage altogether and score just one point. The latter choice offers a safe yet slow and comparatively uneventful road to victory. Despite the addition of several rule-breaking or score-enhancing "special drink" cards, including an "Antidote," a "Love Potion," and a "Shot of Liqueur," which are drawn from the center of the table starting with round two, *Poisons* unfolds like a straightforward party game from beginning to end. Nevertheless, it represents a more advanced system of deduction than the tiny, pocket-sized game that inspired it: designer Chris Anderson's *In Vino Morte* (2016). Notably, the latter game, published by Button Shy, was itself inspired by a pop culture text that is practically synonymous with poison. Specifically, *The Princess Bride* (1987), a film directed by Rob Reiner and written by William Goldman (who adapted his own novel of the same title) appears to have been the basis for Anderson's micro-game, as more than a few online commentators, including contributors to BGG.com, have pointed out since *In Vino Morte*'s publication nearly a decade ago.



Figure 6 & 7: Box designs for *Poisons* and *The Princess Bride: A Battle of Wits*. Included for analysis purposes.

It will probably come as no surprise, at least to devoted fans of *The Princess Bride* (those who can quote verbatim the dialogue that Goldman wove into his metafictional story of swashbuckling romance and humorous fantasy), that a veritable cottage industry of ancillary merchandise has sprung up around the film. Among its many cross-media spinoffs and paratexts are over a dozen tabletop games bearing the film's title, including Game Salute's 2015 release *The Princess Bride: A Battle of Wits*, the cover of which features artist Felicia Cano's rendition of a famous scene involving three of the main characters (see Figure 7). Sitting across from one another in a verdant field, Westley (Cary Elwes), in the guise of the black-masked Dread Pirate Roberts, and Vizzini (Wallace Shawn), the diminutive Sicilian who has kidnapped a royally betrothed farm girl named Buttercup (Robin Wright), raise their goblets of wine as if making a toast. In the film, this "Battle of the Wits"—as Vizzini himself describes their deadly bid for the life of Buttercup—differs considerably from the two battles that preceded it. Those physical contests force Westley to fight two of Vizzini's fellow outlaws: a Spanish fencing master named Inigo Montoya (Mandy Patinkin) and a slow, intimidating giant named Fezzik (André the Giant), whom he defeats through swordplay and fisticuffs, respectively. As James Edwin Mahon has written about this scene, "whereas the first two battles were sportsmanlike and free of deception, this third battle is won by means of deception—a lie—practiced by Westley on Vizzini,"¹⁴ who is unaware of the fact that both of the goblets (rather than just one) have been poisoned with the colorless, odorless, tasteless powder called Iocaine. Fatal to nearly anyone who imbibes it, the fictional poison has no effect on Westley. Unbeknownst to his smug opponent at the makeshift table, the dashing yet dastardly hero has spent two years building up an immunity to it while training to become Buttercup's rescuer.

Of course, knowledge of these narrative details is not needed to play designer Matthew O'Malley's ludic take on *The Princess Bride*, which only requires players to have read the game's slim, 8-page rulebook (notably beginning with a phrase from the film, "But it's so simple!") prior to following its set-up instructions. However, O'Malley's decision to draw from the most morally compromised act on the part of the film's hero, who deceives the ill-fated Vizzini (seated opposite him at the table, as if they were dueling card players), says much about the gamesmanship required to succeed at contemporary tabletop games that revolve around duplicity and mendaciousness along with more traditional mechanisms such as bidding, bluffing, and hidden information. These latter elements, on view in relatively lightweight mainstream games like *Cockroach Poker* (2004), *Wits & Wagers* (2005), and *Skull* (2011) as well as older classics like *Liar's Dice* (a.k.a. *Perudo*) and *Cheat* (a.k.a. *Bullshit*),¹⁵ assume salience when combined with poisoning as a mechanism and/or theme. Moreover, the assumed "simplicity" of a game like *The Princess Bride: A Battle of Wits*, which has relatively few interlocking parts for players to manage, obscures the underlying complexity involved in coping with other people's unpredictable behaviors. Citing the work of Lewis Pulsipher, Paul Booth has noted that "multiple players in games can lead to exponentially more complex social interactions," regardless of how "complicated" a given set of actions or procedures is.¹⁶ Unlike Reiner's film, up to ten individuals, playing characters from other scenes far removed from the riverbank where Westley and Vizzini sit, can be involved in the titular "battle of wits" that is this game's basic premise. Simply trying to handle those dynamic social interactions while staying "alive" amidst growing suspicions and unknown numbers of threats can be just as challenging as winning a much "heavier" game.

¹⁴ James Edwin Mahon. "Why Men of Action Don't Lie." In: *The Princess Bride and Philosophy: Inconceivable!*, edited by Richard Greene and Rachel Robison-Greene. Chicago, IL: Open Court. 2016, pp. 13–26.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Engelstein and Isaac Shalev. *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms*. Baton Rouge, FL: CRC Press. 2022, p. 264.

¹⁶ Paul Booth. *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 2015, p. 166.

Three IPs: Intellectual Property, Intertextual Poisoning, Infectious Play

Game Salute's release of *The Princess Bride: A Battle of Wits*, which tellingly comes with an "Odorless and Tasteless" variant for anyone who would prefer to not know anything about the contents of their possibly poisoned goblets before imbibing, is indicative of another, related phenomenon discernible within the hobby. One of the most conspicuous hallmarks of contemporary gaming is publishers' reliance on established characters, settings, and storylines borrowed from licensed intellectual property (IP). Step into any well-stocked friendly local game shop (FLGS) in North America and Europe and one is likely to stumble upon *The Walking Dead: The Board Game* (2011), *Star Wars: X-Wing Miniatures Game* (2012), *Firefly: The Game* (2013), *Legendary Encounters: An Alien Deck Building Game* (2014), *Sons of Anarchy: Men of Mayhem* (2014), *Marvel Champions: The Card Game* (2019), *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood of Venice* (2021), and countless other titles that beckon towards predecessor texts: comic books, motion pictures, television series, and video games whose already vast worlds are further expanded through such paratexts, which, as Paul Booth has argued, are not just "ancillary products" but media objects worthy of critical evaluation in and of themselves.¹⁷

Notably, a recently Kickstarted expansion for the latter game—*Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood of Venice – Apocalypse* (2024), designed by Thibaud de la Touanne and Fabrice Lamidey—increases replayability and raises the level of difficulty by adding a poisoning element (besides a few other new mechanisms) to the core set. "Tougher foes," including a group of armor-clad elite guards known as Vipers, on top of venomous cobras preying on the players' assassins (whose "life cubes" are removed and placed as blockers atop action slots for every poison damage inflicted), ensure that any victories that might be achieved will be hard-fought and infrequent.¹⁸ As these kinds of additions and refinements are made to the base game, it ironically begins to look more and more like the video game franchise upon which it is based. Indeed, anyone who plays Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) will have the opportunity to equip protagonist Aveline de Grandpré with "berserk darts" that inject craze-inducing poison into her enemies. Beyond that spinoff, the broader transmedial world of *Assassin's Creed*, which encompasses novelizations and tie-ins, is filled with poisonous things like "datura bombs" (explosives that release lethal gas upon detonation), cantarella (an arsenic-like white powder sprinkled onto food or into wine by members of the Templar Order in their efforts to assassinate foes), and Mediterranean mandrake (the toxic properties of which can lead to asphyxiation, blurred vision, and a deadlier outcomes). As such, the inclusion of poisoning in a board game strengthens the intertextual connections between it and other media artefacts, pointing toward their thematic similarities as much as their material differences.

Consider, as well, *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2008). This Living Card Game (LCG), designed by Eric M. Lang, Christian T. Petersen, and Nate French and published by Fantasy Flight Games (FFG), is one of several tabletop adaptations of novelist George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Since its debut in 1996 and discounting the two television series that Martin helped to create, develop, and produce for HBO (*Game of Thrones* [2011–19] and *House of the Dragon* [2022–present]), the author's enormously popular fantasy series has given birth to countless offspring, including comic books, recipe guides, toys, and video games. These and other sites of meaning form an ever-expanding constellation of cross-media connections for fans to locate their own positionality

¹⁷ Booth. *Game Play*, pp. 4–7.

¹⁸ Matt Jarvis. "Assassin's Creed Board Game Adds an Open-World Campaign." *Dicebreaker*, April 25, 2023: <https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/assassins-creed-brotherhood-of-venice/news/assassins-creed-brotherhood-of-venice-apocalypse-expansion-trailer-reveal#:~:text=Tougher%20foes%20will%20include%20elite,dual%2Dwield%20poisoned%20katar%20daggers.>

or identities relative to other consumers (e.g., as “readers,” as “viewers,” as “gamers,” etc.). As a consequence, the potential for metaphorical infusion or textual “infection” likewise grows; so much so that the inclusion of a card like the House of Targaryen’s “Poisoned Wine” or the House of Stark’s “Poisoned Coin” in the LCG seems logical as a ludic extension of narrative events familiar to anyone who has watched the TV series or read the books upon which it and the tabletop game are based (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Examples from *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* featuring poison. Included for analysis purposes.

The first of those cards, which can be included in the deck of anyone playing as Westeros’ dragonlord family (one of six available factions in the base set), seems to allude to the method by which the sadistic young King Joffrey Baratheon is assassinated during his own wedding feast in the third novel (*A Storm of Swords* [2000]) and in the TV show’s fourth season (episode 4.02: “The Lion and the Rose”). But the attribution of “Poisoned Wine” to the Targareyens rather than to the House of Baelish or the House of Tyrell (the factions to which Joffrey’s assassins, the manipulative spy Littlefinger and the elderly matriarch Redwyne, belong) complicates any attempt to draw a straight line between one text and another. The fact that the Mother of Dragons herself, Daenerys Targaryen, is targeted with poison by would-be assassins on at least two occasions—first by a wine-seller employed by Robert Baratheon (whose dastardly deed was foiled by her ever-vigilant sworn protector Jorah Mormont), and later when the Warlocks of Qarth plot to kill the young woman with a scorpion-like manticore (whose venom is lethal)—makes the inclusion of that card, which reduces the strength of any character to whom the goblet passes, highly suggestive as a measurement of how far a game might stray from its source material.

How the similarly labeled *Game of Thrones* card “Poisoned Coin” fits into the overlapping arenas of literary and ludic meaning-making would appear to be a bit easier to determine, insofar as the title of that card makes direct reference to an event that occurs in the prologue of the series’ fourth

book, *A Feast for Crows* (2005). Specifically, the seemingly harmless action of biting a gold coin, which a young apprentice named Pate does to test its authenticity upon receiving payment from the shapeshifting “faceless man” Jaqen H’ghar, is visually represented on the card. However, the white-bearded man who appears on the illustration is considerably older than the character who dies abruptly from poisoning in the book’s prologue. One is left to conjecture that the card’s point of reference must be another coin-related death from the series, one that Jaqen’s pupil-trainee, Arya Stark, similarly engineers against an elderly ship insurer in the series’ fifth book, *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Published one year prior to the “House of Black and White” chapter pack that FFG released as an expansion to the game’s core set in 2012 (and which includes the Stark-specific “Poisoned Coin” card), the novel has sparked debates not about Arya’s motives but rather her method of killing the old man. Slipping the poison-dipped coin into the purse of a shipowner who proceeds to pay the corrupt insurer, she clearly emulates Jaqen’s tactic of killing the unsuspecting novice at the Citadel (from the earlier novel). However, careful readers might suspect that some telepathic link between the two characters would be needed for such a thing to occur, or, conversely, that it could simply be pure coincidence that Arya chose that method of assassination over any others that she would have picked up from the Faceless Men of Braavos. Nevertheless, this low-cost card—playable for the measly sum of one gold coin—brings swift death to any character on whom it is attached, should the player controlling that character rotate him or her 90-degrees from a “kneeling” to a “standing” position” (similar to the “untapping” of cards in *MTG*).

Compounding the challenges of tracing the intertextual relay between “Poisoned Coin” and the game’s source material is the fact that the second edition of *The Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (published by FFG in 2015) would eventually include that same-titled card in one of its many chapter packs (“Music of Dragons,” the fourth such release in the “Dance of Shadows” cycle of expansions)—see Figure 9. Here, though, the “Poisoned Coin” card is an “Event” rather than a “Weapon,” one that brings death to an opponent’s character should he or she let a challenge from the poisoning player go unopposed. Although the visual image that accompanies this newer card’s text is reminiscent of the first edition’s “Poisoned Coin” card, the card’s operational use differs considerably, and is far harder to pin to any preceding narrative event in the game’s source material. Writing about the second edition of *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game* (2011), another of FFG’s adaptations of Martin’s unfolding story (this time designed solely by Christian T. Petersen and suitable for 3-6 players), Paul Booth notes that the “peculiar narrative” that emerges during a game session “may or may not follow precisely what happens in the show.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, playing such a game can sometimes invoke strong recollections of the original text, which, in this case (and to the dismay of George R. R. Martin fans, who might seek out the tabletop games while biding their time for the sixth and seventh novels), remains unfinished. Whether it is supported by mechanisms that allow players to freely make nonbinding promises or seek unprecedented alliances with other Houses (as happens in Petersen’s design), or is driven by “plot cards” that lead players down narrative paths far removed from the story canon (as happens in both the first and second editions of the LCG), such an



Figure 9: The “Poisoned Coin” card from the second edition of *The Game of Thrones: The Card Game*. Included for analysis purposes.

¹⁹ Booth. *Game Play*, pp. 172.

experience can also prompt speculations about the direction that story might take as the never-ending work of worldbuilding rests more and more in the hands of its fans.

Conclusion: Literalizing Toxicity and Leaving a Bad Taste

Increasingly, fans of analog games have used digital platforms to call out a different but related type of toxicity in this outwardly welcoming hobby. If not quite a breeding grounds for bad behavior, bullying, cruelty, and more worrying types of antisocial conduct (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.), tabletop gaming sometimes gives rise to displays of unearned entitlement, not to mention hurt feelings whenever a fellow player—the person sitting just across the table—crosses certain lines (through “smack talk,” arrogant boasting, or outright verbal abuse).²⁰ In the words of one Reddit user, who has sworn off playing designer Don Eskridge’s social deduction party game *The Resistance* partly because of obnoxious players who enforce their own rules and talk over others, “those kinds of people are *poison*.” Similar sentiments can be found in BGG forums and online commentary more generally, which suggests that gamers today—a more diverse demographic than what might have been seen at previous times in the hobby’s history—are perhaps less willing to overlook the kinds of hurtful speech or elitist gatekeeping that went unchecked for so many years, prior to the recent mainstreaming of midweight and heavier strategy games.

Although it has been subjected to analysis for decades, toxic gamer culture, in the words of Mia Consalvo, continues to pose “a challenge for feminist game studies scholars.”²¹ This would include anyone who might worry that their own fannish proclivities—their love for games—might engender feelings of nonchalance or complacency in the face of barely suppressed misogyny at both the relational and representational levels (i.e., the hurtful words and stereotypical images that “poison” an otherwise enjoyable pastime). Building upon her foundational work in the area, a sizeable amount of academic writing about online, digital, and console gaming has laid bare the pernicious, potentially life-threatening effects of entering too deeply into these male-dominated arenas, especially for anyone who does not fit the white cisgender “norm” that continues to define a superficially inclusive culture as well as an increasingly powerful industry that outwardly embraces difference but, in the words of Sarah Stang, remains “deeply entrenched in hegemonic masculinity” and is “driven primarily by the profit motive.”²² While Consalvo, Stang, and other media scholars draw mainly from video game discourses and online player networks in which women, queer folks, people of color, and other marginalized communities are excluded, trolled, or exposed to outright hostility, their arguments can be applied to analog game discourses and offline player networks—including those comprised of friends and family members—in which more benign, but no less upsetting, displays of harassment are encouraged by the mechanisms of structured play.

Of course, sitting at a table with other people, including strangers one is meeting for the first time, presents a different set of social and interpersonal situations for gamers than what they might encounter online, where anonymity can be maintained and a person’s identity can be shielded behind usernames and avatars bearing little to no resemblance to their physical selves. The latter set of conditions is what makes it possible for white men in particular to turn the most virulent forms of verbal abuse, including racial slurs, homophobic slights, and sexist comments, into a form of

²⁰ Marco Arnaudo. *The Tabletop Revolution: Gaming Reimagined in the 21st Century*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc. 2024, p. 212.

²¹ Mia Consalvo. “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* (November 2012): <https://scispace.com/pdf/confronting-toxic-gamer-culture-a-challenge-for-feminist-3ilw95denl.pdf>

²² Sarah Stang. “Diversity,” in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

online “gaming capital,” as if their proficiency in producing pain within a given textual setting (for instance, in a first-person shooter) is commensurate with their ability to anonymously spread hate within the broader gaming culture (for instance, on message boards).²³ Tanya Pobuda points out that the public spaces where analog gaming typically occurs, including board game cafes and conventions, can be just as unwelcoming to women, LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC players as online spaces often are, and that the hobby that finds its “home” in these potentially heterotopic spaces is similarly “encircled by white male gatekeepers.”²⁴ Those gatekeepers, including prominent figures in the industry and critical community associated with the website Board Game Geek and the Dice Tower network, perhaps unwittingly fall back on their “white geek privilege” (to borrow Aaron Trammell’s words) and pronounce themselves “outsiders” only to ensure that the “same systemic, structural inequities...observed in digital gaming” pervade tabletop gaming.²⁵ Indeed, because board gamers who might wish “to actively participate in the hobby” typically do not have the “same ability to hide their true identities” as they might in digital environments, their vulnerability to symbolic and literal forms of violence within a shared physical space can increase,²⁶ even in the presence of those for whom “trash talk” is meant as a playfully contextualized form of gentle ribbing—a source of ostensibly non-toxic fun—rather than as a sign of their strong dislike of fellow players.²⁷ Nevertheless, as suggested by the aforementioned Reddit user’s newfound resistance to playing the social deduction game *The Resistance*, the metaphorically poisonous attitude of anyone who might enjoy ruining other players’ experiences at the table is not unrelated to the equally figurative ways that poison, as both a mechanism and a theme tied to the procedural rhetoric of particular games, deprives someone of health or life within those rule-bound yet productively rule-breaking spaces.

It should be pointed out that the uniquely gamified version of poison that I have been at pains to describe in this article is itself prone to break rules and is hardly limited to one or two effects within the many beautifully designed game systems in which it rears its ugly head. From the “Poison Fog” of *Call of Cthulhu: The Card Game* (2008) to the “Poison Spit” of *King of Tokyo*, it takes sundry forms and, despite the prevalence of death in several recent releases, is not reducible to any one outcome. Indeed, the poison of one game is rarely the poison of another, though there are enough visual parallels—similar symbols, consistent colors, etc.—to suggest otherwise. For instance, in Paul Peterson’s MTG-inspired card-battler *Smash-Up* (2012), “Poison,” an ingredient in the Ninja faction’s deck, destroys any number of actions on an opponent’s minion, whereas in Isaac Childres’s *Gloomhaven: Jaws of the Lion* (2020) the poisoning mechanism increases (by one point) the effectiveness of all enemy attacks. Paying homage to Lewis Carroll’s 1865 children’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the more adult-leaning board game *Wonderland’s War* (2022) forces players to lose one of their fourteen meeple-shaped supporters whenever they draw a poison chip, unless the latter is blocked by an active (face-up) shield token in the player’s tableau. The way poison is used in Steven Medway’s social deduction phenomenon *Blood on the Clocktower* (2022) is different still, since it causes an affected character’s singular power to go on the fritz, if only for one

²³ Stephanie M. Ortiz. “Masculinity, Everyday Racism, and Gaming,” in Deana A. Rohlinger and Sarah Sobieraj, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 532.

²⁴ Tanya Pobuda. “Contested Spaces, Velvet Ropes, Exclusion Zones: The Pleasures and Dangers of Face-to-Face play in Analogue Gaming Spaces,” in Chloe Germaine and Paul Wake, eds., *Material Game Studies: A Philosophy of Analogue Play* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), pp. 168–169.

²⁵ Aaron Trammell. “Precarity and Privilege: The White Politics of Board Game Streamers,” in Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Christopher J. Persaud, eds., *Real Life in Real Time: Live Streaming Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023), pp. 117–129.

²⁶ Tanya Pobuda. “I Didn’t See Anyone Who Looked Like Me: Gender and Racial Representation in Board Gaming,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Ryerson University (2022), p. 49.

²⁷ Christine Tomlinson. *Fractured Gaming Cultures: Marginalized Gamers and New Identities* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), p. 101.

round of finger-pointing gameplay. In Paolo Mori's *Caesar!: Seize Rome in 20 Minutes!* (2022), gaining a poison bonus token (which is strikingly yellow rather than green) means that one's opponent must randomly return an influence token from behind their screen. While this might seem to be an especially benign way to attack another player, the game ends immediately if any player has no more tokens left to return to their draw bags. From time to time, poisoning has even been framed as something to admire: a historically significant, heroic endeavor in games where the goal is to murder someone deserving of slow and painful death. This occurs in Philip duBarry's cooperative game *Black Orchestra* (2016), where a possible path to victory lies in poisoning Adolf Hitler's food—a noble form of "malice aforethought" if ever there was one. In much the same way that "poison," a word derived from the Latin *potio* ("which simply means 'drink'"), can be breathed in and absorbed through the skin in addition to being swallowed,²⁸ a broader understanding of its role in contemporary tabletop games must account for the many ways it affects players, negatively and positively, both inside and outside the "magic circle" of play.



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²⁸ Bradbury, *A Taste for Poison*, pp. 1–2.