

# Powderkeg

*A card game by James Ernest*

First Alpha Rules February 9, 2020

**Introduction:** *Powderkeg* is a bluffing card game for the Island Deck, in which the dealer plays the only hand! It was invented at OrcaCon in January 2020.

**Development Status:** *Powderkeg* is in early development, and represents an interesting new kind of bluffing game. We expect it will continue to improve as we try new things, but here are the basic rules as we have them.

**Players:** 2 to 8 (*Best with 3 to 6*)

**Components:** The 54-card *Island Deck*, and chips for betting.

**Playing Time:** 30+ minutes, at 2 to 4 Minutes per hand.

**Notes:** This is a gambling game, so each hand is an independent game. Players can enter and leave the session at any time (although see “fair dealing” notes below), and there is no specific end point to the session. The object is to finish with more money than you started with.

For a finite play session, choose a fixed period of time (for example, 30 minutes), or a fixed number of rounds, and compare your stacks at the end. Should a player run out of coins, you can let them take a loan and remain in the game. Just remember to account for that loan in the final score.

**The Deck:** The Island Deck has six suits, each with nine cards. The *number cards* are Ace through Seven, and the *face cards* are Queen and King.

**The Core Mechanic: Killing a Hand.** In *Powderkeg*, a hand is “dead” if it contains a number card and a face card of the *same suit*. If you deal hands from a shuffled deck, they will reach this condition in an average of just over seven cards. (This guess is based on an extremely small sample.)

**Setting Up:** Give each player at least 50 coins or chips for betting.

**Each Round:** Shuffle the deck and deal a single hand of eight cards to the Dealer. All players ante one coin, except for the Dealer, who antes five coins.

**Setting the Hand:** The dealer now “sets the hand,” arranging the cards in ascending rank order, and removing one card, which is placed face up on the top of the deck. (This card is called the “docked card,” or often just the “dock.”)

The dealer has free choice of which card to pass, and in which order to arrange cards of the same rank, but otherwise the order of the cards must be ascending. Once the cards are arranged, the dealer sets them down and turns over the first two cards. (These will be the lowest ranked cards in the hand.)



**Each Round:** Starting on the Dealer's left and proceeding clockwise around the table, each player in turn must either call "Live," call "Die," or Fold.

- **Calling Live:** The player puts one coin into the center (face up, if the coins have faces), and declares "Live." This means that the player believes the next card in the hand will not cause the hand to die.
- **Calling Die:** The player puts one coin into the center (face down, if the coins have faces), and declares "Die." This means that the player believes the next card in the hand will cause the hand to die.
- **Folding:** The player withdraws from the hand. This costs nothing.

**Note:** If your coins do not have heads and tails, you might want to create another way for players to indicate what they have called. It's important that these declarations be clear. Thumbs-up and down will work in a pinch, or any object with two distinct sides.

**Reveal:** After all players have acted, the dealer reveals the next card in the sequence. Players who were correct remain in the hand. Players who were wrong, or who folded, are out of the hand.

**Last Card:** The last card is the card that kills the hand, or the seventh card if the hand lives. The winners are the player or players who call the hand correctly all the way. They will divide the money in the pot. If there is an odd coin, it remains for the next pot. If facedown cards remain, the dealer must reveal the rest of the hand to prove that he set it correctly!

**Dealer Win:** If everyone guesses wrong, or drops out, the dealer wins and takes the pot.

**Fair Dealing:** Obviously this game has better and worse table positions, not even including the Dealer's unique role. For a fair game, the deal should go once to every player before anyone is allowed to enter or leave the game. (In reality there should be a reasonable penalty for a player to leave in the middle. This is inevitable in actual play, but TBD in these rules.)

**Dying on the Dock:** If the first two cards in the hand kill the hand, the dealer wins the antes plus another five coins from every player. This situation is extremely rare. (Note, as in all cases, that the dealer must show the rest of the hand!)

### **An Example Game:**

Alfonse is the dealer, and the players are Beatrice, Cowen, Dougherty, and Eron. Alfonse shuffles and deals himself a hand of eight cards. Alfonse antes five coins, and everyone else antes one coin.

Alfonse arranges seven of the cards in ascending order, and docks the King of Anchors. He then turns up the first two cards in the hand, the Aces of Flowers and Crabs.

Every player calls "Live" on the third card. This is correct, because the next card is the three of Boats. The pot now contains 13 coins: these are the antes (one each from four players and five from the dealer) plus the first round of bets (one coin from each of four players).

On the fourth card, every player again calls "Live." This is correct (and it usually is, since the cards must be arranged low-to-high). Indeed, the next card is the Six of Anchors. There are now 17 coins in the pot.

On the fifth card, players B, C, and D call “Live.” Even though he’s fairly sure his call will be wrong, Eron is being offered a pretty big reward (20 coins) if he guesses right on the next card, so he plays his coin face-down and calls “Die.” Unfortunately for Eron, the next card is the Six of Boats, and he is knocked out. The pot now contains 21 coins.

On the sixth card, for whatever reason, Beatrice and Cowen are suspicious. They both vote “Die,” while Dougherty votes “Live.” If Beatrice and Cowen are right, and the next card kills the hand, then they will split the pot. If not, then Dougherty will be the last player, and will have to guess correctly on Card 7.

Alfonse reveals the Queen of Anchors, which shares a suit with the Six of Anchors, killing the hand and awarding the pot to Beatrice and Cowen. Their suspicions were correct!

### **Strategy:**

This is a simple yet fairly interesting bluffing game. The dealer’s decision about which card to dock does tell an interesting story (and can be intentionally misleading, if players understand the game). His goal in setting the hand is to trick players about exactly when (or if) the hand will die.

### **Variations:**

This game is brand new, so we don’t have any variants yet, but we imagine that this strange format has a lot of possibilities. We’ve tried to give the dealer just enough control to be interesting but not overpowered, and we’ve tried to balance the cost of playing so that it’s not too much better to be a Dealer or a Player, though it’s really only fair if the deal goes all the way around the table.

So far the variations we have tried involve the number of cards the dealer has, the number he removes, and the price to play each round. At the moment, the values above seem to be the best.

### **Can’t I play this game with a poker deck?**

Probably. We don’t have numbers for the chances of killing a hand with a poker deck, but in theory it should work more or less the same. There are 12 face cards in a poker deck, just like in the Island deck, but the odds of randomly matching suits are higher, because there are fewer suits. So the dealer might want to start with seven cards and go down to six, though that does shrink the number of betting rounds. Perhaps he reveals only one card at the start, instead of two. Mess with it and tell us what you learn!

### **Questions? Comments?**

Crab Fragment Labs is all about making great games. We hope you’ll have fun playing *Pirate’s Bluff*, and if you have comments, questions, or ways you think the game could be improved, please let us know!

Reach out to us on Twitter at [@crabfragment](https://twitter.com/crabfragment), follow [CrabFragmentGames](https://www.facebook.com/CrabFragmentGames) on Facebook, or use the form on the [About Us](https://crabfragmentlabs.com) page at [crabfragmentlabs.com](https://crabfragmentlabs.com).