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Crosswords — The make-it-yourself game

Number of players

Two or more players use pencil and paper and a 5 × 5 square grid.

Playing

Players take it in turns to call out any letter of the alphabet (as the game progresses, letters may be called more than once).

When a letter is announced, each player must write it in any empty square in the grid.

Aim of the game and scoring

Players aim to form words, as in an ordinary crossword, reading across (left to right) or down (top to bottom).

Any word must be at least two letters long, and scores one point for each letter in it.

A word which is five letters long scores 5 for its five letters, and an extra bonus point for being as long as possible.

Letters cannot be counted twice in one direction, but may be counted once in an across-word, and a second time in a down-word. For example, reading across, the word “MEAT” scores only 4 (either for four-letter “MEAT,” or the two two-letter words “ME” and “AT;” but the word “EAT” cannot also be scored. On the other hand the word “MEAT” could run across and overlap with the word “MARCH,” sharing the letter “A” in common. This would score 4 across for “MEAT” and a further 4 down for “MARCH” (but reading down it is not possible to also score for “ARC” or “ARCH”).

Variations and extensions

The Crosswords game can be made more challenging with a larger board (say, 6 × 6, 7 × 7, or 8 × 8), and with a sliding scale of bonus points for long words (e.g., 1 extra for five-letter, 2 extra for six-letter, and so on).

Disputes can be settled with a dictionary and majority decisions. Scrabble rules apply, ruling out using proper names, slang and abbreviations.

For each completed Crosswords-game, turn the non-scoring spaces into black squares, and create a fresh grid for an actual crossword (replacing letters that scored with empty grid-cells). Then number the grid-cells that will contain initial-letters. Then create a synonym list of Across clues and Down clues. Finally give the newly created (asymmetric) crossword to someone who has not played the Crosswords-game that made this new crossword.

A final task

Create your own symmetrical empty crossword grids, with a symmetric pattern of black squares. Start small, to get the hang of this, and support your work by studying the grids used in newspapers. Are they ever repeated?

If you are feeling really adventurous, find target-words that fit your empty crossword grid, and make clues for your target-words. If you are good at this you could have a career opening as a new puzzle-setter!
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