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Hangman Spelling Game

Disha Sinojiya*, Prof. Kalpesh Chudasama**
*(B. Tech Computer Engineering, Atmiya University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India- 360005
Email: dishasinojiya987@gmail.com)
** (Assistant Professor of Engineering and Technology, Atmiya University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India – 360005
Email : kalpesh.chudasama@atmiyauni.ac.in)

Abstract:
Hangman is a classic word-guessing game that started as a paper-and-pencil activity and transitioned to computer platforms. It has remained relevant in education and studies about algorithms. This paper outlines the game's history, its role in teaching vocabulary, and its computational methods, such as frequency heuristics and entropy-based selection. It also addresses complexity issues found in versions like "Evil Hangman." Research shows measurable improvements in vocabulary in classrooms and compares basic and expert algorithms in computer play. These findings emphasize the straightforward mechanics that allow for in-depth exploration in history, learning, and computational methods.

Keywords — Hangman, word-guessing games, educational games, vocabulary learning, entropy-based guessing, frequency heuristics, computational complexity, algorithm design.

I. Historical development
Origins and initial descriptions: Although the specific origin of Hangman remains uncertain, an initial variant is found in Alice Gomme's 1894 anthology, which monitored tries without employing hanging imagery, suggesting a late 19th-century classroom tradition. The 1902 Philadelphia Inquirer description provided the currently recognizable hanging motif, representing a change in iconography as well as public play culture. These sources locate Hangman in the late Victorian to early modern era of parlor and classroom games.
Classical to modern rules: Historical reconstructions note a “classical” period (late 19th to early 20th century) standardizing six wrong guesses and repeated-letter guessing, later diversified by educational texts suggesting reduced or alternative visuals, and eventually by electronic adaptations such as Atari’s 1978 Hangman, reflecting both normalization and re-interpretation in modern contexts. Such accounts illustrate continuity of core mechanics with adaptations to social sensibilities and platforms.
Modern implementations: Hangman remains prevalent in online portals and learning game websites with relevant word lists, demonstrating the game's translatability to web and mobile environments and the retention of the fundamental guess-and-reveal cycle. These executions enhance the game's longevity as both entertainment and an educational support for spelling and vocabulary

II.Related work
Educational applications: A library-based synthesis (2016–2021) of five studies applying Hangman for teaching vocabulary identified consistent post-intervention gain and improved motivation, procedures borrowed from Greenall and Wright or researcher-created derivatives; results indicate procedural robustness. This work suggests effectiveness within secondary-level settings and is in accordance with norms of classroom deployment.
Algorithmic approaches: Academic and community discourses meet in dictionary-filtering with letter-frequency heuristics, optionally enhanced by positional analysis, as a basic solver; benchmark success rates at about 18% in one reported problem highlight potential for optimization through probabilistic modeling and entropy-based pruning. Such discussions place Hangman on a pedestal as a testing ground for search and decision heuristics in the face of uncertainty.

Complexity and adversarial play: Formal analyses of "Evil Hangman," in which the setter responds adaptively to prevent disclosing the word, look at the computational complexity of the adversarial version, shedding light on the added hardness that comes with adaptive adversaries over fixed-dictionary draws. This work places Hangman alongside didactic examples for complexity and game theory in limited information contexts.

III. Literature review

Educational literature: Meta-analyzed studies indicate that Hangman enhances vocabulary competence, facilitates spelling and pronunciation practice, and enhances learner interest; manipulation of procedural fidelity to Greenall or Wright procedures did not reduce results, suggesting that the underlying mechanic is adequate as an effective vocabulary scaffold in different implementations. Such findings underpin the embedding of the game in language curricula as a low-cost intervention.

Algorithmic text and discussion: Practical solvers will usually iteratively prune a candidate list by pattern constraints and letter guesses, and then choose the next guess by letter frequency within candidates, with positional tie-breaks enhancing discrimination; this is greedy information gain proxy easily extended by entropy or Bayesian modeling. The reported ~18% success rate for the baseline solver in a competitive setting highlights the value of more informative priors and adaptive information measures.

Historical reconstructions: Narrative histories locate late-19th-century consolidation of rule and subsequent pedagogical concessions that downplay gallows imagery, with digital incarnations in the late 20th century legislating electronic play, making Hangman both an educational resource and a casual game across media. These sources situate the game's social adaptation and migration in technology.

IV. Method

Game model: Consider a fixed dictionary D, unknown target word w of length L, and a maximum number of wrong guesses G; a solver iteratively maintains a candidate set $C \subseteq D$ filtered by length, revealed pattern, and exclusions from wrong guesses, selecting letters to maximize expected information gain. This abstraction supports both classroom and computational analyses within consistent constraints.

Baseline solver: The baseline strategy picks the yet-to-be-guessed letter with greatest marginal frequency over C, adjusts C according to exposed positions or eliminations, and recurs; tie-breaking through positional frequency can improve marginally by aiming for letters that disambiguate more candidate structures. This technique approximates greedy reduction in hypothesis space.

Entropy-guided optimization: A more sophisticated approach orders letters in terms of expected entropy decrease over C, considering candidate splits triggered by each letter's occurrence/exclusion and position patterns; implementations that calculate per-position entropies and prune on high-entropy positions show better C-narrowing and better prediction accuracy in experiments. This puts Hangman into the category of traditional active feature selection.

Adversarial variant: For "Evil Hangman," the setter adaptively selects the partition of C consistent with previous feedback that optimizes survival, de facto optimizing information disclosure and making solver guarantees harder; complexity analyses make formal what is intuitive as difficulty and distinguish it from fixed-word. This is important for benchmarking assumptions of solvers.

V.Experiment

Educational replication design: Following earlier research, a quasi-experimental pre/post test of vocabulary with classroom Hangman classes across several weeks can measure improvements in recall, spelling, and use; instruction procedures may adhere to Greenall or Wright protocols with no loss of generality, as on the basis of earlier robustness across procedural variations. These designs prioritize ecological validity in schools.

Algorithmic benchmark: With a canonical training dictionary and disjoint test dictionary as in competitive environments, compare baseline frequency and entropy-informed solvers over N fixed-G and variable-L randomized trials; report success rate, avg. guesses to solution, and avg. wrong guesses, positioning

performance against a baseline of ~18% for frequency-only heuristics. This design retains both efficiency and robustness.

Implementation notes: Guarantee pattern-matching strictness, maintain candidate set sizes after every guess, and log entropy calculations for ablations; where appropriate, simulate adversarial selection to test solver brittleness under "Evil" scenarios, with the understanding that adversarial complexity is not equivalent to fixed draws. These are in support of reproducibility and comparative analysis.

VI. Results

Educational results: Synthesis of literature shows enhanced post-test word scores and increased motivation and interest after Hangman-based teaching, with positive effects across spelling, pronunciation, and sentence use; the effects were retained despite procedural variation across experiments, which implies that the central mechanic is the key generator of learning outcomes. This focuses on positive efficacy for secondary-level students.

Baseline solver performance: Reported benchmarks record frequency-based solvers to succeed at about 18% under rigorous testing with disjoint dictionaries, recording nontrivial failure rates and encouraging better selection strategy; positional heuristics achieve incremental progress but are still limited by greedy behavior. These findings set the context for more profound information metrics.

Entropy-guided optimization: Working implementations with per-position entropy scoring and pruning report marked relative accuracy improvements over naive frequency, in accord with the prediction that optimizing information gain speeds candidate rejection; though particular rates vary with corpus and parameters, qualitative benefit over frequency-based methods is confirmed. This direction promotes informed information-theoretic design.

Adversarial difficulty: Complexity analyses of "Evil Hangman" account for sudden deterioration of solver performance as the setter adapts to maximize minimal disclosure, agreeing empirical frustration with formal hardness and emphasizing the need for distinct specification of fixed-vs-adaptive assumptions in experimental designs. This distinction is crucial for equitable algorithmic evaluation.

VII. Conclusion

Hangman's longevity is representative of a simple yet communicative information game that accords with historical, instructional, and computational inquiry, ranging from 19th-century schoolroom play to contemporary electronic and mobile versions. Studies in classroom learning report sustained gains in vocabulary and motivation, while algorithmic work finds that entropy-based selection enhances over baseline frequency heuristics but still struggles in adversarial conditions framed by "Evil Hangman." Standardization of corpora and protocols for benchmarks of solvers, broader cross-linguistic educational assessments, and continued synthesis of information-theoretic approaches with pedagogical goals are suggested to achieve greatest learning gains and solver resilience.

VIII. References

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