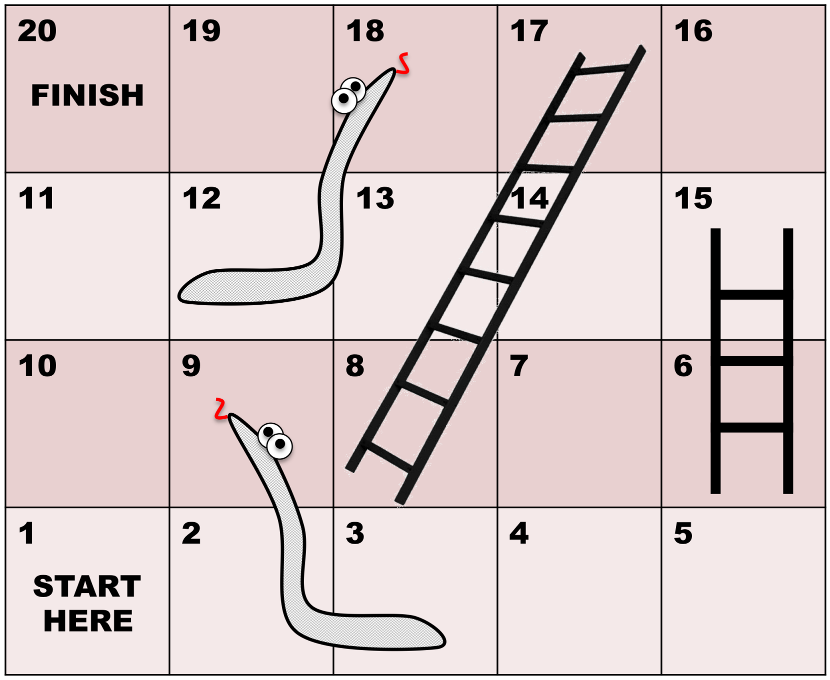
Analyzing Snakes and Ladders with Markov Chains

In the lecture, we looked at a small game board of Snakes and Ladders. Here we look at this larger board.



Rules of the game

The game starts on square 1. Reaching square 20 results in winning. On each turn, roll a die.

- If you roll 1 or 2, do not move and stay on your current square.
- If you roll 3 or 4, move ahead one square.
- If you roll 5 or 6, move ahead two squares.

If you land on square 6, you climb up to square 15. If you land on square 8, you climb up to square 17. If you land on square 18, you slide down to square 12. If you land on square 9, you slide down to square 3. If you land on square 19, you can roll 3, 4, 5, or 6 and land at square 20 to complete the game.

Analyzing the game

The transition matrix for this game is

$$A = \begin{bmatrix}
1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 & 1/3 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1/3 & 2/3 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1
\end{bmatrix}$$

What is the minimum number of moves in the game? To analyze this, you let

$$\mathbf{v}_0 = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}.$$

We compute $\mathbf{v}_n = \mathbf{v}_{n-1}A$ until the last component of $\mathbf{v}_n$ is nonzero. That happens when $n = 6$. So the minimum number of games is 6. Something about the board becomes evident when you look at $\mathbf{v}_n$ for increasing n. Regardless of the value of n, the 10th and 11th elements of $\mathbf{v}_n$ equal 0. This means you never have a chance to reach these squares. Take a moment and look at the board. It was constructed for this to happen.

What else do you notice? What game board might you make? It's your turn to explore these ideas.