

TinyPunk: Building a Tabletop Game That Leaves the Table

By Patrick Laffoon

I've always been obsessed with the fantasy of being a tiny person, like you'd find in the fiction of *The Borrowers*, *Indian In the Cupboard*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *The Secret World of Arriety*, etc., but I've never been fully satisfied with what current tabletop role-playing games have to offer. So, I sought out to make my own that truly captures the feeling of being really small and on a big adventure.

Enter TinyPunk, a Game Masterless guided extraction role-playing adventure about exploring the world of your own home as one of the teeny-tiny beings that secretly lives in your walls. Players take on the roles of pioneering tinyfolk who've just arrived in a new human home to settle. The goal is to establish a new outpost and grow it into a thriving town, while gathering useful scrounged items and charting each room in the home for any future tinyfolk who follow in your wee footsteps. Here I'll go over some of the unique gameplay elements I've designed, as well as my philosophy and intention behind them.

Goodbye Table, Hello Actual Exploration



When you hear “tabletop” you rightfully think of games that are played at a table with friends. But I wanted to take the concept of a traditional tabletop game and make it more active. In order to make players truly feel like they're seeing the world from the perspective of their tiny characters, I decided to have the gameplay take place in the actual real-world rooms of a player's home. That means when the player characters head out for an excursion, the group gets up and leaves the table.

That's right, there are no overworld maps, dungeon tiles, or handwaved days of travel from one place to another. To explore the world of TinyPunk, players are actually moving character pieces along their own countertops, under their couches, through their bookcases, and inside their

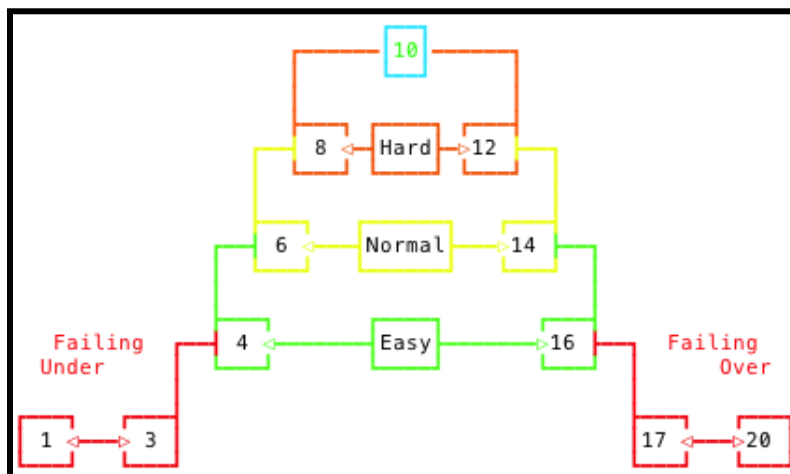
messy drawers, which makes the journey the players and their characters are experiencing truly one to one. Players navigate the unique geography of each room with character ability checks and equipment they can earn, purchase, or build in town. No two homes are the same, which means no two TinyPunk game worlds are the same, either! If a player group finishes a campaign in one home, they can simply move the game to another player's home and start over in an entirely new world. Near endless replayability.

Not every aspect of the game is away from the table, however. Half of the game takes place in the player group's Tiny Town, where there are buildings to construct, shops to buy from, and even NPCs to dripfeed them lore. It's a carefully crafted back and forth system. To design TinyPunk's gameplay loop, I looked to some video games in the popular extraction shooter genre, like *Arc Raiders*, *Escape From Tarkov*, and *Marathon*. These games are all based around a very basic structure: prepare for a run, go on the run to look for loot and resources, extract and return to a safe space to spend the resources on upgrades that will improve future runs.

TinyPunk plays in a very similar way. Players decide on a room in the home that they'd like to explore, they get up from the room and explore the room with their game pieces, looking for scrounged items while fending off enemies and avoiding environmental hazards. Then players return to the table, thus returning their characters to the Tiny Town to spend their resources and earn a variety of upgrades. Ideally, players go back and forth from adventuring in a room to the table multiple times a session. This makes players feel more invested in their excursions, and keeps them somewhat active, but still provides some much needed sitting time every once in a while.

Seeking Balance (or Failure Is Fun)

Players seek out power fantasy and want to win. I get it. But I think the most interesting moments in role-playing games are when players fail, because conflict and drama make for a better story than a hero steamrolling every challenge they face. That's why I made it so there are *two* ways to fail during an ability check in TinyPunk.



Ability checks in TinyPunk are all about hitting as close to the “middle” as possible. Not too much, not too little. The game uses d20 rolls for ability checks, but unlike other games, rolling a natural 20 is one of the worst rolls you can have. Same goes for rolling a natural 1. No matter the type of ability check, the player is always after the elusive “Perfect 10.”

An ability check will always come with a “difficulty range,” be it Easy, Normal, or Hard. To pass the check, the player needs to roll *within* the range. If a player doesn’t land within range on the initial roll, they can then modify it a variety of ways, including spending Stamina cards, using Scrounged Item cards, getting help from a nearby party member, or using special equipment.

DIFFICULTY RANGES

- Easy = 4 - 16 (65%)
- Normal = 6 - 14 (45%)
- Hard = 8 - 12 (25%)
- Perfect = 10 (5%)
- Automatic Fail Under = 1 (5%)
- Automatic Fail Over = 20 (5%)

When all desired options have been exhausted, and a player fails an ability check, they either “Fail Under” or “Fail Over.” The effects of the failure are dependent on this. Failing Under means the player’s failed attempt affects them and them alone. They may lose Stamina, fall from one surface to another, or drop Scrounged Items. Failing Over means the player’s failed attempt affects those around them, at random, meaning another party member, friendly NPC, or enemy may reap the negative effects.

My intention with this design is more than mere cruelty (though I do want players to fail on a regular basis, mwahaha). It’s meant to fuel narrative and encourage collaboration. A character who always happens to Fail Over becomes a fun quirk the player can take on as part of their personality, and party members will feel motivated to help each other out to help prevent any negative consequences because they may very well affect them, whether it’s their ability check or not. To me, this design is all about balance. Failure is where the fun is, but fear not, there will be plenty of opportunities to win.

Using What You Have Instead of Forcing Something New

TinyPunk is all about tiny people finding and making use of the random junk we humans leave lying around. They’re the ultimate buy-nothing, zero waste people. To keep with the spirit of that concept, and to make the game as accessible as possible, I chose to design the game’s systems using elements you’d find in just about any gamer’s home. TinyPunk only requires a deck or two of standard playing cards, some typical gaming dice (a few d6’s and a single d20), and the game’s book, in order to play. No proprietary game pieces, no special cards that need printing, and no dice a tabletop gamer with even minor experience doesn’t already have (or couldn’t easily acquire). Waste not, want not!



As an example of my design using existing game elements, let's take a look at some aspects of the Stamina system, and how it uses standard decks of playing cards. Every player holds a hand of cards that represents their character's Stamina. One card is one Stamina, regardless of the card's value. Stamina is used for everything from attacking enemies in combat, to pushing oneself during an ability check in order to avoid failure, to representing a character's health pool. Generally speaking, the idea behind this system is the harder a character pushes themselves without rest, the more at risk they are for being incapacitated.

Every Stamina Card in a player's hand also has a second value according to the number on the card, as well as whether it's a positive or negative value based on the color of the card. Black cards are positive, Red cards are negative, Aces are wild. See the table below:

Black Stamina Card Values

◦	2 of Clubs/Spades = +2
◦	3 of Clubs/Spades = +3
◦	4 of Clubs/Spades = +4
◦	5 of Clubs/Spades = +5
◦	6 of Clubs/Spades = +6
◦	7 of Clubs/Spades = +7
◦	8 of Clubs/Spades = +8
◦	9 of Clubs/Spades = +9
◦	10 of Clubs/Spades = +10

Red Stamina Card Values

◦	2 of Diamonds/Hearts = -2
◦	3 of Diamonds/Hearts = -3
◦	4 of Diamonds/Hearts = -4
◦	5 of Diamonds/Hearts = -5
◦	6 of Diamonds/Hearts = -6
◦	7 of Diamonds/Hearts = -7
◦	8 of Diamonds/Hearts = -8
◦	9 of Diamonds/Hearts = -9
◦	10 of Diamonds/Hearts = -10

Ace Stamina Cards are WILD and may become any +/- card needed.

Here are some examples of how they are used:

- For ability checks, players are attempting to roll a number within a specific range, based on difficulty. In the event a player rolls outside of the range during an ability check (indicating a failure), a player can “push themselves” by playing a single Stamina card. The value of the Stamina card is applied to the initial roll, which may then change the failure to a success. For example, if a player rolls a 17 with their d20, they still need to get between a 16 and 14 to pass an “Easy” difficulty check. So, the player then plays a red 2 Stamina Card (-2) to subtract 2 from initial 17, now making it a 15, and thus succeeding the check.
- In combat, a player can attack and do a certain amount of damage to an enemy by playing a “range” of two cards in their hand. For combat, color is ignored, so all numbers are positive. The range, or total damage done, is the value between the two cards, or the value remaining after subtracting the smaller number from the bigger number. For example, playing a 5 and a 9 (regardless of color) has a range of 4 ($9 - 5 = 4$), thus dealing 4 damage to the enemy—but expending 2 Stamina Cards in the process. Players must be careful not to overextend themselves! Because...
- The Stamina Cards in a player’s hand also represent the amount of health a character has. For example, a hand of six cards means the character has six Stamina. When the character performs certain actions, is attacked and damaged, fails ability checks, or pushes themselves, their Stamina is reduced and puts them in danger of it reaching zero, which means character becomes incapacitated. Fortunately, Stamina Cards can be replenished through a variety of methods. During combat, players can use the free Recover action to draw cards from the group’s shared deck for their hand. Think of it as taking a few breaths before lunging at the enemy again. Or a character who fills the healer role in a party can return Stamina Cards to player’s hands using a variety of special abilities.

Three gameplay mechanics designed with the very ethos of the game’s fantasy. Interwoven systems that are all using something people almost certainly already own in an efficient way. The tiny folk in my walls would be proud enough to give me a high five. Well, a low five.

Using Fantasy to Enable More Engaging Gameplay

Despite the fact that TinyPunk takes place in a player’s actual home, the game is first and foremost a fantasy setting. There is magic, mysticism, and mystery abound. I love a game where the “fantasy” of it all comes from spells, abilities, and descriptions of the world, but I wanted to incorporate a major fantasy element into the gameplay of TinyPunk in a way that makes it entirely unique.

The first major “magical” ability each player character learns is called “Godshand SHIFT.” I won’t go too deep into the somewhat dark lore here, but in the world of TinyPunk, humans are looked at as the gods of their world, and any tinyfolk who consumes bits of “consecrated godsflesh” (aka magically prepared human remains) will gain magical powers. Specifically, they create a

psychic connection with the ghostly spirit of the human they've consumed. At the end of the book's built-in tutorial mission, players get their first such magical ability:

- Godshand SHIFT: Navigation. Once per excursion, a tinyfolk may summon a spirit hand that appears and moves any object in the world that can be easily lifted with one human hand from point A to point B.

In practice, this ability essentially allows a player to move an object in the real world in order to make moving their game pieces around the room a bit easier. Can't make the jump from the dresser to the bookshelf? Godshand SHIFT a book over to build a simple bridge. Want to get past a blockade of tall boxes on the dining room table? Godshand SHIFT one of the boxes just enough so there's room to pass without having to go over. No matter how a player wants to build their character, everyone gets this ability early on to make exploring easier and more inventive. I love this ability because it makes the player an actual part of the game's fantasy world. You are the spirit! Your hand is actually appearing to them and moving things for them as they have commanded. To me, nothing is more engaging than a game making the real you a part of its world.

Creating the Story Together, With a Little Nudge

TinyPunk is primarily a Game Master-less experience, and is designed from the ground up to allow all people in a group to play as a game character. Nobody gets stuck doing prep and running the show here. The TinyPunk book guides the players through a loose main story structure, but most of the real storytelling comes from the players themselves. Many tabletop players are already natural story tellers, but I wanted TinyPunk to be approachable and welcoming to those who may not already have such inclinations, while also nudging them to contribute in simple, fun ways. I have a background in improv, so I wanted to incorporate game elements that encourage players to invent things on the spot and play like they're a kid again (or encourage them to continue playing like a kid, if they are a kid).

There are three key mechanics I use to activate players as storytellers, including random character prompts, the unique Locale system, and the near-infinite ways players can choose to use the various Scrounged Items they discover during their excursions.

- Random Character Prompts: As player characters explore the rooms in their home, fast travel along "the wallways," set up camp for a rest, or unlock new elements in their Tiny Town, players will activate random prompts that ask them to share details about their character, initiate character conversations regarding a specific topic, and generally encourage them to explore who their characters are. These prompts are simple, providing just enough to be a jumping off point. If a player wants to go deep and embellish they can, but they can also keep it simple without feeling like they're "not doing a good job."
- The Locale System: Not only will players explore their own home in real time, they'll gradually build out a map of their home from the perspective of their tiny characters. As

they explore, players will often get the chance to name a small area in a room that either provides a positive or negative effect (determined via dice rolls and random tables). Maybe a player will be asked to designate the corner of a bookshelf that grants the group a recovery bonus when they arrive. Something like “The Healing Book Nook.” Or perhaps a player will be asked to designate a specific spot on the kitchen floor with a permanent movement penalty. Something like “Sticky Stuck Puddle.” These locales become lasting facets of the game world and its story. Not only is it fun to help build the world as a player, the player-created locales make it exciting to plan new routes for future excursions.

- Using Scrounged Items: As players explore, they’ll collect Scrounged Items to be used back at their Tiny Town. When a Scrounged Item is collected, it’s merely a currency, with no specific traits or qualities. But that currency also has another application. Those same Scrounged Items can be used during an excursion to provide bonuses to any ability check. Players will sometimes have to decide if they want to risk failing an ability check, or use up their loot to give themselves a boost. The catch? When a player decides to use a Scrounged Item, they must then describe *what* the item is on the spot (button, needle, thread, a penny?), as well as *how* the character is going to use that item to help them succeed. A boring “I use an item to pass the check” becomes a more story-focused “I have a bent paperclip that I tie it to some thread to use as a grappling hook.” Some experienced role-players do this naturally, but having player invention be part of the rules helps push shy or novice players into becoming grand collaborative storytellers.

TinyPunk is currently in solo development and on track to release in 2027. Please keep an eye out for it, and thank you for reading!