



Ludic Language Pedagogy Special Issue Article: The Ludic You Love

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Snakes and Ladders: Roll, Reflect, Remix!

Jonathan deHaan* (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4775-4112>)

University of Shizuoka, Faculty of International Relations

Item Details

Keywords:

Board game
Cultural analysis
Meanings in games
Pedagogy of multiliteracies
Project-based learning
Roll and move
Remixability

Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** *Snakes and Ladders*
- **Type/genre/theme:** 'Roll and move' board game
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: 3 and up
- **Intended audience proficiency** 🗨️: absolutely any (with the 'right' pedagogy!)
- **Typical time to play** ⏳: 10 minutes or more
- **Number of players** 👤: 2-4

Microblog synopsis

I love *Snakes and Ladders* because it (with the help of a teacher!) turns simple rolls of a die into deep lessons about rules, language, and life. Students play, question, and redesign their own meanings.

#"Oh, no! I landed on a snake!"

#"Why do you think the game is from Europe? 😊"

View at the LLP Site: <https://www.llpjournal.org/2026/07/01/llp-special-edition-the-ludic-you-love.html>



1. Introduction

Snakes and Ladders is a simple roll-and-move board game (goal: get your token to the final square by rolling dice), playable in just a few minutes and teachable in a few sentences. I love this game because beneath its surface lies an extraordinary opportunity for language learning, cultural exploration, and playful pedagogy. The simplicity of its mechanics and the richness of its meanings make it a perfect “gateway” game for students to connect their everyday experiences of play to deeper questions about rules, fate, and agency. It is also endlessly remixable. Students can easily change dice, themes, or board designs, making it an ideal platform for developing both game literacy and learner autonomy. And even more, it’s the perfect “gateway” for teachers curious about doing more with games. The game invites not just play, but analysis, dialogue, and creation in ways that make teaching and learning deeply personal and participatory.

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TEACHING TIP

Use familiar, fast games as gateways.
Short, simple games like *Snakes and Ladders* create space for richer post-play analysis, reflection, and creative projects.

2. Ludic: Why It’s Playful and Enduring

At first glance, *Snakes and Ladders* seems almost too simple for any kind of Ludic Language Pedagogy. Players just roll a die, move a token, climb a ladder, slide down a snake. Pass the die. Rinse and repeat. Yet its elegance and unpredictability generate both tension and laughter. The randomness keeps every player emotionally engaged; even someone in last place might suddenly climb to victory. The tactile components – bright boards, iconic ladders, and writhing snakes – anchor atmospheres of nostalgia or discovery.

Historically, the game’s meaning has transformed dramatically: from its Indian origin as *Moksha Patam*, a moral teaching tool about virtue and vice, to its British reinterpretation as a Victorian lesson in morality, and finally to its U.S. commercial version emphasizing entertainment and chance. These layered interpretations make *Snakes and Ladders* not just playful, but reflective play—a cultural mirror that reveals how societies frame luck, morality, and success.

For a 5:27 video that explores this (either for you as the teacher or for your students), please watch:

[▶ Snakes and Ladders - How the Meaning of an Ancient Children’s Game Adapted Over Time - Extra Credits](#)

For learners (with the help of a teacher) this playfulness (and simplicity!) encourages experimentation and creativity. The game’s 10-minute playtime allows lots of time for reflection, discussion, drawing and remixing: what if snakes became “bad things at school” or ladders “acts of kindness”? Through such modifications, students experience both the joy of design and the joy of meaning-making.

3. Language: Rules, Talk, and Reflection

Linguistically, *Snakes and Ladders* offers a surprisingly rich microcosm of English use. The rule sheet alone exemplifies key grammatical structures such as imperatives (“Roll the die,” “Move your token”), present simple verbs, and conditional statements (“If you land on a ladder, climb up”). These clear patterns make it ideal for introducing or practicing some verb forms and functional language.

During play, students practice formulaic phrases for turn-taking and social interaction:

“It’s your turn.” “Count carefully!” “Oh no! I can never roll what I want!”

Such natural exchanges foster fluency and pragmatics far better than scripted dialogues. The emotional immediacy of competition provokes authentic language use—spontaneous exclamations, encouragements, and negotiations—that can be captured and reflected on afterward. Figures 1a and 1b show a (ludically decorated) transcript of my university students’ game of *Snakes and Ladders* in class (deHaan, manuscript).

Figure 1a
Snakes and Ladders gameplay transcription

1 Play the game. Record the game (audio or video) with a smartphone/tablet.
While you are playing the game, write down:

(1) what the person who takes a turn before you says (2) your observation, feelings, thoughts, questions.

okay, one -> not bad
four ->
six -> un that one
five -> okay, the same
six -> hm mmm the same tho
four -> okay fine
six -> okay, she not going up
fay r->>> lucky she not up
1-> she the same
3-> he hehehe
4-> yeah yeah
4-> he he he she losing
2-> oh no
2-> why not 1
3-> hhhmmmm
6-> am i dreaming or sth
2-> yeahhhhhhh
1-> lol
3-> oh shit
2-> she going up
4-> okay no tggd
6-> oh shit, she the same spot with me
2-> same spot again
6-> same spot again
1-> hehehe
1-> again girl
3, that speed->
4-> okay not bad
1-> hehehe
5-> oh good
5-> you safe
6-> slide down
2, really-> not gonna end
4-> never end
1-> again
1-> hhes small step, sth wrong with this game
4-> hehehe
6-> you safe
4-> safe again?
5-> fuck this game
1-> i love you
5-> she wining
5-> you safe girl
2-> come back girl
1-> not gonna laugh
1-> wininggggggggg

→ → → →
5 3 my turn 2 OK 3 I don't need this 3 I don't need this 6 my turn 3 "shouting" f*ck" ?? That want ?? "Smiling"
?? Really?? WTF ? OH! ?? There OK 2 "clicking tongue" 4 OK 1 not crying ?? You too ?? Yess Finally "Joy" 5 Yessss "nodding(?)" "Fist pump(?)"

Figure 1b

Snakes and Ladders gameplay transcription

okay, one -> not bad
four ->
six -> un that one
five -> okay, the same
six -> hmhhh the same tho
four -> okay fine
six -> okay, she not going up
four ->>> lucky she not up
1 -> she the same
3 > he hahaha
4> yeah yeah
4> he he he she losing
2> oh no
2> why not 1
3> hmhhmmm
6> am i dreaming or sth
2> yeahhhhhhhh
1> lol
3> oh shit
2> she going up
4> okay no tbad
6> oh shit, she the same spot with me
2> same spot again
5> same spot again
1> hehehee
1> again girl
3, that speed>
4> okay not bad
1> hehehe
5> oh good
5> you safe
6> slide down
2, realy > not gonna end
4> never end
1> again
1> hehee small step, sth wrong with this game
4> hehehe
6> you safe
4> safe again?
5> fuck this game
1> i love you
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5> you safe girl
2> come back girl
1> not gonna laugh
1> winingggggggggg

Beyond the board, *Snakes and Ladders* becomes a site for metalinguistic inquiry. Students analyze how rules are written, how tense and mood construct authority (e.g., “tokens must slide down snakes” is not up for debate), and how cultural metaphors are encoded in the text and imagery. By comparing versions from different countries, they notice lexical and thematic differences (“snake” vs. “chute,” “virtue” vs. “luck”), gaining awareness of how language reflects worldview. See Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c for a different class group’s exploration of the game’s language, social connections and educational value.

Figure 2a
Snakes and Ladders analytical poster presentation

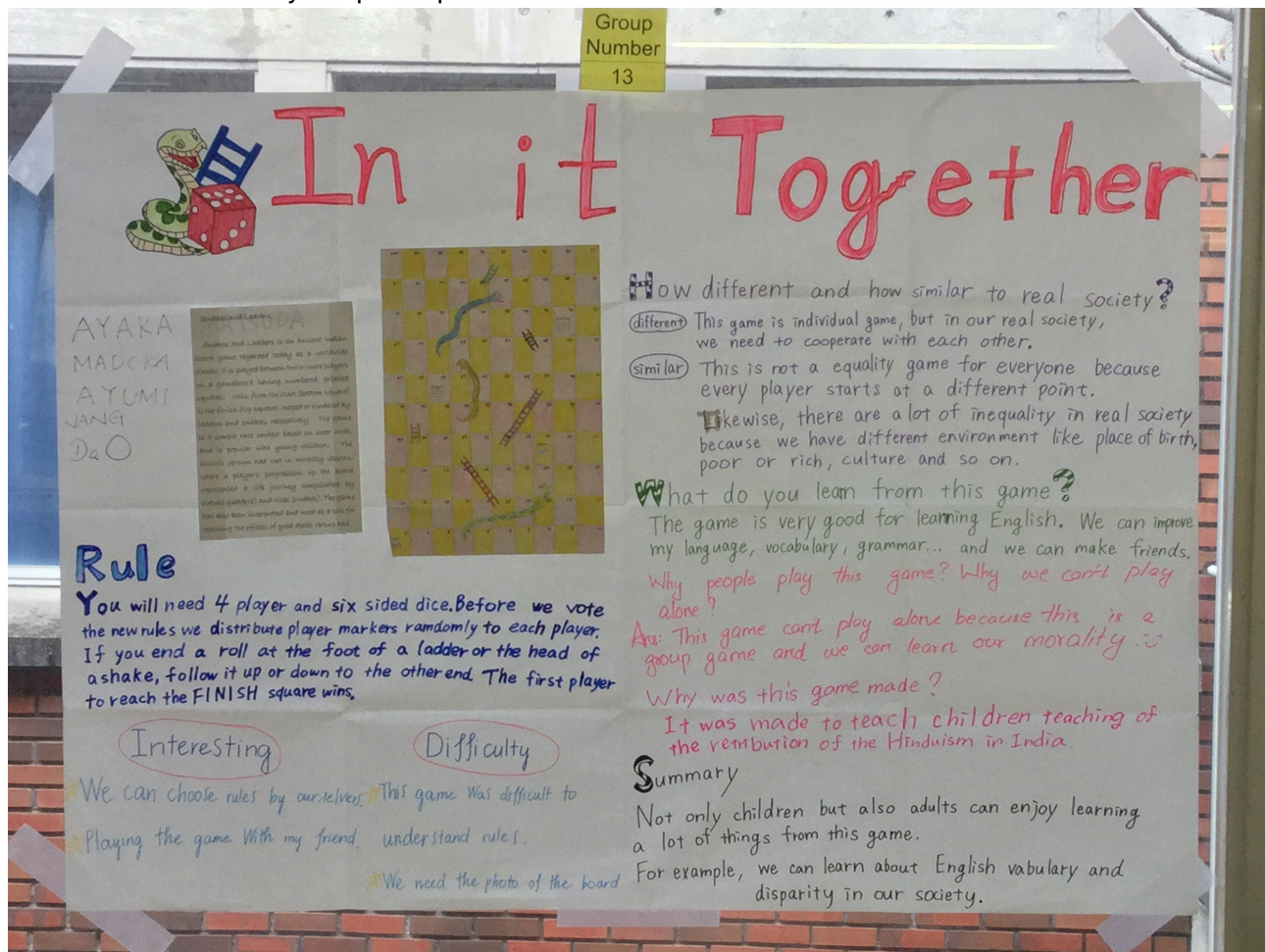


Figure 2b
Snakes and Ladders analytical poster presentation

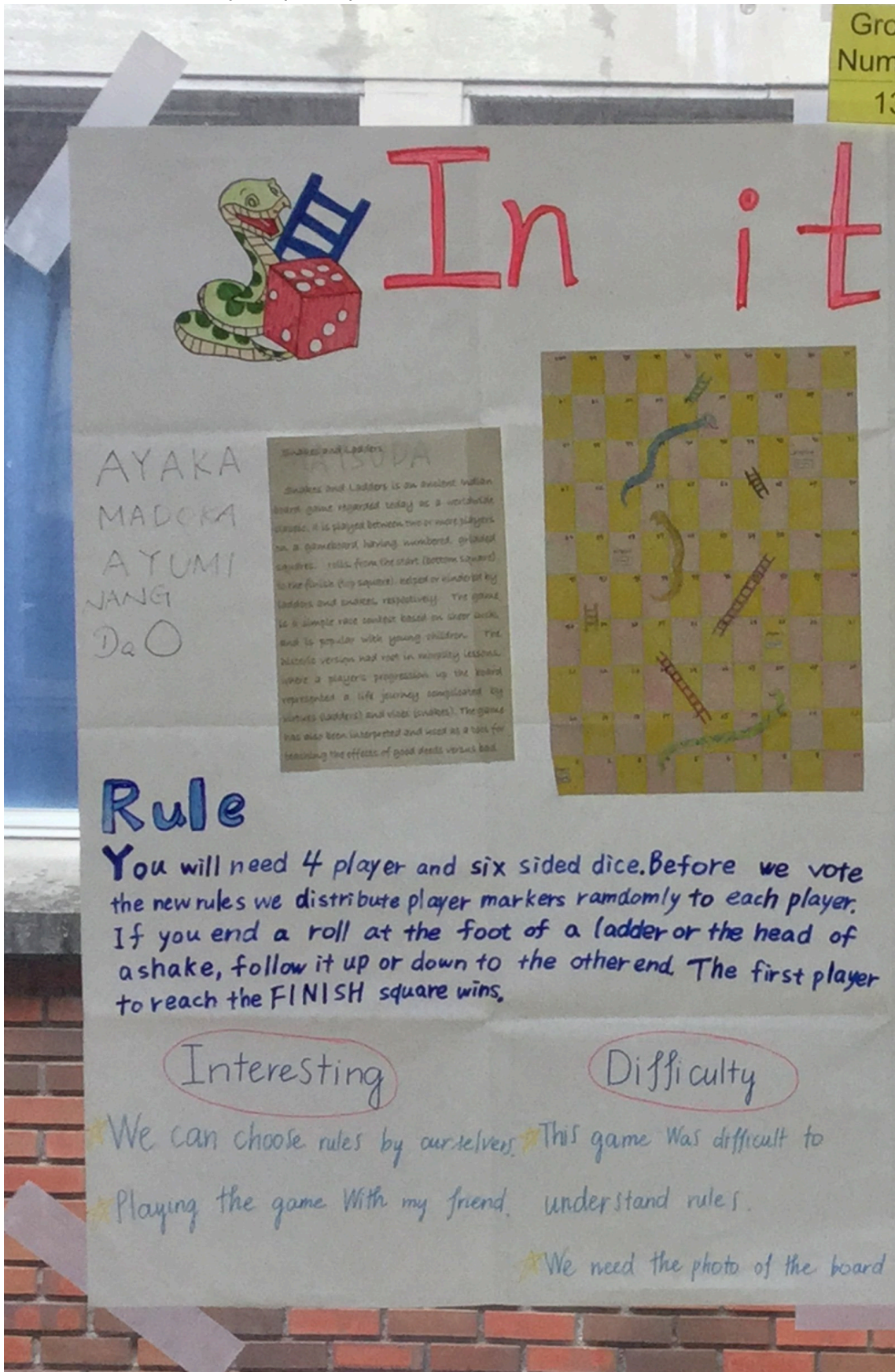


Figure 2c
Snakes and Ladders analytical poster presentation

Together

How different and how similar to real society?

(different) This game is individual game, but in our real society, we need to cooperate with each other.

(similar) This is not a equality game for everyone because every player starts at a different point.

likewise, there are a lot of inequality in real society because we have different environment like place of birth, poor or rich, culture and so on.

What do you learn from this game?

The game is very good for learning English. We can improve my language, vocabulary, grammar... and we can make friends.

Why people play this game? Why we can't play alone?

Ans: This game can't play alone because this is a group game and we can learn our morality.

Why was this game made?

It was made to teach children teaching of the retribution of the Hinduism in India.

Summary

Not only children but also adults can enjoy learning a lot of things from this game.

For example, we can learn about English vocabulary and disparity in our society.

4. Pedagogy: From Rolling Dice to Re-imagining Society

In my Game Terakoya course at the University of Shizuoka, *Snakes and Ladders* forms the center of a four-stage learning sequence heavily driven by the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies (and Learning by Design reframing): Experience → Conceptualize → Analyze → Apply (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Experience – Students first play *Snakes and Ladders* in small groups. I model simple English phrases for play (e.g., “It’s your turn.” “I have to slide down .. oh no!” “Thank you for playing!”).

Conceptualize – Together we examine the verbs and sentence structures in the rules, discussing why imperatives are used and how fairness is constructed through language. (See Notes below for my workshop slides and materials).

Analyze – Students research the game’s cultural history, compare versions, and debate philosophical ideas like fate versus free will. We examine how moral lessons and colonial adaptations transformed the game’s message.

Apply – Finally, students remix the game to express their own beliefs or social observations. Some have designed versions that embody their school’s particular culture and rules. One memorable group turned the board game into a cooperative version where a team of players try to dodge random bits falling from the top of the board! They then teach and playtest their creations with peers, reflecting on how their designs convey meaning.

This process aligns naturally with project-based and task-based approaches to language teaching, as well as connected learning principles that link classroom work with students’ identities and communities. Students move from understanding a text to creating a new one; from consuming to producing; from playing a game to designing and sharing one. For more information about my “PedML remixing,” please read deHaan (2022).

Teacher mediation is crucial. I scaffold discussions with mini lectures (see Figure 3 and Notes materials) worksheets, reflection prompts, and simple research tasks (“Where do you think this version came from, and why?”). Assessment is embedded in portfolios and peer presentations (which provide formative feedback useful for continued explorations and discussions) rather than tests. Students’ reflections reveal deep conceptual and linguistic growth —“written in English, but ... made in India. This is because India was a British colony” and “there are fewer ladders than snakes → doing good is harder than falling into bad behavior” (deHaan et al., under review).

Figure 3
Snakes and Ladders debriefing lecture slide

3.1) Language and effects

Present simple / imperatives (commands / directions)

"moves the number on the die"

"must slide down"



Students move from understanding a text to creating a new one; from consuming to producing; from playing a game to designing and sharing one.

TEACHING TIP

Go beyond playing—analyze and remix.

Encourage students to explore a game's language, history, and cultural meanings, then redesign it around new ideas or values.

5. Adaptation and Accessibility

My lesson (and probably any lesson with *Snakes and Ladders* or similarly simple board games) scales easily. For lower-proficiency groups, focus on counting, colors, and turn phrases. For advanced learners, emphasize cultural analysis and critical discussion. Materials are free or low-cost (you can buy a commercial version to enjoy and analyze in full, or photocopy or draw the board, die and tokens), and playtime is flexible (10 to 90 minutes). Teachers in other contexts can adapt the post-play activities to their own curricular goals: ethics, storytelling, civic education, or intercultural communication.

By centering language and literacy learning on *Snakes and Ladders*, teachers can bridge everyday play and academic inquiry—inviting students to see that games, like lives, are systems of rules that can be questioned, changed, and redesigned.

Help students see redesigning a game as both creative expression and an act of meaning-making across media and languages.

6. Conclusion

I love *Snakes and Ladders* because it reminds me, and my students, that even the simplest game can lead to profound conversations about language, culture, and human agency. Just a few rolls of a die becomes an invitation to notice how we speak, act, and make meaning together. In class, a tiny luck-driven journey of a few tokens up and down a board always seems to grow into something much larger: students exploring who they are, what they value, and how they might redesign not just a game, but their relationship to learning and society itself.

Even the simplest game can lead to profound conversations about language, culture, and human agency.

Notes

- For a lot more depth on *Snakes and Ladders*, and doing a lot more ludically, linguistically and pedagogically, check out deHaan and York's (2025) primer: <https://ludic.space/freedom-to-play/>
 - The first chapter is free!
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389937352_Freedom_to_Play_A_Ludic_Language_Pedagogy_Primer
- For Jonathan's lecture slides about *Snakes and Ladders*, click here:
 - GTc 2024 snakes and ladders interactive lecture
- For Jonathan's 60-minute workshop on *Snakes and Ladders* and literacy, click here:
 - HS Lecture: Games Language Learning Literacy / Snakes and Ladders
- For Jonathan's 4-class (360-minute) unit on playing, discussing and designing *Snakes and Ladders* and some other free board games, click here:
 - 2017 Eibei Course Nyumon - Prof deHaan's 4 week "multiliteracies" project

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