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The Game of *Senet*




This is a picture of the scribe Ani and his wife, Tutu, playing a game of *senet*. By the looks on their faces, they are enjoying themselves, probably because it appears that Ani has the game in the bag.

Senet was an enormously popular game among the Ancient Egyptians, both for sheer amusement, and as an allegory of the passage of a soul into eternal life in the underworld. It faded from popularity only in the 400's A.D., when Roman rule brought Christianity and *senet's* religious aspects put it in disfavor. Only in the past century, through the efforts of fun-loving archaeologists, has the game been rediscovered. I can attest from experience that it is just as fun today as it was 5,000 years ago. It's an interesting combination of luck and skill. I like to think that this "play the hand you're dealt"

mentality contributed to the resiliency that allowed Egyptian culture to endure for 3,000 years.

That the game was both very old and very popular can be seen from the fact that the glyph  **mn**, representing a *senet* board with playing pieces on top, is found in the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions, honoring the king Narmer (also known as "Menes"), from around 3100 B.C., and that it went on to become one of the most common of hieroglyphic symbols. Game boards were also a common item in the burial equipment of Egyptians from all levels of society, so that they might continue to enjoy it in the afterlife (Click [here](#) to read about King Tutankhamen's *senet* board!).

As with all Egyptian words, there is no way of knowing if *senet* is the game's real name. *Senet* seems to be derived from the verb "to pass", which in Coptic is **shina**. Since the feminine **t** marker was often left unpronounced in Late Egyptian, and since the glyph  **S** usually used to spell the game's name (as in the inscription on the right) represented the sound **z** in Old Egyptian, there is reason to believe that the actual name was closer to **zinat**.



Similarly, we can't be certain that we have rediscovered the actual rules of the game. In recent years, I've seen several different versions. But many years ago, I found a boardgame called **Passing Through the Netherworld**, produced by Timothy Kendall of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It contains a set of rules and a 67-page booklet detailing the archeological evidence he studied to determine those rules. This is good enough for me, and the rules I set forth below are based on his work, with only a few clarifications I added as I played the game.

You can learn the rules of *Senet* [here](#); you can play on-line *Senet* [here](#), or you can down-load **Senet For Windows** [here](#)



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