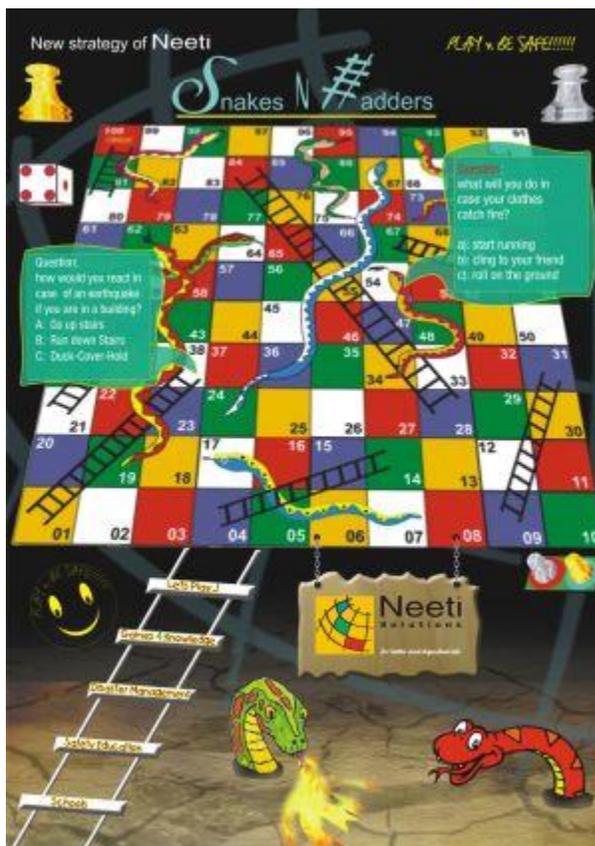


Snakes and Ladders, by Neeti Solutions.

It's the eternal favourite Snakes and Ladders board game played on the computer, but with a twist. This time, on landing at a snake's mouth, you won't necessarily be gobbled down. You can save yourself and continue the game by correctly answering a question that pops up, relating to disaster management. This modified version of the ever-popular game incorporates information about disaster management, educating children about fires and earthquakes and how to cope best in such situations as they roll the dice and play their game.

It's a given - educate a child and you can effect change in an entire generation. Moreover, educate the child through play and fun and they'll learn best. With these two tenets as its guiding principles, Pune-based solutions provider firm Neeti Solutions Pvt. Ltd. has designed this unique version of Snakes and Ladders, aimed at disseminating the principles of disaster management (preparedness and risk reduction) among school children. The game was showcased at the Asia Pacific Regional Workshop on School Education and Disaster Risk Reduction in Bangkok from 8-10 October. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR) and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (APDC) organised the workshop. The goal was to make a contribution toward reducing the vulnerability of school children to disasters and helping to decrease the loss of lives. It also aims to improve resilience of school communities struck by disasters, or in hazard prone areas.



The concept of integrating disaster management education into a popular children's game and its implementation into an interactive computer game was received well at the Bangkok workshop. It found an appreciative audience amongst hearing and speech impaired children in particular, and the ISDR has decided to partner with Neeti Solutions to adapt the game to suit such special needs. UN-ISDR is planning to use this in countries like Indonesia and Thailand, where it has some ongoing programmes in disaster management for children with special needs. Also, the game will now be integrated into the ongoing disaster management workshop in Gujarat, conducted by the Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, which was set up after the earthquake in 2001.

This computer-based 3D Snakes and Ladders is similar to the original in the way except for the integration of questions that decide a player's path ahead. When the player lands at the base of a ladder or the mouth of a snake, they have to answer a question relating to any kind of disaster. For example, "How would you react if you are inside a building during an earthquake?" Or "What do you do in case your clothes catch fire?" If the answer is correct, the player will move up the ladder or get a bonus point that will save them from the snake. If the answer is wrong, the player loses the chance to climb the ladder or gets eaten by the snake.

Disaster management training and education is not a new domain for Neeti Solutions. Its managing director, Dr Parag Mankeekar, has done voluntary work in Gujarat and Afghanistan after the earthquake and the war, and these

experiences gave him an insight into the need for organised disaster management training. As a company, Neeti has been developing computer based training programmes for organisations to train their rescue workers like firemen, ambulance workers, police, etc. These programmes are virtual reality based 3D tools where various disasters are simulated and the players have to react to the incident.

Taking this ahead, children are now the target audience for these training programmes. The best way to train them is through fun-filled activities and what better than computer games that kids love and spend hours at. "It has become crucial to include disaster management in school curricula," maintains Mankeekar. "Children are the easiest to reach and are an important link to the rest of the community. If we can prepare them for disasters, we will be able to build a community that is better prepared or educated for disasters," he says.

The group at Neeti has also been working at getting schools to include some disaster management activity into their schedules. Dr Manasi Abhyankar from the team has been training pre-primary and primary staff and children of some Pune schools in evacuation drills.

Abhyankar's experience in the United States made her realise that in schools there, even the youngest of children is taught about evacuation drills and what to do in case of a particular disaster. In India, she found that awareness is at a dismal low because neither the teachers nor the children know about the subject in details. This motivated her to start work with schools.

"The terrible school fire tragedy in Kumbakonam (Tamilnadu) in July 2004 is a stark reminder of what can happen in case of lack of safety awareness. That was the trigger for me to take the initiative in training school children," she says. However, her experience of over two years points to the lackadaisical attitude prevalent in most of our schools towards disaster management training. "Though school management authorities voiced the need for such training, in practice very few allowed me to conduct it. Some schools said that they do have fire fighters come in and demonstrate some rescue and fire fighting techniques. Some schools have tried to train high school children after the Kumbakonam incident. The Pune Municipal Corporation has banned the usage of cooking gas in PMC schools. But none of these are mandatory as yet or followed regularly," she points out.

In Pune itself, the Millennium National School, Shishuvihar School, and Ranade Balak Mandir are among the few to have started evacuation drill training. Abhyankar uses the popular game of 'Simon Says' to teach the school children. In Marathi, this game is played as into 'Shivaji mhanto' (Shivaji says) and is a favourite even among rural children, indicating the potential for integration into rural schools too. Abhyankar highlights the successful training of the primary section at Shishuvihar School, wherein after a year and half of ongoing training, they were able to evacuate the 250 children and staff in a disciplined manner within 70 seconds during a mock drill.

What has been heartening for her is the response from parents of children she has trained. Some of them willingly participate in such programmes and acknowledge the fact that they are now better informed about different emergency responses to various disasters because their children are sharing this information with them. Abhyankar has also started gathering information about state/municipal governments' rules for school safety using the RTI Act. While she does admit that schools are overburdened with curricular and extra/para-curricular activities, she insists that a golden mean must be achieved so that disaster training is made mandatory in schools without being a burden on the school authorities.

Teach them young and teach them right about disaster management - that's what this group in Pune is aiming to achieve, combining its experience in disaster management activities with its knowledge and skills in creating computer games. You may win or lose the particular game of Snakes and Ladders, but any which way, you'll definitely walk away with valuable information about how to react swiftly safely in case of a natural or manmade disaster. ⊕

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