Social ritual and religion in ancient Egyptian board games.

Author: Phillip Robinson
Date: May, 2015

Abstract:
Board games are particularly well represented in the archaeological record of ancient Egypt. Their connections with ancient Egyptian religion means there are also references to gaming in religious texts and funerary artwork. Games by their very nature have a social element to them, they usually require more than one player and are often played with friends or family. When religion and ritual is attached to such games they can take on magical properties. In ancient Egypt this could be your ticket to the underworld or even a system which allowed communication with the dead.
Social ritual and religion in ancient Egyptian board games.

It is a part of human nature to play and toys and games can be used as a method for transferring essential skills; they can provide a way to practice real life events in a safe and controlled environment. Games that involve throwing, running, hiding and discovery all use skills that were useful for our ancestors to hone their techniques for hunting and fighting. As society developed so did early formal gaming; games appeared with dedicated playing pieces, set rules and organised play. There is evidence of board games being played in the ancient Near East over 9,000 years ago with game boards found in Pre-Pottery Neolithic B contexts such as those at Beidha (Kirkbride, 1966).

Games soon developed into a method for encouraging and practising strategic thinking and moving opposing pieces on a reference grid became a popular game mechanic. This includes early games that are still played today such as Chess and Checkers. These grid based games require basic battle planning to capture your enemy using a balance of offensive and defensive play. Games were also designed for educational purposes and have traditionally been used as learning tools for counting, spelling, history, geography, religious studies and more. These themes are still popular in today's games, puzzles and pastimes and we can see many of these attributes in the games played in Ancient Egypt.

Objects associated with gaming are fairly common archaeological finds although it is not common to find complete games with all of their associated pieces. While there is a wealth of evidence for gaming there is often a lack of detailed information. The names of games and the rules of play are often lost and can only be inferred from what remains. Board games in ancient Egypt are particularly well represented though and as funerary goods they are sometimes found complete. Their connections with ancient Egyptian religion means there are also some references to gaming in religious texts and funerary artwork. The ancient Egyptians also played many ball games and sports for recreational
purposes or to develop skills and show their athletic prowess, however, board games had a strong connection to ancient Egyptian society and religion. The four most common board games: Mehen, Hounds and Jackals, Aseb and Senet will be examined for their social ritual and religious connections.

There is usually some bias in evidence from Ancient Egypt as objects that have survived come mostly from funerary contexts such as the tombs of the rich or royal and as such represent a distinct class and not society as a whole. Whilst some funerary goods are fundamentally everyday items that the deceased may need in the next life, there is also some bias in selecting items for the tomb with ritual and religious connections. The archaeological evidence for Egyptian board games come in three forms; physical, visual and textual. The physical items include any playing boards, associated playing pieces and throwing sticks that have been excavated. The visual forms are depictions in tomb paintings of both equipment and of people playing. The textual evidence are hieroglyphic texts which mention the games either directly or by association to the connected rituals.

The game of Mehen is an Old Kingdom (See Appendix A for chronology) game played on a spiral board representing a coiled snake. The snake is a representation of the Egyptian god Mehen, a large snake which sits in the Night Barque of Ra as he travels to the Duat; the mythological underworld inhabited by gods and supernatural beings. Mehen is the guardian of the barque and ensures Ra's safe passage through the night sky.

At least thirteen examples of Mehen boards are known to exist dating from the Predynastic Period to the end of the Old Kingdom. There was no particular number of squares required for a Mehen board and the number varies greatly from just twenty nine to as many as four hundred (Piccione, 1990). The direction in which the snake coils could not have been important either as examples are found coiling in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions. The boards themselves are not inscribed but their connections to
Mehen can be seen both through their representations in tomb paintings and by understanding the nature of the god Mehen.

![Fig. 1. A fourth dynastic Mehen board from Petrie's excavations at Ballas (Petrie, 1896)](image)

There is very little evidence of the game in the Predynastic Period and the main body of physical evidence for the game comes from the Old Kingdom. The game appears to fallen out of favour completely during the social and political upheaval of the First Intermediate Period and there is no physical evidence of the game at all after this period. There are, however, some visual and textual references to the game Mehen in the Theban tombs of Ibi (Capart, 1938) and Ankh-ef-en-Sekhmet (Hill, 1957) from the Late Period (Twenty Sixth Dynasty). These visual representations show people playing a game on a board but which game they are playing can only be discerned by the Hieroglyphic text which mentions the game Mehen directly. This sudden reappearance after almost 2,000 years has been attributed to the neo-Memphite revival (Piccione, 1990), a time when the artistic, religious and cultural tastes of the Old Kingdom were briefly resurrected (Capart, 1938).
A painting in the Third Dynasty mastaba tomb of Hesyre at Saqqara shows a Mehen board along side a few other Egyptian board games including a Senet board. The illustration of the Mehen board shows a large number sections and a box of playing pieces for both Senet and Mehen. The playing pieces for Mehen are three recumbent lions, three lionesses and six compartments holding six marbles each (fig 3). Some boards, such as the example below from the British Museum (fig. 4.) are created with raised and lowered sections creating hollows that can retain the marbles which are assumed to be used as pawns.
Even though physical evidence of the game only exists in the Old Kingdom an understanding of the associated “Mysteries of Mehen” can be derived from sources after this period. These mysteries are found recorded in the “coffin texts” (Faulkner, 1977) and later in the “Book of the Dead” (Faulkner, 1994). The god Mehen is a coiled serpent described as a protector but ultimately he protects by capturing the enemies within his coils and keeping them as prisoners.

“My soul belongs to my body, my shade is at my side. I am the guard of the prisoners after the secret affairs of the coiled one [Mehen]” (Faulkner, 1977, p. 135).

This capturing of the enemies of Ra within the coils of Mehen could be the religious idea which led to the development of the game but as the game existed prior to any written records of the Mysteries of Mehen, it is not really known whether the game came from the mythology or whether the mythology was inspired by the game itself (Kendall, 2007). What is known is that the Mysteries of Mehen were secret. The mysteries of Mehen tell of coiling roads of fire with the god Ra at their centre. Knowing the names of these roads
was essential if you wished to traverse them in order to reach the Duat and this was secret knowledge, not knowledge imparted to the general population (Piccione, 1990).

The rules of Mehen are not fully understood but there have been several attempts to recreate the method of play. In most reconstructions Mehen appears to be a combination of race game and capture game (Rothöhler, 1999). The marbles in the game act as pawns that traverse the coils of Mehen, upon their journey they are in danger of becoming captured by the lions. This would make sense when aligning the game to the Mysteries of Mehen and the game may have been created as a way to reaffirm the secret knowledge through direct involvement.

Egyptian religion at a high level was a system to serve the elite. Those with special knowledge of ritual would be able to cross into the next life. This required being literate and being of sufficient social status to be exposed to these “mysteries”. The word mysteries is often used but the Egyptian word here is “St3w” which has a deeper meaning of “secret knowledge”, that is, the secret rituals and religious information that would allow a priest, high ranking official or member of the royal family to gain entry to the afterlife (Piccione, 1990).

While the game of Mehen has ties to ancient Egyptian religion that bind it to that particular society, some games played in ancient Egypt were more open to cross cultural transmission. A popular board game that originated in Egypt and was played throughout the Middle Kingdom was Hounds and Jackals (Hoerth, 2007). This is a race game where players move sticks with carved heads of hounds and jackals around a board.

One of the finest examples is that found by Howard Carter and now housed in Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 5). The board has fifty eight holes linked in a circuit by proximity. While the decorative designs can vary there are some common features across each example. The central hole at the top is large; possibly to hole multiple sticks and
therefore considered to be the destination. The large hole is often surrounded by the hieroglyphic symbol for “Shen” which means “to encircle”, “to go around” and is used to describe the journey of the Sun, it makes sense in this context as the players move around the edge of the board.

The most common shape for the boards are designs that have curved edges, described by Carter as an axe shape (Carter, 1912), but it is perhaps more representative of an ancient Egyptian shield. There are also examples that are the shape of animals such as a turtle or hippopotamus. A popular design feature is for the board to have a central palm tree motif but this is assumed to be for decoration only.

The rules are not known but there are several attempts to recreate them from the evidence that has survived. Movement was determined by rolling astragali (knucklebone dice) and these are often found with the boards. There are certain tracks carved into the board which, it is assumed, were used to redirect a player’s progress in a similar way to Snakes and Ladders (fig. 6).

Fig. 5. Ivory Hounds and Jackals board from tomb of Reniseneb (MMA 26.7.1287).
The game “Hounds and Jackals” is also known as “58 holes” and “The Monkey Race”, it is a game that travelled well and examples have been found that retain the core features of the board throughout the ancient world with at least sixty eight boards having been found across the ancient near east (de Voogt, et al. 2012). Rather than seeing different interpretations of the game, the style and core features of are fairly static despite it crossing cultural and geographical borders. Hounds and Jackals was played for nearly 2,000 years with very little change, it did not have the same religious connections that Mehen had and was therefore played for recreational reasons. It was a widespread game that would have been traded or at least transferred by cross cultural play (de Voogt, et al. 2012).

Another game which travelled well is the game of “Aseb”, also known as “20 Squares”, which is closely related to the game of Senet. Double sided boards were fairly common with one side marked out as an Aseb game and a Senet game marked on the other. As with Hounds and Jackals, Aseb is widespread throughout the ancient near east and shows many common features with the Mesopotamian “Royal Game Of Ur” (Murray 1952). It
is believed that rules are the same and a cuneiform tablet detailing the rules of the Royal Game of Ur was translated and applied to Aseb (Finkel, 2007). The game made it into Egyptian culture through trade and cultural exchange which again places it as a recreation game with less attachments to ritual play.

The board layout changed a little but the changes are progressive (fig. 7). Aseb is a race game where players attempt to exit all of their pieces from the board so the playing pieces have an entrance square, a predefined path to follow and an exit square. In the Royal Game of Ur there is a fairly complicated path which twists back on itself and has many special squares marked that have an effect on each player's progress. By the time the game appears in Egyptian tombs the exit has been elongated to remove the need to travel back. This also helped to make the shape of the board more rectangular allowing Aseb to be played on the reverse side of a Senet board. Player's pieces are safe from being set back to the start unless they are on the central strip and Finkel suggested that this straightening was a deliberate attempt to avoid the players having safe zones and to keep them engaged in battle (Finkel 2007).

*Fig. 7. Top: The Royal Game of Ur, British Museum, ME 120834*

*Mid: A transitional board in Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, S 3688*

*Bottom: Aseb, British Museum, EA24424*
The game's religious connections are more indirect than with Mehen. Aseb is mentioned in funerary texts but only in a recreational context. It is a game that the gods play and by defeating them you will have proved your worth and be allowed safe passage. Whilst double sided boards are common the games appear to have very different functions; Senet is filled with religious and ritual connections.

Senet like Aseb is an escape game where the goal of the game is to get all of your playing pieces off the board in a similar manner to backgammon. The game board contains thirty squares and used throwing sticks to determine movement. It allows you to pass your opponents pieces by exchanging places, the word “senet” means “passing” in ancient Egyptian language. Senet was played for about 3,000 years and nearly eighty boards have been discovered. There were four Senet boards found in Tutankhamun's tomb alone. Almost all of the Senet boards have some squares marked out for special purposes with the last five squares containing the hieroglyphs representing “good”, “water”, “three”, “two”, “one”. As a method for exiting the board players have to throw the number on the square to exit if stood on the last three squares. The water square sends players back to the previous row.

![Fig. 8. The movement of pieces in the game Senet (Robinson, 2014)](image)

The game may have started as a purely recreational activity but out of all of the ancient Egyptian games, Senet has embedded itself most deeply in ancient Egyptian religion and ritual. It was provided both as a physical tomb item and also as a magical item depicted in
tomb paintings and offering lists since the first dynasty. When items were painted on the walls of a tomb they could be manifested as real items by the deceased.

Early visual representations of Senet being played show people playing the game during the funerary celebrations while the deceased looked on as a third party. At this point it appears that the game was being played purely for recreational purposes and it is shown along side scenes depicting dancing and music. By the sixth dynasty visual representations of Senet were changed to include the deceased playing the game against a living opponent. This is significant as the game was being used as a bridge between the deceased and the world of the living (Piccione, 2007). By the twelfth dynasty the game had received a more ritual use and in the Coffin Texts, Spell 405 instructs the deceased:

\[
\text{Let him sing, let him dance, and let him receive ornaments.}
\]
\[
\text{Let him play Senet with those who are on Earth.}
\]
\[
\text{It is his voice that is heard, even though he can not be seen. (de Bruck 1954, p.209)}
\]

This shows Senet in use as a ritual method of communication between the living and the deceased (Piccione, 2007) and after the twelfth dynasty the game took on a deeper connection to this transmigration. Representations of the deceased are now shown playing with no visible opponent (fig. 9). This combined with textual evidence from both the coffin texts (spell 335) and chapter seventeen of the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Faulkner, 1994) indicate that the deceased now plays against his Ba, the part of the human soul that can transmigrate, and this is how the deceased was able to communicate between the two worlds.
Some texts also refer to the deceased playing Hounds and Jackals against an invisible opponent in order to reach the afterlife safely. Consequently, the game was often placed in the grave alongside other useful objects for the dangerous journey through the Duat.

By the eighteenth dynasty the religious nature of the game was evident, Senet was no longer visually represented in scenes of daily life but shown exclusively in the religious context of tomb paintings. Senet boards were also inscribed with chapters from the Book of the Dead and were being manufactured deliberately as funerary goods (Piccione, 1980).

The secret knowledge and ritual associated with these board games was intended to be learnt by those wishing to travel to the Duat. These spells were written in the Book of the Dead and in the Coffin Texts to ensure the deceased did not forget them, they were an important part of the journey and being a capable player would help the deceased to complete this journey.
All four games all have a large element of chance and their movements are determined either by the random fall of sticks or by throwing dice. These may be games of chance but when linked with religion and ritual this can be seen in a more philosophical light. The common game of Snakes and Ladders originated in India and the early boards were adorned with Hindu gods. The random elements of the game had their roots in Karma and the player's fortune was seen as being determined not as a random act but by fate. In Ancient Egypt these random elements may have been seen as the destiny of the gods also, as being governed by the universal truth of Maat.

It is difficult to know how much religion influenced the creation and development of these games and how much the games had these religious ideas connected to them. In the case of Mehen it is possible that the mythology led to the creation of the game but in the case of Aseb and Sennet, they are more likely to have existed as games which then became part of Egyptian recreation and ritual. If mankind played these games then it would have made sense to the Egyptians that mankind's creators would have also enjoyed playing them and that the deceased could use the games to socialise with the gods.

*Fig. 10. Aseb board scratched into a flat surface, from Deir el-Medina, Louvre Museum, E14449*
The lack of surviving evidence from the poorer regions make it difficult to assess how much these games were played in a domestic environment. There is little equipment required to play these games, however, and a board can be scratched into the ground or on a flat rock and a few impromptu counters used. These improvised board games would not have survived well but there are examples from persevered towns such as the workman's village of Deir el-Media which show these games were played in a domestic context.

Games by their very nature have a social element to them, they require more than one player and can be played with friends or family. When these games were played by the general population then it may have been with less religious attachment and more as a pure form of leisure and socialising. The average Egyptian would have no knowledge of the mysteries of Mehen or of the religious activities attached to the other games.

In the case of Senet, the social elements of the game extended through religion into a method of ritual communication between the world of the living and that of the deceased. The religious elements had also become an important part of the secret ritual for gaining access to the Duat and these secrets were kept for those who had attained a high enough social status to allow them to aspire to joining the gods.

Board games may have started purely as a leisure activity but unlike sports or other physical games board games in particular received a level of religious attachment. This is true of many everyday items that were taken into the tomb but board games appear to have been given greater significance. While the evidence of games in a domestic context is sparse it does show that improvised games were played and the social aspects of gaming are evident. The ritual of communicating with the deceased over a game of Senet is also indicative of the game table being a place to converse during daily life which is a function of gaming that continues today.
List of illustrations

Figure 1. Petrie, W. M. F., Quibell, J. E., 1896, *Naqada and Ballas 1895*, Quaritch, London. Plate XLIII, 2.

Figure 2. Capart, J., 1938, *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Figure1.

Figure 3. Quibel, J. E., 1913, *Excavations at Saqqara 1911-1912*, Le Caire : Institut français d'Archéologie Orientale. Figure 3, p.20.

Figure 4. British Museum, EA. 66216. At http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00556/AN00556248_001_l.jpg (Accessed on 25.05.15)

Figure 5. Hounds And Jackals, *MMA 26.7.1287*. At http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/eg/web-large/DP263833.jpg (Accessed on 25.05.15)

Figure 6. (Left) Carter, H. 1912, *Five Years' Exploration At Thebes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Figure 14. p. 57.

Figure 6. (Right) Petrie, W. M. F. 1890, *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara*, London, Plate XVI, p. 30.

Figure 7. (Top) The royal Game of Ur, British Museum, ME 120834 At http://www.britishmuseum.org/images/ps121289_1.jpg (Accessed on 25.05.15)

Figure 7. (Bottom) *British Museum, EA24424*. At
http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00293/AN00293260_001_l.jpg
(Accessed on 25.05.15)

Figure 8. Robinson, P., 2014, *Senet Rules* At


Figure 10. Décamps, C., 2008, *Louvre Museum, E14449* At
Bibliography


Appendix A – Chronology of Ancient Egyptian

Predynastic Period (6000 – 3100 BC)
   Anything from earliest settlement
   Dynasty 0
      Naqada settlements

Early Dynastic Period (3100 - 1650 BC)
   1st Dynasty
      Narmer, Menes, Aha, Djer, Djet, Adjib, Semerkhe, Qaa
   2nd Dynasty
      Hotepsekhemwy, Raneb, Ninetjer, Peribsen, Khasekhem

Old Kingdom (2650 - 2150 BC)
   3rd Dynasty
      Sanakht, Netjery-Djoser, Sekhemkhe, Khaba, Huni
   4th Dynasty
      Snofru, Khufu, Radjedef, Khephren, Menkaure, Shepseskaf
   5th Dynasty
      Userkaf, Sahure, Neferirkare, Shepseskare, Raneferef, Niuserre, Menkauhor, Isesi, Unis
   6th Dynasty
      Teti, Pepi, Merenre, Pepi II
   7th Dynasty
      Very little evidence of this time, several short reigns of unknown lengths.
   8th Dynasty
      Several short reigns leading into the First Intermediate Period.

First Intermediate Period (2134 - 2040 BC)
   9th Dynasty
      Several kings ruling mostly from Herakleopolis.
   10th Dynasty
      Kings ruling from Herakleopolis, some cross over with Theban rulers.
   11th Dynasty
      Intef I, II and III, Montuhotep I (II) (Defeat of Herakleopolitan rule.)

Middle Kingdom (2040 - 1640 BC)
   11th Dynasty (continued)
      Nebhepetre Montuhotep, Montuhotep III, Montuhotep IV
   12th Dynasty
      Amenemhat I, Sesostris I, Amenemhat II, Sesostris II, Sesostris III, Amenemhat III, Amenemhat IV, Sobeknoferu

Second Intermediate Period (1640 - 1550 BC)
   13th Dynasty
      Wegaf I, Amenemhat V, Sobekhotep I, Hor, Amenemhat VI,
Sobekhotep II, III, IV, V

14th Dynasty
A group of minor kings, some probably ruled along side 13th Dynasty rulers during its collapse.

15th Dynasty
Egypt was ruled from the delta region by the Hyksos, a group of Asiatic invaders.

16th Dynasty
This like the 15th Dynasty was ruled by various Hyksos kings. They were driven out of the country by the rulers of the 17th Dynasty who returned control to Thebes.

17th Dynasty
Intef V, Sobekemsaf, Seqenenre, Sequenenre Tao, Kamose

New Kingdom (1550 - 1070 BC)

18th Dynasty

19th Dynasty
Rameses I, Seti I, Rameses II, Merenptah, Seti II, Amenmesses, Siptah, Tawosre

20th Dynasty
Setnakht, Rameses III-XI

Third Intermediate Period (1071 - 712 BC)

21st Dynasty
Smendes, Psusennes I, Amenemope, Osorkon I, Siamun, Psusennes II

22nd Dynasty
Sheshonk I, Osorkon II, Takelot I, Sheshonk II, Osorkon III, Takelot II, Sheshonk III-V

23rd Dynasty
Very little evidence of this time, several short reigns of unknown lengths.

24th Dynasty
Several short reigns of unknown lengths. Bakenre

Late Period (712 - 332 BC)

25th Dynasty
Kashta, Piye, Shabaka, Shebitu, Taharqa, Tantuamun

26th Dynasty
Piramesses, Psammetichus II, Necho II, Psammetichus II, Apries, Amasis II, Psammetichus III

27th Dynasty
Under Persian rule, Cambyses, Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, Darius II

28th Dynasty
Amyrtaios

29th Dynasty
Nepherites I, Psammuthis, Hakoris, Nepherites II
30th Dynasty
    Nectacebo I, Teos, Nectacebo II