

Senet

Introduction and history

The most important and popular board game of Ancient Egypt was Senet, 'The Game of Passing [Through the Underworld]', sometimes known as 'The Game of Thirty Squares'. It was played from 3000 B.C. and is one of the oldest known games. It took on religious over-tones, becoming a representation of the journey of the parts of the soul (Ancient Egyptians believed in several souls, which you can interpret as parts of the soul or as different aspects of being) through the under-world and eventual rest in the 'field of reeds' in the cosmic west.

This is an excellent game, enjoyable and interesting to play.

Senet appears in one of the creation stories: Djehuty (Thoth) invented Senet as a way to help the poor skygoddess Nut. Nut had been cursed by her husband Ra-Atum because she had been unfaithful and was now pregnant with the earth-god Geb's children. Ra-Atum's curse stated "that Nut could not give birth to any children during the 360 days of the year". Djehuty challenged the gods to games of Senet, with time as the prize, and, winning, was able to add 5 extra days to the year (which were not so cursed). Nut was then able to have her children on each one of the 5 extra days: Ausare/Wesir (Osiris), Her-Wer (Haroeris), Setekh (Seth), Aset (Isis), and Nebet-Het (Nephthys).

Componentets used in Senet

- 10 pcs of player discs (5 per player)
- 4 pcs of throw stick or 8 dice (4 per player)

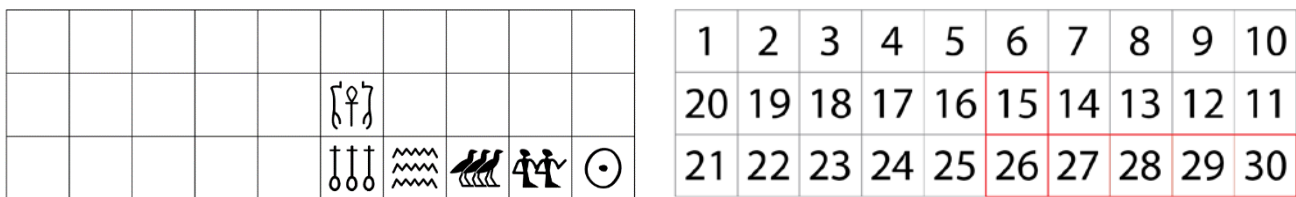
Important note

The rules described here are just for one variant of the game. As it was played in several ways in the history, lot of variation exist. This rule will help you get the basics but feel free to do some research and try out different rules to discover how this game could be played in ancient times.

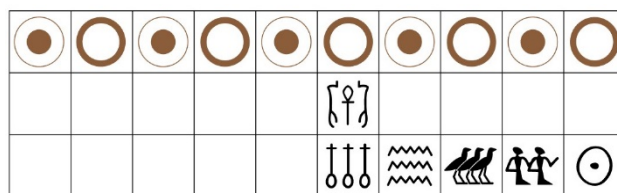
How to play

At the start of the game determine randomly which of the two types of pieces each of the players will use. Also determine randomly which player goes first. If more than one game is to be played, the players can agree on a fixed number of games. If multiple games are to be played, the player that lost the previous one goes first in the new game.

The game board consists of 30 squares (a. k. a. "houses"), arranged as a 3x10 grid. Square 1 is located in the upper left corner, square 20 at the left edge in the middle row, square 30 in the lower right corner (see illustration below). That means, the pieces will change their direction of movement twice as they are moved across the board. Squares 15 and 26-30 have special names and features which will be explained later on.



After it has been determined which of the two types of pieces each of the players will use, the pieces are placed onto the first row of the board (squares 1-10). The pieces light in colour (often cone-shaped) are placed on squares 1/3/5/7/9, the pieces dark in colour (often spool-shaped) are placed on squares 2/4/6/8/10.



Players take turns in rolling the four traditional throw sticks or use the 4 player dice (also further referred to as "rolling"). The rules are as follows:

- **Roll of one** (the light/marked side of one stick/die shows) - The player **moves one of his pieces one square forward and immediately rolls again** (but not a third time!). It's then the opponent's turn.
- **Roll of two** (the light /marked sides of two sticks/dice show) - The player **moves one of his pieces two squares forward**. It's then the opponent's turn.

- **Roll of three** (the light /marked sides of three sticks/dice show) - The player **moves one of his pieces three squares forward**. It's then the opponent's turn.
- **Roll of four** (all light /marked sides of the sticks/dice show) - The player **moves one of his pieces four squares forward and immediately rolls again** (but not a third time!). It's then the opponent's turn.
- **Roll of five** (none of the flat/marked sides of the sticks/dice show) - The player **moves one of his pieces five squares forward and immediately rolls again** (but not a third time!). It's then the opponent's turn.

Rules of movement

- A square may only be occupied by one piece at any time.
- When a piece is moved onto a square that is already occupied by an opponent's piece, this is considered an attack and the pieces swap places. Thus, the attacked piece is moved to the square from which the attacking piece came from.
- A piece may not be moved onto a square that is already occupied by one of the player's own pieces.
- Two or more pieces from the same player that are adjacent to each other (located on consecutive squares) cannot be attacked because they are protected. (This does not apply to squares 28-30.) However, the opponent may jump over them if he rolls a number high enough to do so.
- In case that a player is unable to move one of his pieces forward by the number rolled, he has to move one of his pieces backwards by the number rolled. In this case, it is not allowed to roll for the second time if the number rolled was a one, four or five.
- In case that moving backwards is also not possible, perhaps because the squares that the player would have to move onto are already occupied by his own pieces, he will not move any piece and it's then the opponent's turn.
- If the player, by moving backwards, moves onto a square that is already occupied by an opponent's piece, the pieces swap places, even if the opponent's piece would be considered protected for it is adjacent to others of the opponent's pieces.



Square 15, "House of Rebirth"

This square only has a special feature when used in combination with square 27.



Square 26, "House of Beauty"

All pieces have to move onto this square by an exact roll before they can continue to move to squares 27-30. This means, that this square cannot be jumped over. A piece occupying this square may not be attacked, even if it is not adjacent to other pieces from the same player.



Square 27, "House of Water"

(1) When a piece moves onto the House of Water by an exact roll (roll of one from square 26), it has to be returned to the House of Rebirth (square 15). In case the House of Rebirth is currently occupied by one of the player's or opponent's pieces, the piece has to be moved to the next unoccupied square with a lower number (square 14, 13, ...) instead.

(2) When a piece is forced to move onto the House of Water because it was attacked on squares 28-30 (see the rule for these squares further down), the player can decide to return the piece to the House of Rebirth (or the next unoccupied square with a lower number). However, the player can also decide to try to bear the piece off the board with an exact roll of four. In case that no four is rolled, the piece has to be returned to the House of Rebirth (or the next unoccupied square with a lower number), the number rolled is forfeit and (sort of a "penalty") the opponent now will gain an advantage and will receive an extra turn.



Square 28, "House of Three Truths"

For a piece occupying this square to be borne off the board with a single roll, a three has to be rolled. If a two or one is rolled, the piece may of course be moved forward. If a piece is attacked on this square, the pieces do not swap places, but the attacked piece is forced to move onto the House of Water (square 27). The player who controls the attacked piece then continues as described at Square 27, section (2).



Square 29, "House of Re Atum"

For a piece occupying this square to be borne off the board with a single roll, a two has to be rolled. If a one is rolled, the piece may of course be moved forward. If a piece is attacked on this square, the pieces do not swap places, but the attacked piece is forced to move onto the House of Water (square 27). The player who controls the attacked piece then continues as described at Square 27, section (2).



Square 30, "House of Horus"

For a piece occupying this square to be borne off the board with a single roll, a one has to be rolled. If a piece is attacked on this square, the pieces do not swap places, but the attacked piece is forced to move onto the House of Water (square 27). The player who controls the attacked piece then continues as described at Square 27, section (2).

The objective of the game is to be the first to bear off all five pieces from the board (beyond square 30). *The game can be seen as an interpretation of the Ancient Egyptian belief in the hereafter: guide your soul (symbolized by the five game pieces) through the underworld and its trials to be the first to make it to the afterlife. However, there are other astronomical and mythological interpretations.*