

MEHEN

Mehen is one of the oldest board games in the world, along with the Royal Table of Ur and the Aseb, or Game of 20 squares. It dates back to the Egyptian pre-dynastic period, datable to before 3100 BC and

was played for centuries before decaying in favor of the more famous Senet, Aseb and Seejeh towards the end of the Old Kingdom, around 2300 BC.



*Mehen's board. Predynastic period, Egypt.
Oriental Institute of Chicago Museum*

Specimens of the board have also been found in Cyprus, Jordan and along the coast of the Dead Sea, a sign that it was also played in these other territories.

Mehen literally means “the one who is rolled up” and refers both to the spiral form of the game and to the predynastic divinity Mehen, depicted precisely in the form of a snake that coils up in a spiral to protect the sun god Ra on his journey through the Duat at night as a shield from the attacks of the chaos god, the snake Apophis.

Towards the end of the Ancient Kingdom the divine figure of Mehen decayed, leaving Apophis as the only snake-shaped deity and the role of protector of Ra during the journey in the Western Lands passed through various deities: from Sia and Heka even the same Seth. The meaning of the Mehen's journey could therefore also have changed, making the game a race against the snake of Chaos from traveling under the protection of “the one who is rolled up”. But they are just hypotheses.

Its real uniqueness, compared to other games even from later eras, was that it was multiplayer, with up to a maximum of six participants. Although we have no archaeological or historiographical evidence that allows us to go back to the original rules, specimens of the game have been found accompanied by six pawns in the shape of dogs, hippos or - more commonly - lions and many round pawns, mostly resembling small marbles. The use, of course, was not clear.



*Six ivory Mehen lion pawns. 1st
Dynasty, ca. 3100-2890 BC
Egyptian Museum, Cairo*

The confirmation of how the complete game set of the Mehen was and, consequently, of the fact that it was for more players, we had with the discovery of the Mastaba of Hesy in Saqqara, where a complete set of board games is depicted on a fresco, from Mehen to Senet, to Aseb.



Three games: Mehen (left), Senet (top right), and Men (bottom right) from the Mastaba of Hesy in Saqqara, Egypt. Drawing by James Edward Quibell, 1913, on the Saqqara excavations of 1911-1912. Original at the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale

The Mehen boards found in archaeological excavations

are mostly made of earthenware or wood and the number of boxes is very variable, from forty to four hundred. However, it seems that the number of squares does not affect the rules of the game, rather the duration of the match.

From the historiographical and archaeological documentation the Mehen fell into disuse after the Old Kingdom, supplanted by the Senet and the Aseb, but it has not been completely forgotten since in 1925, the English colonial administrator Reginald Davies recorded the “Hyena Game” played from the locals in the north of Sudan and from the analysis of Davies’ texts it closely resembles the Mehen with the aim of getting all six of their pieces to reach the central well.

We extracted the rules mainly from the adaptation of Davies’s writings implemented by researcher and historian Timothy Kendall, in his article *Mehen: The Ancient Egyptian Game of the Serpent*.

PURPOSE OF THE GAME

This game, being very old and having been played for nearly three millennia, has undergone heavy variations in the rules.

We therefore propose a simple and a complex game version, for the player to decide which one to face. It follows, therefore, that the purpose of the game also changes depending on the version used.

SIMPLE VERSION

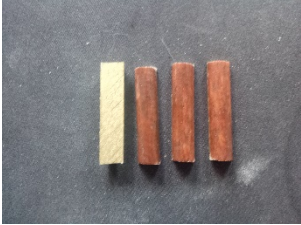

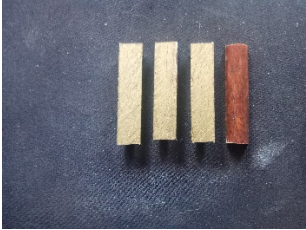
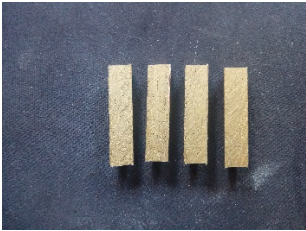

Each player must bring all of their pawns to safety on the snake’s head.

COMPLEX VERSION

The goal of the game is to get the lion as soon as possible and then use it to eat as many pawns of other players as possible.

READ THE EGYPTIAN DICE

The ancient Egyptians had a system of dice that was quite different from the one we know, so we must first of all learn to read them:

Depiction	Value
	1
	2
	3
	4
	5

GAME'S RULES

As already indicated in the paragraph “Purpose of the game”, being Mehen a very ancient game played for almost five millennia, it has undergone heavy variations in the rules that we therefore propose here in two versions: simple and complex.

Have fun!

SIMPLE VERSION

1. The number of players is from 2 to 6, pawns move on the board starting from the tail until they reach the head of the snake. The versions we propose are for 2 players in the leather bag and for max. 4 the large table one.
2. Each player, in turn, rolls the dice adding the score obtained from the previous rolls until a 2 is rolled. For example, I get this sequence of rolls:
1 1 3 4 1 5 3 4 2 so the total sum is $1 + 1 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 5 + 3 + 4 + 2 = 24$
3. When a 2 is rolled, the player decides how to move their pieces by distributing the points obtained for the six available pieces.
For example, with the above result I can decide to move a single piece of 24 squares, or all six of 4 squares or... as we prefer. The important thing is that the sum of the movements of single piece gives the total obtained by throwing the dice, in our example: 24.
4. If you end up with a pawn in a square occupied by one of an opponent, it is captured and must start again from the beginning.
5. If in our path the score leads us to overcome the opponent's pieces, this happens normally.
6. If a pawn ends up in a square occupied by another pawn of the same player, the pawns can be stacked.
7. A single pawn cannot make any capture on opposing pawns against each other and the player will have to decide on an alternative movement.
8. The leaning pieces can move together, a number of spaces equal to or less than the total score divided by the number of leaning pieces.
For example: with the roll of the dice the player has scored 13 points. He can move three pawns against each other by a maximum of 4 squares and a single pawn by only one square.
9. In addition to six pieces, each player also has a lion. He can decide to play it at any time of the game, with these constraints:
 - a. The lion starts from the tail and can move both forward and backward on the board.
 - b. If the lion moves, all the points obtained must be used up and cannot be shared with other pawns.
 - c. The lion can eat everything: single pawns, leaning pawns, other lions.
 - d. Once a lion has been brought into play, it can also be used by opponents.
10. Pawns or lions eaten can still return to play, starting from the tail.
11. The winner is the one who brings all the pieces to the snake's head first, where they are safe and can no longer be eaten, not even by lions.

COMPLEX VERSION

This version of the game is the one documented by Davies in the Nubia region of northern Sudan in 1925 and rebuilt by Timothy Kendall.

The game is divided into two phases:

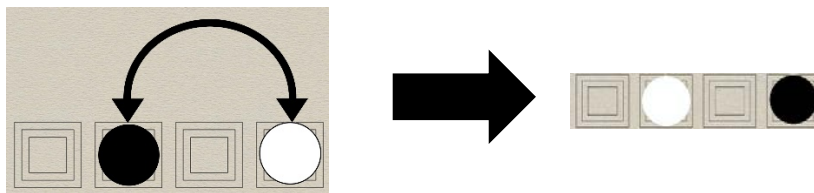
Stage 1: Get the lion

- All tokens start from the tail.
- The players move the pieces one by one towards the snake's head.
- Once all of a player's pawns reach the head and then return to the start of the trailing path, that player gets the lion.

Stage 2: Eat the opponent's pieces using the lion

- The lion along with the player's pawns begins to return from the tail to the head and then back to the tail.
- On his way the lion tries to eat as many pieces as possible of the opponents.
- Lions move twice as fast as other pawns, so whatever the dice score, it is doubled for the lion.

1. Players take turns rolling the dice. A token can only be put into play if a 1 is rolled.
2. The pawns only move with 2, 3, 4 and 5. If a player scores 1 and has no other pawns to put into play, "save" that score for later. (We recommend that you mark these saved points).
3. If a pawn lands in a square occupied by an opposing pawn, it swaps places, placing the opposing pawn in the position it started from that turn, as shown below.



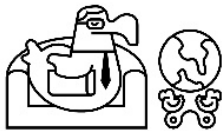
4. In order to land in the snake's head, the scoring of the dice must be correct; if you get a higher value than the missing squares to get to the head, it is not possible to get there, however it is possible to subtract from the score obtained from the dice the "bailouts" referred to in point 2 in order to obtain the exact score to reach the head. If he cannot reach the snake's head thanks to the saved points, the player must move another pawn, if he has no more pawns to move then he skips the turn.

For example: to get to the head the player must roll a 2. On his turn the player rolls the dice and rolls a 5. If, in the previous rolls, he had saved at least 3 points, he can decrease the necessary from this score to get the 2 he needs to get to the head.

If, on the other hand, the player have not enough points saved (in our example he has less than 3), he cannot reach the head and must move another pawn. If he can't move any more pieces he skips the turn.

5. Once on the head, in order to make the journey backwards it is necessary to spend 4 saved points for each piece that makes the journey towards the queue. If you haven't got enough points, you have to wait and accumulate them by rolling the dice until you have 4 points (remember that you only save points if you roll 1).
6. As soon as a pawn reaches the tail of the snake it started from, the player gets the lion. It is not necessary to make the correct score to reach the queue, it can even be passed.
7. The lion moves from the tail towards the center of the board and comes to the head in the same way as normal pawns, however when moving a lion it moves double the score on the dice.
8. During the journey from tail to head, the lion cannot eat opposing pieces, but the position is substituted as described in point 3.

9. To be able to get the lion out of the head and returning to the tail, however, 10 saved points must be spent. If they are not available, they must be accumulated as explained in point 2 and the player must wait to have enough of them.
10. On the way back to the tail, the lion can eat the opponent's pieces which are removed from the board.
11. If the lion takes down an opponent's lion, they swap places as in step 3.
12. Once the lions reach the top of the board, the game does not stop. Each player should return all their remaining pawns on the board to the snake's tail, trying to avoid being eaten by the opponent's lions.
13. The game ends when all the lions reach the snake's tail, even if some pawns remain on the board. In this case it is not necessary to have an exact score to exit the tail.
14. The winner is the player who has accumulated the most opposing pieces eaten by his lion, even if his lion reaches the beginning of the course last. However, if all the pieces are eaten before one of the lions reaches the snake's tail, whoever reaches the tail with his lion first wins.



THE ADVICE OF THE DODO

Have a lot of patience: the game will turn out to be much longer than you think!