

**SURREAL
ESTATE**

A supernatural House Hunters RPG
by sweet potato

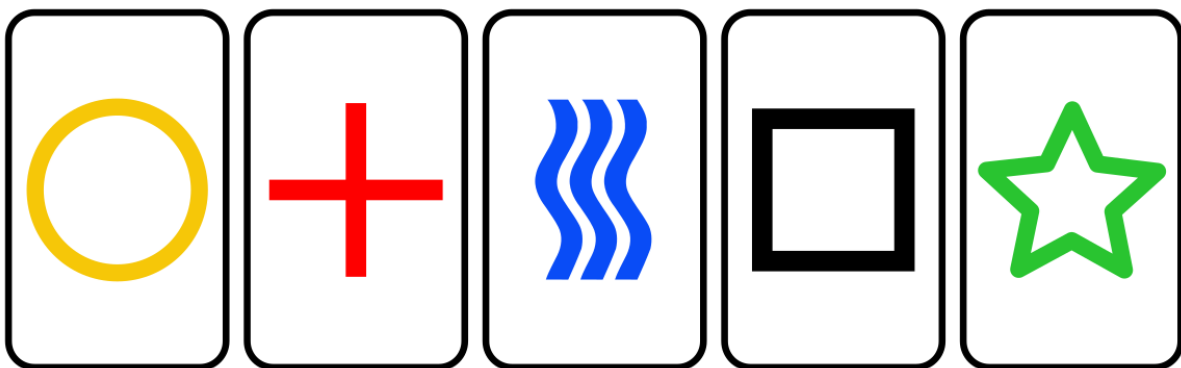
What is this game?

Surreal Estate is a tabletop role-playing game for 3 or 4 players about participating in an HGTV-style reality show, combating malevolent forces, and developing your latent *PSYCHIC POWERS*. This is a storytelling game, where your “win condition” is telling a fun and goofy story with your friends and where play will largely be composed of loosely guided roleplay with card-based conflict resolution.

Surreal Estate is inspired by the House Hunters franchise (and similar shows) and their place in the popular imagination, including the @HouseBudgets Twitter bot created by Zach Whalen and the short fiction piece *House Hunters* by Daniel M. Lavery. RPG influences include storytelling and world-building games like *The Quiet Year* by Avery Alder and *Anomaly* by Carter Richmond, with conflict resolution gently inspired by board games like *Cosmic Encounter* and *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game*.

You will need:

1. Three or four players. A two-player game may not be the most exciting but could make for a fun afternoon, while a five-player game is doable but will probably get a little rowdy.
2. An open playspace with plenty of paper and pencils (or the digital equivalent).



3. A few decks of five *Zener cards* (one for each player, and one extra deck for drawing inspiration). Zener cards are a series of cards with distinct symbols on them, originally designed to test for ESP. In a traditional deck, there are five symbols of Zener card: a circle o, a cross +, three squiggly lines ~, a square [], and a star *. You don't need to stick to these symbols, but you

should have five cards with distinct symbols that can be assigned a hierarchy of values.

4. Some snacks and some time to have fun!

Tone and Safety

Surreal Estate is designed to be a fairly goofy and non-serious game. However, it incorporates weird and supernatural elements, for which everyone's preference and tolerance will vary. Before play, talk through what sort of experience everyone would like to have, as well as what specific content players would like to either fully avoid (lines) or see represented only without specific detail (veils). At any time during play, players can indicate, without any justification required, that a certain element is off-limits to them or that they'd like to see a storytelling decision reversed (the X card). Make sure that you have a clear and consistent signal for indicating that the X card has been played.

While *Surreal Estate* lends itself to a lighthearted game, your group might decide that you want a darker and more serious game with a more explicit horror vibe. Cool! Just make sure that everyone is on board and be clear about what material you'd like to avoid.

Setup and Beginning Play

One player will take on the role of the *Realtor*, while the others will take on the role of *Buyers*. The Realtor represents the primary antagonist. They would ideally like to sell the Buyers a house; however, they are first and foremost a supernatural, malevolent force. Their primary goal is to sow discord, strife, and/or mischief. When you play the Realtor, you take on a role similar to a Game Master or Facilitator--ideally, make sure that the Realtor is someone experienced or comfortable with taking on this role.

The Buyers represent the main protagonists/player characters. As a Buyer, your primary aim is to purchase the house that best fits your needs. The Buyers have a pre-existing relationship with each other--they could be family, partners, friends, etc. They would ideally like to remain close by the end of the house-hunting process, but their top priority is to make sure their individual priorities are satisfied in their search for a house. Additionally, each Buyer has a latent *PSYCHIC POWER* that they will develop during the course of play. The extent to which the Buyers are aware of these powers (or the existence of *PSYCHIC POWER* in general) is up to the table. You may want to play a game that starts mundane and slowly exposes the Buyers to the weirdness of reality, or you may want to play in a world already

touched by the supernatural. In the latter case, you can let these supernatural elements inform the Buyers' Hustle and Wants (see below).

Note: Throughout setup and play, you will frequently be asked to come up with ideas for characters and settings. At these points you may (and in some cases you *must*) *Draw Inspiration*. To do this, you draw one of the five Zener cards from the extra deck and come up with an idea based on its associations--see the Drawing Inspiration section for more details. In the rules, optional draws will be indicated with the (#) symbol, and mandatory draws will be indicated with the (!) symbol.

Begin play by doing the following:

1. Decide who will be playing the Realtor and who will be playing the Buyers.
2. Decide a little bit about the world. In which location are you looking for a house? (This can be very specific or very general.) Are supernatural elements commonplace or unknown? Are the Buyers aware of their latent abilities?
3. Establish the characters of the Buyers.
 - a. Determine the relationship between the Buyers (#). How do you all know each other? Are you friends, lovers, coworkers, surfers looking to establish a small seaside community? Your bond should be tight, but not unbreakable. No bond is unbreakable to a skilled Realtor.
 - b. Determine your *Hustle* (#). This is your job, hobby, source of income, and/or primary activity. While to the audience your identity is defined primarily as a participant on a reality TV show, your Hustle is an important aspect of your life. Outlandish, ridiculous, excessive, wasteful, and upsettingly niche activities are all highly encouraged. It need not be supernatural, but it can be. For inspiration, Draw, or consider the @HouseBudgets Twitter account. For example, you might design top hats for dolls, or you might build the furniture sets for those videos where hamsters eat tiny food. You might run a magic school where you teach frogs to jump very high.
 - c. Determine your *Wants* (#). What are you looking for in a house? A seaside view? A vegetable garden? A theirs-and-theirs bathroom sink? Convenient access to a ritual circle? Take turns writing down three or four specific Wants and sharing them with the table. Once you've gone around the circle a few times, write down one or two additional *No-Nos* that directly contradict or run orthogonal to the other players' existing Wants.
 - d. Determine your *PSYCHIC POWER* (!). Whether you know it or not, you can do something supernatural that no one else can do. What is it? Draw to determine your power. Is it pyrokinesis? Divination? Communication with animals?
 - e. (Optional) Determine your *Fur Babies* (#). Because you are on a reality show looking for a house, for audience appeal you probably look

after an interesting variety of animals. You refer to these as your Fur Babies (even if they don't have fur). Decide collectively: what are they? How many? Dogs, cats, crickets, a small but very serious water buffalo? You're not required to look after any Fur Babies, but if you like animals you may find it a fun part of the game. Let any player veto on animals ride. (Note: The Buyers may face a variety of supernatural threats in a game of *Surreal Estate*--however, Fur Babies cannot be imperiled. They are functionally immortal, impervious to harm, and are completely unflappable in the face of supernatural distress.)

- f. Determine your *Budget*. To avoid getting into the gritty detail of housing markets, you can choose this semi-randomly based on whatever seems right for the style of house and currency of your choice. This has no direct mechanical impact whatsoever, but will help frame the positives and negatives of the house.
 - g. Determine your name and pronouns, age, and look.
4. Establish the character of the Realtor.
- a. Determine your *Desire*(#). While your overarching goal is to cause chaos and inflict harm, you Desire something specific. What is it? Are you trying to give physical form to an ancient god? Build a legion of automata? Get rich? This has little mechanical impact, but is a fun way to characterize your Realtor. Most likely you will have identified some fun elements of the characters and setting from Buyer creation--definitely play on these if you have an idea.
 - b. Determine your *Dominion*(!). Something gives you your malevolent powers. What is it? Draw to determine. You might have Dominion over plantlife, crystals, or the void. This is analogous to the *PSYCHIC POWER* of the Buyers, so feel free to think of an interesting foil to one or all of them.
 - c. Determine your name and pronouns, age, look, and *Tell*. Something gives you away as an agent of chaos if you're not careful. What is it?
5. Introduce the Buyers and Realtor in the form of an awkward intro scene from an HGTV show. Feel free to do a voiceover, if you feel inspired.

Flow of Play

At the beginning of play, the Realtor will introduce three possible houses. Be very vague here--give only the bare outline of what makes each house unique. In a regular game, the Buyers will then choose two of these houses to describe in more detail through a Showing.

Start by collectively deciding which house you will view first. At the beginning of a new Showing, the Realtor will describe the essentials of the house--location,

budget, size, external appearance. Buyers, briefly give your thoughts. Is the location good? Is it over budget? Do you think you can make it work? Draw a quick sketch of the house and surrounding somewhere in the play area.

Then, the Realtor will show the Buyers inside. In order, starting with the player to the Realtor's right, players will introduce a new room to the house (e.g. kitchen, living room, master bedroom, guest bedroom, bathroom, sunroom, backyard, etc). Feel free to explore rooms in any order that makes sense, including non-chronologically (e.g. you can start with the basement and explore the main floor later, if you want.) Draw the room in the playspace in a floor plan-style, but don't worry too much about how the rooms would realistically connect. The initial introduction of the room should be vague--size, broad appearance, general vibe, and at most one or two features.

Then, proceeding in clockwise order, each player (including the Realtor) will introduce a feature of the room. What furniture does it have? How much natural light does it get? How much space is there? What is the wallpaper like? What unusual, curious, or supernatural properties does it have? Think about the Buyers' Wants as you do--you should introduce features that hit Buyers' likes OR dislikes. (Note: Nothing is stopping you from introducing features that target your own Wants, but be cool about it. It's no fun if that's all anyone is doing.) When you've settled on a feature, draw it into the room. As you introduce new features, describe your characters' reactions and/or act out short scenes. The Realtor should be prepared to justify any strange and alarming features you've added to this house! Once you collectively feel you've introduced enough qualities (at least once around the circle), the next player on the list can introduce the next room.

After you collectively decide you've fully explored the house (and everyone has had a chance to introduce at least one room), the Realtor must introduce a *Complication*. This is a display of their Dominion--they are attempting to change the house in some deep and fundamental way. Describe the Complication. What room or rooms does it most affect? What qualities does it change (pick two or three)? Draw it in the house. Go big, go bold, go weird. Feel free to draw a card as extra inspiration if you need.

One Buyer must engage in a *Conflict* against the Realtor in order to solve the Complication (see the Conflict section for more details). Only one Buyer can engage in a Conflict--if it's unclear who that should be, decide who has the best fictional position, act out a short scene, or draw cards from the extra deck to break ties (based on the hierarchy of cards).

If the Buyer wins the Conflict, they are able to successfully beat back the Realtor's influence. Some small mark of the Realtor's power still exists in the home--what is it?

If the Realtor wins the Conflict, they gain complete control over the house. Most or all of the remaining qualities change, and the Realtor's Dominion extends to cover the entire house. The house is fundamentally changed, though not necessarily ruined--maybe some of the Buyers like the house better in its new form. Maybe some of its flaws have been addressed.

After the Complication, frame a short closing scene. What is your overall impression of the house, with or without the changes? Collect yourself and check if anyone at the table wants to take a short break.

When you return, frame a short "back from commercial break" scene. What did you like about the last house? What did you dislike about it? What flaws are you hoping the next house will address? This will help get everyone back in the groove, but will also help the table decide what features might be fun to introduce in the next house. Once everyone has their say, collectively decide the second house you want to explore and begin a second Showing.

Finally, while the Realtor has the power to introduce a Complication, the Buyers have reality-warping abilities of their own: the ability to shoot a Confessional. Once per house, each Buyer can cut away to deliver a short monologue for the camera. While they cannot rewrite the Complication, the Buyer can introduce any other detail, which must immediately be taken as true. This could mean adding a new quality to one of the rooms, introducing a helpful fact or tool, or characterizing one of the buyers or the realtor.

Conflict

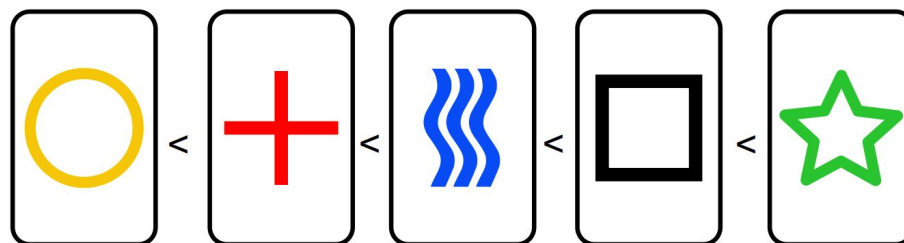
Sometimes a Buyer and the Realtor (or two Buyers) find themselves at odds, whether addressing the Complication or arguing over who should get the larger bedroom. Whether a serious matter or a trivial one, if you find yourself arguing with one of the other characters and it won't be easily resolved, you've found yourself in Conflict.

A Conflict proceeds as follows:

1. Decide on the stakes of the Conflict. If this is a Conflict to address the Realtor's Complication, the stakes are already clear. If the Conflict is between two Buyers, talk a bit about what's at stake here. There should be a real consequence to the conflict--for example, who gets the master bedroom, or

whether one of the rooms can be converted to a gaming chamber. The stakes of a Conflict should *not* involve ruling out choosing the house, but a Conflict can introduce factors that might make the house more or less desirable (e.g., "Our friends will never come visit this place")

2. You and your opponent each choose a Zener card from your personal deck.
3. In a conflict between Buyer and Realtor, can you think of any ways in which your Hustle or Fur Babies can help you with the challenge at hand? If so,
4. Stare your opponent down, or close your eyes, or try to read the energy in the room. On the count of three, guess: say out loud (or type in chat) what symbol you think they have chosen.
5. In a Buyer-Realtor conflict: Are you leveraging your Hustle or your Fur Babies? If so, you get an extra guess!
6. Reveal your cards.
 - ◆ If only one player correctly guesses their opponent's card, they are the winner!
 - ◆ If both players guess correctly (or neither do), the winner is decided based on the natural hierarchy of cards played, as follows:



- ◆ If both players play the same card, they play their cards face up in front of them and repeat.
7. The winner narrates how the Conflict has resolved in their favour. Any player who correctly guessed their opponent's card has successfully manifested their *PSYCHIC POWERS!!* Describe how they helped you win the Conflict, OR how they mitigated the harms of your loss.
 8. After you've chosen a card, place it FACE UP next to your character card in the play area--your opponent should know at all times which cards remain in your deck. When you've used your last card, return them all to your hand.

*Example: The realtor, Abby, has established their Complication--they are using their Dominion over water to cover the upstairs in sheets of ice! One of the buyers, Zain, steps in to address the threat. Luckily, Zain's Hustle as a figure skating instructor comes in handy--he's always got a pair of skates on hand, and so is exceptionally prepared to address the threat. Zain has two guesses in the Conflict, and Abby has one. Zain guesses [] and *, and plays +. Abby guesses ~, and plays []. Zain has guessed correctly! So even though Abby's [] outranks his +, Zain wins the Conflict. Furthermore, since Zain guessed correctly, he has manifested his PSYCHIC POWERS!! Zain's player describes how he uses his control over technology to psychically interface with the thermostat, melting the ice and bringing the house back from Abby's control.*

Note: the Conflict is as much about reading your opponent as it is about good guessing! The * might be the most valuable card, but it's also the most obvious choice to guess. Keep in mind which cards your opponent has and hasn't played.

Don't shy away from Conflicts but be cautious about overdoing them--figure out what sweet spot works right for you.

Finale and Epilogue

After you've seen both houses, it's time to make a decision! (Feel free to invent some ridiculous reason why you've ruled out the third house initially sketched.)

First, discuss openly and honestly among Buyers which house you like best. Be honest to your character and their Wants--what appeals to you most? Remember, as much as you like your fellow Buyers, your primary job here is to get a home you're happy with.

If you all honestly come to a decision on the same home, fantastic! It's yours, and you've all emerged stronger for your trials! Skip ahead to the *Epilogue*.

If there is a dispute between two or more Buyers, uh oh! It's time for the Final Conflict!

1. Each Buyer should declare which house is their top choice. Remember--you CAN declare a house where you lost to the Realtor's Complication!
2. A Conflict occurs between two of the Buyers, one representing each of the houses. (If there's more than one Buyer representing a house, decide amongst yourself who will participate in the Conflict - you can always break ties by whoever draws the higher card from the Inspiration deck.)
3. The winner of the Conflict decides on the house of their choice!

A decision has been made, and a house has been chosen! Now it's time to proceed to the Epilogue.

SIX MONTHS LATER...

If the Buyers overcame the Realtor's Complication in the chosen house:

Narrate a series of short scenes, beginning and ending with the victorious Buyer(s).

- Buyers: If the house was chosen unanimously and peacefully, take turns describing your life in the house. What do you like about it? How have your Wants been satisfied? How has the new house helped you work on your Hustle? How has it helped you connect to your *PSYCHIC POWERS*?
- If the house was chosen after conflict, how has your relationship soured as a result of the conflict, or how have you grown closer together in spite of your differences? What difficulties does the house cause you, and how have you adapted?
- Realtor: how does the small mark you left on the house change or evolve over time? How does your loss inform your next great scheme? How will you satisfy your Desire?

If the Realtor defeated the Buyers in the chosen house:

Narrate a series of short scenes, beginning and ending with the Realtor.

- Realtor: How does the Complication change the house over time? How does this victory help you accomplish your Desire?
- Buyers: What does your life look like in the new house? How does the Complication change your life, bringing you closer together (if you chose unanimously) or driving you further apart (if you chose after Conflict)? How do you come to adapt?

Congratulations! You've brought a game of *Surreal Estate* to a close. Take a break for a minute or two to settle your thoughts. If you like, debrief with your fellow players. What did you like about the game? What were your favourite moments? What did you learn?

Drawing Inspiration

At various points throughout character creation and regular play, you may be stumped for an idea. It may be a good time to Draw Inspiration from the deck!

Draw a random card from the extra deck, and consider some of the associated concepts in Appendix A. Take directly, or use these as inspiration to generate your own. (Alternatively, feel free to use your own cards, your own symbols, and/or your own associations!)

Variants

- For a shorter or longer game: instead of the default two house showings, consider one showing for a shorter game (omitting the final conflict over which house to buy) or three showings for a longer game. A one-house game will likely take roughly 2 to 2.5 hours, depending on the length of character creation, while a two-house game will likely take roughly 4 to 4.5 hours. For a three-house game, you'll probably want to split up play over the course of two sessions. With three houses in play, you may need to break a three-way over settling on a house--if so, try to narrow down to two houses before picking your choice.
- For a tiny house game: it's the same, except the houses are smaller and they probably have lofts. Adjust your budget accordingly, or don't.

Appendix A: Inspiration

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- Water. Ice, sea grass, the ocean breeze.
- Continuity, consistency, gradual change.
- Food, drinks.
- Science, rationality.
- Art, literature, painting and sculpture.
- Fish, waterfowl.

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- Fire. Smoke, steam, magma.
- Aggression, renewal, revolution.
- Sport, play.
- Sorcery, the occult.
- Advocacy, debate, public speech.
- Insects, invertebrates.

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- Air. Storms, lightning, dust.
- Subtlety, cryptarchy.
- Transportation, movement.
- Stealth, thievery, deception.
- Technology, computers.
- Birds, winged mammals

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- Earth. Sand, clay, mountains.
- Stability, constancy, tyranny.
- Exertion, work, currency.
- Construction, building.
- Cards, probability, games of chance.
- Reptiles, ground mammals.

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- Aether. Space, plasma, comets, the cosmos.
- Eternity, infinity, stasis.
- Thought, philosophy, creation.
- Exploration, the unknown, discovery.
- Manipulation and control of time. Clocks, horology.
- Plants, trees, leafy things.

Appendix B: Changelog

v1.0:

- First release version!
- Additional tweaks to the the conflict resolution, featuring hierarchies of power instead of numbered values for the cards
- Simplifying the final resolution and house decision.
- Final copyediting and adjustments.

v0.3:

- Name change!
- Changes to the flow of play: now the Realtor introduces three houses at the beginning, and (for a typical game) players spend time building out only two of them.
- Some more clarity around buyer-buyer conflicts and their consequences.
- Adjustments to the epilogue--making the rules around final scenes a bit more explicit and the conclusions a bit more open-ended.

v0.2:

- Adjustments to the Conflict rules--now every player has their own deck and chooses a card, rather than drawing randomly. All players have full information on who has which cards available.
- Expanded the Inspiration list.
- Clarified several rules, including how players establish rooms.

v0.1:

- It's the game :o

Thanks!!

- To Alex, Allison, and Taylor for first reads, advice, and for general RPG love and support.
- To the playtesters: Adam, Cole, Galen, HB, Kris, Maddie, and Xander.
- Special thanks to Cole for the name suggestion!!
- Special thanks to Maddie for proofreading!!
- To Friends at the Table for being a constant source of inspiration and wonderful storytelling.
- To the Roll +Bond community for the feedback and support.
- To you, for reading and playing!!