one set, two people

Two-Player Mahjong at a Glance

Mahjong Tilework
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ONE HAND EACH

Two-handed

The National Mah Jongg League's own adjustment. You each play one hand, on one rack.

TWO HANDS EACH

Siamese Mah Jongg

Gladys Grad's variant. You each play two hands, on two racks, and win by finishing both.

Two-handed: setting up

- The two players sit across from each other.
- Build all four walls anyway, 19 stacks long and two high. The empty seats are dealt nothing, and their wall is drawn from like any other.
- Only the two of you take tiles, four at a time, until you each hold 12. The dealer takes two more and the other player one, so the dealer has 14 and the other 13.

Two-handed: playing

- There is no Charleston. The dealer opens by discarding.
- Everything else is the four-player game: the same card, claiming, jokers, dead hands and payments.
- East moves on after every hand, so the two of you take turns dealing.

Siamese: setting up

- Two players face each other, each with two racks, or one double rack.
- Each player builds two walls, 19 stacks long and two high, one in front of each rack.
- The dealer throws one die to break their own first wall, and both of the dealer's walls are used before the opponent's.
- Playing from a loose pool instead of walls is for social games only.

Siamese: the deal

- Each player takes 27 tiles, the same number for both.
- The dealer picks a 28th tile to start and discards. That is why guides call it 27 and 28.
- There is no Charleston and no courtesy pass.

Siamese: playing two hands

- Move tiles between your own two racks as you like, while they are still in your hand. Once exposed on a rack, they stay with that hand.
- You win by declaring both of your hands.
- Jokers can be taken from anyone's exposed sets, yours included, but never from a hand already declared as a winner.
- So showing a finished hand protects its jokers, and holding it back keeps them available to you.

Siamese: what hands pay

- The first hand pays the value on the card you are using, doubled if it holds no jokers.
- The second hand, the one that wins, pays double, and doubles again with no jokers.
- Feeding your opponent the tile that finishes their second hand costs you points.
- A drawn hand pays both players a little. Her rules give the exact amounts and the penalties.

Three players

- Build all four walls and deal nothing to the empty seat.
- Four tiles at a time until everyone holds 12, then the last tiles, so the dealer has 14 and the others 13.
- No Charleston. The dealer opens by discarding.
- Sources give more than one way to hand out those last tiles, so agree on one before you start.

What never changes

- A winning hand still has to match a line on the card you play with.
- You can claim only the tile just discarded, and only for a set of three or more, or to win.
- Jokers go in sets of three or more, never in a pair or as a single tile, and a discarded joker is dead.
- A hand with the wrong number of tiles is dead, and its player still pays the winner.

Our summary of the rules, in our own words. Siamese Mah Jongg is Gladys Grad's variant: her full rules, including penalties and tournament play, are at mahjongg.org. You need a card of hands to play, and no hands from any card are printed here.