

# TOMBSTONE

---

## PUBLIC PLAYTEST RULES

Standard Three-Player Format | Version 0.4

*Control the rocks, the cards, the information, the Dust, and the Grave.*

**3 PLAYERS • 1 STANDARD 52-CARD DECK • 3 ROUNDS**

*Trick contracts + captured-card poker + three competing pots*

**Designed by W. D. Johnston**

Public playtest edition • July 2026

# 1. What Tombstone Is

Tombstone is a three-player standard-deck game combining Spades-style contracts and trump, poker-style hand construction and betting, and a match economy divided among three pots. Players bid for rocks, capture specific cards through trick play, build reveal hands from their pockets and captured cards, and decide whether their money belongs in the immediate Dust or the long-term Grave.

**CORE PRINCIPLE** Tombstone is a game of control: control the rocks, specific cards, hidden information, Dust, the Ante, and the Grave.

## What you need

- One standard 52-card deck with no jokers.
- Chips, counters, or written units for betting. Real-money wagering is not required.
- A score sheet for points, bags, Dust wins, and Grave eligibility.
- Three small Undertaker markers per player. Coins or spare chips work.

## Standard match

- Players: exactly 3 in this public playtest format.
- Rounds: 3. Competitive tables may declare 5 rounds; extended matches may declare 6.
- The declared match length cannot change after the first deal.
- Each player receives only 3 Undertaker uses for the entire match, regardless of match length.

## Table language

| Term          | Meaning                                                                 |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rock          | A trick or book.                                                        |
| Pocket        | Three hidden cards used for the final reveal; normally not playable.    |
| Play hand     | Eight-card play hand chosen from 12 dealt cards.                        |
| Captured pile | Face-up cards won in rocks; used at reveal.                             |
| Dust          | The immediate round pot.                                                |
| Ante          | The mandatory match pot funded by round antes and tied or spoiled Dust. |
| Grave         | The optional match pot funded by Grave wagers during contract betting.  |
| Bury          | Table verb for adding a Grave wager: "Bet ten. Bury five."              |

## 2. Before the First Deal

### Choose the table rules

- Choose a betting unit and starting banks. Five-unit antes and five-unit minimum bets are recommended for the first playtest.
- Tombstone may be played entirely with points or chips. If money is used, all players are responsible for local law and table consent.
- The public playtest assumes table stakes: no borrowing. A player unable to call Dust must fold from Dust; a player unable to match Grave loses Grave eligibility.
- Choose the first dealer by any fair method. The dealer rotates clockwise after each completed round.

### Seat and action order

The player to the dealer's left acts first during pocket betting, contract declarations, contract betting, and the first rock. Action proceeds clockwise. After the first rock, the winner leads the next rock.

### Deal

1. Shuffle one complete 52-card deck.
2. Deal 3 pocket cards face down to each player.
3. Complete pocket betting.
4. Deal 12 potential play cards face down to each player.
5. Each player privately chooses 4 of those cards to burn face down, leaving an 8-card play hand. Then set the remaining 7 undealt cards aside face down; they do not enter the round.

**DECK DISTRIBUTION** A standard deal uses 9 pocket cards, 36 potential play cards (24 retained and 12 burned), and 7 undealt cards.

### Card zones

| Zone          | Visibility      | Use                                                                |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pocket        | Hidden          | Final hand construction; Undertaker exchanges.                     |
| Play hand     | Hidden          | The 8 retained cards legally played into rocks.                    |
| Captured pile | Public          | Every card from rocks won by that player; final hand construction. |
| Burn          | Normally hidden | Four cards chosen before contracts; never used in play or reveal.  |
| Undealt cards | Hidden          | Seven cards outside the round.                                     |

Captured cards should remain grouped by rock whenever practical. Every player may inspect every captured pile at any time.

### 3. Round Sequence

---

1. Round ante: each player pays the required ante into the Ante Pot.
2. Pocket deal: each player receives 3 hidden pocket cards.
3. Pocket betting: players wager only into Dust.
4. **Play-hand deal: each player receives 12 hidden potential play cards.**
5. **Burn selection: each player privately burns 4 cards, leaving an 8-card play hand.**
6. **Contracts: each player declares a rock contract.**
7. **Contract betting: players wager into Dust and may attach Grave wagers.**
8. **Rock play: exactly 8 rocks are played.**
9. **Reneg window: calls and reconstruction are resolved before reveal begins.**
10. **Final betting: remaining Dust-active players wager once more.**
11. **Reveal: active players reveal; folded players may optionally reveal afterward.**
12. **Award and record: resolve Dust, score contracts and bags, and update match pots.**

#### Quick round rhythm

REMEMBER Ante → Pocket → Bet → Deal 12 → Burn 4 → Contract → Bet/Bury → 8 rocks → Bet → Reveal.

## 4. Rocks, Contracts, and Match Points

Each player declares how many of the round's 8 rocks they expect to win. Contracts are individual. The bids do not need to total 8; the table may overbid or underbid the round.

### Contract scoring

| Result                                   | Points | Bags                                |
|------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------|
| Finish under contract                    | -5     | None                                |
| Meet contract and go over                | +10    | One bag per extra rock              |
| Hit contract exactly, bid below 5        | +15    | None                                |
| Meet a contract of 5 or more and go over | +15    | One bag per extra rock              |
| Hit a contract of 5 or more exactly      | +20    | None                                |
| Proven Reneg                             | 0      | None; player is null for that round |

### How bonuses stack

- Base award for meeting or exceeding a contract: +10.
- Exact-contract bonus: +5.
- High-contract bonus for a declared contract of 5 or more that is met: +5.
- The exact and high-contract bonuses stack.

### Bags

Every rock above the contract is a bag. Bags accumulate across the match. Each time a player's bag counter reaches 3, that player loses 10 match points and the bag counter resets to 0. Process multiple new bags one at a time, so excess bags after a reset remain counted.

### Examples

| Bid | Rocks won | Round result          |
|-----|-----------|-----------------------|
| 3   | 2         | -5 points             |
| 3   | 3         | +15 points            |
| 3   | 5         | +10 points and 2 bags |
| 5   | 5         | +20 points            |
| 5   | 6         | +15 points and 1 bag  |

## 5. The Three-Pot Economy

### Ante Pot

- Every player must pay the round ante to play the round.
- The Ante Pot is awarded at match end to the highest contract score.
- Tied winning reveals move the entire Dust Pot into the Ante Pot.
- A folded player who optionally reveals the strongest hand also moves Dust into the Ante Pot.
- Optional Grave decisions never affect Ante eligibility.

### Grave Pot

- The Grave Pot is funded only by Grave wagers during contract betting.
- To remain eligible for the Grave Pot, a player must match every Grave increase they face.
- Declining a Grave wager permanently forfeits Grave eligibility for the rest of the match.
- All previous Grave contributions remain committed after eligibility is lost.
- A player who loses Grave eligibility may still win Dust, the Ante Pot, and contract points.
- Once only one Grave-eligible player remains, no further Grave wagers may be made.

### Dust Pot

- Dust is the immediate round pot.
- Pocket betting, the Dust portion of contract betting, and final betting all feed Dust.
- Folding removes a player from Dust betting and prevents that player from personally collecting Dust.
- Dust is normally awarded to the strongest Dust-active reveal.

### Betting phases

| Phase            | When                                   | Allowed money            |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Pocket betting   | After pockets; before play hands       | Dust only                |
| Contract betting | After all contracts are declared       | Dust plus optional Grave |
| Final betting    | After eight rocks and Reneg resolution | Dust only                |

### Grave wager limit

A Grave increase may not exceed one-half of the Dust increase made in the same action. A player must increase Dust to increase Grave.

| Legal action              | Dust increase | Maximum Grave increase |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Bet 10; bury 5            | 10            | 5                      |
| Raise Dust by 20; bury 10 | 20            | 10                     |
| Raise Dust by 40; bury 20 | 40            | 20                     |
| Raise Dust by 10; bury 10 | 10            | Illegal                |

When raising, announce the new Dust and Grave totals or clearly state the increases. Dust and Grave decisions are independent: a player may call Dust and decline Grave, or fold from Dust while matching Grave.

A Grave increase enters the pot only to the extent that at least one opponent matches it. If no opponent matches, the bettor's unmatched Grave increase is returned; the declining opponents still lose Grave eligibility.

## 6. Folding, Null Rounds, and Showdown Pressure

---

### Folding from Dust

Folding removes you from the Dust, not from the deal.

- You stop participating in Dust betting for that round.
- You continue playing every rock and must still follow suit.
- You still score your contract and bags normally.
- You may call Reneg and use Undertaker.
- You may still match Grave wagers during contract betting.
- At showdown, you may optionally reveal after the Dust-active players reveal.

### Optional folded reveal

A folded player is never forced to expose a pocket. After the Dust-active hands are shown, a folded player who believes their hand is strongest may reveal it.

- If the folded hand is not strongest, the active winner still receives Dust.
- If the folded hand wins outright, the entire Dust Pot moves into the Ante Pot.
- If the top hands tie, the entire Dust Pot moves into the Ante Pot under the normal tie rule.
- A folded player never personally collects Dust.

### Null round

If contract betting ends with only one Dust-active player, the round is null.

- Return every contribution made during that deal, including ante, Dust, and Grave wagers.
- Record no contract points and no bags.
- Collect all cards and shuffle again.
- The same dealer redeals; the round number does not advance.

## 7. Playing the Rocks

---

### Standard trick rules

- The player to the dealer's left leads Rock 1.
- A player must follow the led suit when able.
- Spades are trump.
- If no Spade is played, the highest card of the led suit wins.
- If one or more Spades are played, the highest Spade wins.
- The winner captures all three cards face up and leads the next rock.
- Ace is high in trick play.

**PUBLIC PLAYTEST DEFAULT** Spades may be led at any time. Tables that prefer traditional Spades may use “Spades must be broken” as a declared house rule before the first deal.

### The eight-card play hand

After all 12 potential play cards are dealt, each player privately chooses 4 to burn before contracts are declared. The remaining 8 cards form that player's play hand, and exactly 8 rocks are played. Burned cards are locked out of trick play, Undertaker exchanges, and final reveal. Keep them face down and separate from the pocket, play hand, and captured pile.

### Undertaker

Each player begins the match with 3 Undertaker uses. Uses do not refresh between rounds and unused uses expire at match end.

1. Win a rock.
2. Before leading the next rock, declare “Undertaker.”
3. Choose one card from your hidden pocket and one unplayed card from your play hand.
4. Reveal both cards to the table.
5. Exchange them. The former pocket card becomes playable; the former play card enters the pocket.
6. Spend one Undertaker marker, then lead the next rock.
  - A player may use multiple Undertakers in one round if they win enough rocks and still have markers.
  - An Undertaker card introduced into play cannot prove a Reneg alleged before that exchange.
  - All Undertaker exchanges are public information and should be recorded when practical.

## 8. Reneg

---

### Definition

A player Renegs by failing to follow the led suit despite holding at least one card of that suit in the play hand at that moment. Reneging is illegal.

### Calling Reneg

- Any player may call Reneg without penalty.
- The call may be made at any time before reveal begins.
- The caller should identify the disputed rock when possible: “Reneg. Seventh rock.”
- Once reveal begins, uncalled or unproven Renegs stand.

### Reconstruction and proof

Use captured piles, remembered sequence, Undertaker exchanges, remaining play cards, burned cards, written logs, footage, or an official. A later card proves an earlier Reneg only if it was already in the accused player’s play hand at the time. If the violation cannot be established cleanly, the call fails and play stands.

### Proven Reneg penalty

The offending player is null for that round only. The round remains valid for every other player.

- No contract points, exact bonus, high-contract bonus, or bags are recorded for the offender.
- The offender is ineligible to reveal, win Dust, tie Dust, or redirect Dust into the Ante Pot.
- All of the offender’s Ante, Dust, and Grave contributions remain committed.
- Every other player keeps their captured-rock count and scores the round normally.
- A proven Reneg does not automatically remove Grave eligibility for future rounds.

## 9. Reveal and Hand Construction

### Eligible cards

At reveal, build the strongest qualifying hand using only:

- Your 3-card pocket, and
- Every card in your captured pile.

Burned cards, undealt cards, and cards captured by opponents are never eligible. For ordinary poker hands, choose the best five cards. Extended and named hands use the exact number of cards stated in their definitions.

### Reveal order

1. All Dust-active players remaining at showdown reveal their pockets and announce their best hands.
2. Compare the Dust-active hands.
3. Folded players may then choose whether to reveal.
4. Resolve the Dust Pot or move it into the Ante Pot as required.

### Ties

Suits never break ties. If two or more players share the highest qualifying hand after normal rank comparison, Dust is not split. Move the entire Dust Pot into the Ante Pot.

**TABLE PHRASE** Tie the hand, carry the Dust.

### General comparison rules

- Ordinary poker hands use standard poker comparisons.
- For equal-length Processions or straight flushes, the higher ending rank wins. Ace may be low or high, but may not wrap except in a Revolver.
- For equal-length extended flushes, compare the highest card, then the next highest, and so on.
- For Matchbox Quads, compare the higher four-of-a-kind first, then the lower four-of-a-kind.
- Identical-rank Revolvers or King's Coffins tie; suit does not break the tie.

## 10. Tombstone Hand Rankings

Tombstone uses its own hierarchy. It is not standard poker. The order below runs from lowest to highest.

| Rank | Hand                      | Definition                                                                 |
|------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1    | High Card                 | Best five cards with no higher hand.                                       |
| 2    | Pair                      | Two cards of one rank.                                                     |
| 3    | Two Pair                  | Two different pairs.                                                       |
| 4    | Flush                     | Five cards of one suit. In Tombstone, this ranks below Three of a Kind.    |
| 5    | Three of a Kind           | Three cards of one rank.                                                   |
| 6    | Straight                  | Five consecutive ranks; suits unrestricted.                                |
| 7    | Full House                | Three of one rank plus a pair.                                             |
| 8    | Eight-Card Flush          | Eight cards of one suit.                                                   |
| 9    | Eight-Card Procession     | Eight consecutive ranks; suits unrestricted.                               |
| 10   | Four of a Kind            | All four cards of one rank.                                                |
| 11   | Straight Flush            | Five consecutive cards of one suit.                                        |
| 12   | Royal Flush               | 10-J-Q-K-A of one suit.                                                    |
| 13   | Nine-Card Flush           | Nine cards of one suit.                                                    |
| 14   | Nine-Card Procession      | Nine consecutive ranks; suits unrestricted.                                |
| 15   | Ten-Card Flush            | Ten cards of one suit, not necessarily consecutive.                        |
| 16   | Ten-Card Procession       | Ten consecutive ranks; suits unrestricted.                                 |
| 17   | Eight-Card Straight Flush | Eight consecutive cards of one suit.                                       |
| 18   | Nine-Card Straight Flush  | Nine consecutive cards of one suit.                                        |
| 19   | Mississippi Flush         | Nine cards of one suit, all captured in rocks; no pocket card may be used. |
| 20   | Robber Baron              | Nine consecutive ranks, all captured in rocks; no pocket card may be used. |
| 21   | Matchbox Quads            | Two complete four-of-a-kinds: eight exact rank-set cards.                  |
| 22   | Revolver                  | A-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-J-Q-K-A; every rank plus a second Ace.                |
| 23   | Tombstone                 | Any ten-card straight flush other than King's Coffin.                      |
| 24   | King's Coffin             | 5-6-7-8-9-10-J-Q-K-A, all in one suit. Highest hand in the game.           |

### The five-to-eight gap

Six-card and seven-card straights or flushes receive no special extended rank. They may still supply an ordinary five-card straight or flush, but extended recognition begins only at eight cards. This gap makes an extended chase risky rather than incremental.

## Important hierarchy breakpoints

- At eight, nine, and ten cards, a Procession beats a same-length flush.
- Four of a Kind, Straight Flush, and Royal Flush beat both eight-card hands but lose to both nine-card hands.
- Eight- and nine-card straight flushes beat the unnamed ten-card Flush and Procession.
- Mississippi Flush beats every unnamed straight flush. Robber Baron ranks above Mississippi Flush and below Matchbox Quads.
- Tombstone and King's Coffin are ten-card straight flushes and both beat Matchbox Quads and Revolver.
- King's Coffin is the highest possible hand.

## Special-hand construction notes

- A card may serve only once inside the hand being declared, but a player always announces the single highest qualifying hand available from the full reveal pool.
- Pocket cards are allowed in every hand except Mississippi Flush and Robber Baron, which must be built entirely from captured rocks.
- Robber Baron is the captured-only nine-card Procession and ranks above the captured-only nine-card flush.
- Revolver is the only hand allowed to wrap from Ace low through King and return to a second Ace.
- A ten-card straight flush is never called an ordinary straight flush: it is either a Tombstone or King's Coffin.

# 11. Winning the Match

## Award the Ante Pot

After the final round, award the Ante Pot to the player with the highest contract score. Every player who remained in the match is eligible, regardless of Grave status.

## Award the Grave Pot

Award the Grave Pot to the highest-scoring player who remains Grave-eligible. A player who declined any Grave wager cannot win the Grave Pot, even if that player has the highest overall score.

## Public playtest tiebreak

1. Fewest current bags.
2. Most Dust Pots won during the match.
3. Highest single revealed hand during the match.
4. If still tied, split the affected match pot equally among the tied eligible players.

The Ante Pot and Grave Pot are resolved separately. Different players may win them.

## Recommended score sheet

| Player   | Points | Bags | Dust wins | Grave eligible? | Undertakers left |
|----------|--------|------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| Player 1 |        |      |           | Yes / No        | 3                |
| Player 2 |        |      |           | Yes / No        | 3                |
| Player 3 |        |      |           | Yes / No        | 3                |

| Round | Contract | Rocks | Score | Bags gained | Dust winner / destination |
|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1     |          |       |       |             |                           |
| 2     |          |       |       |             |                           |
| 3     |          |       |       |             |                           |

## 12. Optional Variant: Rock Around the Clock

Rock Around the Clock preserves the original high-chaos three-player structure for tables that want spectacular extended hands and a longer capture game.

| Rule               | Standard Tombstone                | Rock Around the Clock            |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Pocket             | 3 cards                           | 5 cards                          |
| Play hand          | 12 dealt; retain 8                | 12 cards                         |
| Rocks played       | 8                                 | 12                               |
| Cards burned       | 4 chosen before contracts         | None                             |
| Undealt cards      | 7                                 | 1                                |
| Reveal environment | Conventional hands remain central | Extended hands appear frequently |

Use all other current Tombstone rules unless the table declares a different house rule before the first deal. Rock Around the Clock is an extended-hand variant; conventional poker hands will be substantially less dominant.

### Current scope

This edition publishes the three-player rules. Duel, four- to six-player deals, team formats, solitaire instruction mode, and tournament-official procedures remain in development.

**CONCISE PITCH** Tombstone is a three-player standard-deck game in which players bet on hidden pockets, bid rocks, capture cards through Spades-style trick play, and build poker and extended Tombstone hands from what they win. Round money goes to Dust. Contract control decides the Ante and Grave.

END OF PUBLIC PLAYTEST RULES v0.4