Hangman AI: Analysis ReportBidirectional HMM + Q-Learning Reinforcement Learning

Project: UE23CS352A Machine Learning Hackathon

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Date: November 2024-----1.
Key Observations
Most Challenging Parts
1.1 Overfitting Problem

The most significant challenge was the **severe overfitting** observed during development:

- **Training Performance:** ~95-96% win rate on training corpus
- **Test Performance:** ~32-33% win rate on test set
- **Gap:** 60%+ performance drop between training and test data

Root Cause Analysis:

- The RL agent learned to memorize patterns from the training corpus (50,000 words)
- Test set contains different words, many rare/technical terms not well-represented in training
- Q-table became too specific to training patterns, failing to generalize

Insight Gained:

- In sequence prediction tasks, RL can easily overfit to training vocabulary
- HMM as the foundation (with heavy weighting) helps prevent overfitting
- Need for better regularization and more diverse training strategies

1.2 State Space Explosion

Another major challenge was the **exponentially large state space**:

- Each state: `masked_word:guessed_letters:lives`
- Example: `"APP_E:{a,p,e}:4"`
- With 26 letters, various word lengths, and 6 lives, state space ≈ 10^15+ states

Insight:

- Q-table approach becomes infeasible for large state spaces
- Heavy reliance on HMM (expert oracle) was necessary
- Considered Deep Q-Network (DQN) but time constraints limited implementation

1.3 HMM-RL Integration Balance

Finding the right balance between HMM guidance and RL learning was critical:

- Too much RL → overfitting, poor generalization
- Too much HMM → no learning, static strategy
- Found optimal: HMM weight × 50, RL weight × 1

Key Insight:

- In domain-specific tasks, trust the expert (HMM) more than the learner (RL)
- RL should refine HMM predictions, not replace them

-----2. Strategies2.1 Hidden Markov Model (HMM) Design ChoicesArchitecture Decision: Bidirectional First-Order HMM

Choice: Implemented bidirectional HMM with first-order transitions

Rationale:

1. **Bidirectional Context:**
    - Traditional HMM only uses forward context (previous letters)
    - Bidirectional uses both forward AND backward context
    - Example: Pattern `"_PPLE"` - forward context is limited (start of word), but backward context (`? → P`) is highly informative
    - Result: Better predictions when pattern is partially revealed
2. **First-Order vs Higher-Order:**
    - First-order: P(letter | previous_letter) - simpler, more generalizable
    - Higher-order (2nd, 3rd): More context but higher risk of overfitting
    - Compromise: Added trigram patterns as additional feature (not full 2nd-order HMM)
    - Result: Good balance between context and generalization

Key HMM Components:

1. Vocabulary Pattern Matching (Most Accurate):

```
# Direct lookup in corpus vocabulary
matching_words = find_words_matching_pattern(masked_word)
if matching_words:
    return letter_frequencies_from_matches()
```

- **Why:** Most accurate when corpus contains the word
- **When:** Pattern has few matches (< 100 words)
- **Accuracy:** ~90-95% when pattern is specific enough

2. Position-Specific Probabilities:
P(letter | word_length, position)

- **Why:** Letter frequencies vary by position (e.g., 'Q' never starts words)
- **Implementation:** Separate counters for each (length, position) combination
- **Result:** Better predictions for specific word positions

3. Bigram and Trigram Patterns:
Bigram: P(letter | previous_letter)
Trigram: P(letter | previous_2_letters)

- **Why:** Captures common letter sequences (e.g., "APP" → "L")
- **Usage:** Combined with bidirectional context for maximum accuracy
- **Weight:** Trigram has 2.5x boost when pattern is common (> 50 occurrences)

4. Reverse Transitions (Bidirectional):
Reverse: P(letter | next_letter)

- **Why:** Patterns like `"_PPLE"` benefit from knowing what comes after
- **Example:** "P" commonly follows "A" in English (APPLE, APPROACH)
- **Result:** 20-30% accuracy improvement on partially-revealed patterns

HMM Smoothing:

Choice: Laplace (Additive) Smoothing with α = 0.01

Rationale:

- Prevents zero probabilities for unseen transitions
- Allows generalization to new words
- Small α value: conservative smoothing, maintains strong patterns
- Tested α = 0.1, 0.05, 0.01 → 0.01 gave best validation performance

Vocabulary Storage Strategy:

Choice: Store entire vocabulary (50,000 words) for pattern matching

Rationale:

- Pattern matching is most accurate method (when matches exist)
- Memory cost acceptable (50K words ≈ 500KB)
- Dramatically improves accuracy when word is in corpus

Trade-off:

- Only works for words in corpus (test set overlaps but not identical)
- Alternative: Pattern matching only, no vocabulary → lower accuracy on known words

-----2.2 Reinforcement Learning Design2.2.1 State Representation

State Design:
state_key = f"{masked_word}:{sorted_guessed_letters}:{lives_left}"
Example: `"APP_E:{a,p,e}:4"`

Components:

1. **Masked Word Pattern:** Current revealed pattern (e.g., "APP_E")
   - Encodes position of revealed letters
   - Critical for HMM predictions
2. **Guessed Letters Set:** Sorted string of all guessed letters (e.g., "aep")
   - Prevents repeated guesses
   - Used to filter available actions
3. **Lives Remaining:** Integer (0-6)
   - Affects risk-taking behavior
   - Important for Q-value learning

Rationale for This Design:

- **String-based state:** Simple, interpretable, fast lookup
- **Included lives:** RL needs to know risk level (few lives = conservative)
- **Sorted guessed letters:** Deterministic state representation (order doesn't matter)
- **No word length:** Already encoded in masked_word

Alternative Considered:

- Vector representation (one-hot + probabilities)
- **Rejected:** Too complex, state space explosion, slower lookup

2.2.2 Action Space

Design: Discrete action space - 26 letters of alphabet
actions = {a, b, c, ..., z} - guessed_letters
Why Simple:

- Natural action space for Hangman
- No need for complex actions
- Easy to filter (remove already guessed letters)

2.2.3 Reward Function Design

Final Reward Structure:
```
Reward = {
    'correct_guess': +2.0 × occurrences,      # Per letter revealed
    'wrong_guess': -1.5,                       # Lose a life
    'repeated_guess': -1.0,                # Inefficiency penalty
    'win_game': +25.0,                     # Large win bonus
    'lose_game': -8.0                      # Loss penalty
}
```

Rationale:

1. **Correct Guess: +2.0 × occurrences:**
    - Rewards discovering multiple letters (e.g., "E" appears twice = +4.0)
    - Encourages strategic guessing (common letters like "E", "A")
    - Higher weight than wrong guess penalty maintains exploration
2. **Wrong Guess: -1.5:**
    - Penalty for losing a life
    - Balanced: not too harsh (would discourage exploration) but not too lenient
    - Tested: -0.5 (too lenient), -2.0 (too harsh) → -1.5 optimal
3. **Repeated Guess: -1.0:**
    - Discourages inefficiency
    - Smaller than wrong guess (repeating is bad, but not as bad as wrong)
    - In practice: Environment prevents repeats, so this rarely triggers
4. **Win Bonus: +25.0:**
    - Large positive reward for success
    - Dominates other rewards (25 vs 2×5 = 10 for correct guesses)
    - Ensures agent prioritizes winning over minimizing guesses
5. **Lose Penalty: -8.0:**
    - Penalty for failure
    - Less than win bonus (encourages playing to win, not avoiding loss)
    - Combined with wrong guesses: -8.0 + (6×-1.5) = -17.0 total loss penalty

Reward Balance:

- Typical win: +25 + (5 correct × 2) = +35
- Typical loss: -8 + (6 wrong × -1.5) = -17
- Ratio: 2:1 win/loss ratio encourages risk-taking to win

Iterations:

- **Initial:** +10 win, -5 loss → too conservative
- **Version 2:** +50 win, -20 loss → too aggressive, overfitting
- **Final:** +25 win, -8 loss → balanced, good generalization signal

2.2.4 Q-Learning Algorithm

Algorithm: Tabular Q-Learning

Update Rule:
$Q(s, a) \leftarrow Q(s, a) + \alpha[r + \gamma \times \max_{a'} Q(s', a') - Q(s, a)]$

Hyperparameters:

- **Learning Rate (α):** 0.3
  - High enough for fast learning
  - Low enough for stability
- **Discount Factor (γ):** 0.98
  - High value: agent values long-term rewards (winning game)
  - Close to 1: considers future implications of each guess
- **Initial Q-values:** 0 (optimistic initialization via HMM)

Why Q-Learning (not DQN):

- State space is discrete and manageable (string keys)
- Tabular Q-learning is simpler, faster for this problem
- DQN would require neural network, more complexity, training time
- **Future work:** DQN could handle state space explosion better

Integration with HMM:
combined_score = Q(s, a) + (HMM_prob(a) × 50)
action = argmax_a combined_score

- HMM weight (50x) dominates Q-values
- RL learns refinements, not replacement of HMM strategy
- This design prevents overfitting to training vocabulary

-----3. ExplorationExploration vs Exploitation Trade-offStrategy: Epsilon-Greedy with HMM-Guided Exploration

Implementation:
ε-greedy with ε decay: 1.0 → 0.01 over 20,000 episodes
Exploration Phase (High ε):

- ε = 1.0 → 0.5: 100% exploration initially
- Explores HMM's top 5 predictions (not random!)
- **Smart exploration:** Even when exploring, uses HMM guidance
- Result: Learns from good guesses, not pure randomness

Transition Phase (Medium ε):

- ε = 0.5 → 0.1: Decreasing exploration
- Mixes exploitation (Q-values + HMM) with exploration
- Balances learning new states vs using learned knowledge

Exploitation Phase (Low ε):

- ε = 0.1 → 0.01: Mostly exploitation

- Uses learned Q-values combined with HMM
- Fine-tunes strategy on known patterns

Key Innovation: HMM-Guided Exploration

Instead of pure random exploration:

```
if exploring:
   # Bad: return random.choice(alphabet)  # Pure random
   # Good:
   top_5_hmm = sorted(hmm_probs, reverse=True)[:5]
   return random.choice(top_5_hmm)  # Explore HMM's suggestions
```

Why This Works:

- Exploration still discovers new states
- But explores **promising** states first (guided by HMM)
- Faster learning than pure random exploration
- Reduces wasted guesses on unlikely letters

Epsilon Decay Schedule:

```
ε_decay = 0.9995 per episode
episodes_to_50% = log(0.5) / log(0.9995) ≈ 1,386 episodes
episodes_to_10% = log(0.1) / log(0.9995) ≈ 4,605 episodes
```

Result:

- ~1,400 episodes: 50% exploration/50% exploitation
- ~4,600 episodes: Mostly exploitation with occasional exploration
- Final: 1% random exploration maintains adaptability

Validation of Exploration Strategy:

- Training win rate increases from ~40% (early) to ~96% (final)
- Q-table grows from 0 to ~100,000+ states
- Test performance: 32% (indicates need for more exploration OR less overfitting)

-----4. Future Improvements

Given an additional week, here are the improvements I would prioritize:4.1 Immediate Fixes (Days 1-2)4.1.1 Deep Q-Network (DQN) Implementation

Problem: Tabular Q-learning can't scale to full state space

Solution: Replace Q-table with neural network

Implementation:

- Input: Encoded state vector (masked_word one-hot + HMM probabilities + lives)

- Architecture: 3-layer MLP (256 → 128 → 26)
- Output: Q-values for 26 actions
- Experience replay buffer: Store and sample diverse experiences

Expected Impact: +10-15% test accuracy (better generalization)4.1.2 Ensemble of HMMs by Word Length

Problem: Single HMM treats all word lengths equally

Solution: Train separate HMMs for different word lengths

Implementation:
```
HMMs = {
   3-5: ShortHMM(),      # Common words, simpler patterns
   6-8: MediumHMM(),     # Most common length range
   9-12: LongHMM(),      # Complex words
   13+: VeryLongHMM()    # Rare technical terms
}
```
Expected Impact: +5-8% accuracy (better pattern matching)4.2 Advanced Improvements (Days 3-4)4.2.1 Curriculum Learning

Problem: Training on random words doesn't match difficulty progression

Solution: Start with easy words, gradually increase difficulty

Implementation:

- Phase 1: Common 4-6 letter words
- Phase 2: Common 7-9 letter words
- Phase 3: Uncommon words
- Phase 4: All words (final fine-tuning)

Expected Impact: +8-12% accuracy (better learning progression)4.2.2 Attention Mechanism for HMM

Problem: Current HMM treats all positions equally

Solution: Attention-weighted HMM predictions

Implementation:

- Learn attention weights for which positions/patterns matter most
- Weighted combination: position × bigram × trigram × global
- Attention learned via neural network or gradient descent

Expected Impact: +5-7% accuracy (focuses on important patterns)4.2.3 Multi-Step Lookahead

Problem: Greedy one-step decisions may not be optimal

Solution: Consider future implications of current guess

Implementation:

- Tree search (Monte Carlo Tree Search) for 2-3 steps ahead
- Evaluate: "If I guess E now, what will HMM predict next?"
- Choose action with best expected long-term outcome

Expected Impact: +7-10% accuracy (better strategic planning)4.3 Research-Level Improvements (Days 5-7)4.3.1 Transformer-Based HMM

Problem: Current HMM only uses local context (bigrams/trigrams)

Solution: Transformer encoder for full word context

Implementation:

- Pre-train transformer on corpus
- Fine-tune for Hangman predictions
- Captures long-range dependencies (e.g., "QU" pattern affects later letters)

Expected Impact: +10-15% accuracy (better context understanding)4.3.2 Meta-Learning for Few-Shot Adaptation

Problem: Model doesn't adapt to test set characteristics

Solution: Meta-learning to quickly adapt to new word distributions

Implementation:

- Learn to learn: optimize for fast adaptation
- Given small sample of test words, quickly adjust strategy
- MAML (Model-Agnostic Meta-Learning) algorithm

Expected Impact: +12-18% accuracy (adapts to test distribution)4.3.3 Uncertainty Quantification

Problem: Model doesn't know when it's uncertain

Solution: Bayesian RL or ensemble methods

Implementation:

- Track uncertainty in HMM predictions
- When uncertain, explore more; when confident, exploit
- Ensembles of multiple HMMs vote on predictions

Expected Impact: +8-12% accuracy (better decision-making)4.4 Practical Optimization (Any Time)4.4.1 Hyperparameter Optimization

Current: Manual tuning

Future: Automated search (Bayesian Optimization, Grid Search)

Parameters to Optimize:

- HMM smoothing (α)
- RL learning rate, discount factor
- Reward function weights
- HMM weight multiplier
- Exploration schedule

Expected Impact: +3-5% accuracy (finds optimal configuration)4.4.2 Data Augmentation

Problem: Limited to 50,000 words in corpus

Solution: Generate synthetic words or use external dictionaries (if allowed)

Implementation:

- If rules allow: Add common English words
- Pattern-based word generation
- Cross-validation to prevent overfitting

Expected Impact: +5-8% accuracy (more training data)4.4.3 Transfer Learning

Problem: Starting from scratch each time

Solution: Pre-train on larger word lists, fine-tune on corpus

Implementation:

- Pre-train HMM on general English word lists (100K+ words)
- Fine-tune on specific corpus (50K words)
- Transfer learned patterns to new domain

Expected Impact: +6-10% accuracy (better base knowledge)-----5. Summary

This project successfully implemented a **Bidirectional HMM + Q-Learning** system for Hangman, achieving:

- **Training Accuracy:** ~96%
- **Test Accuracy:** ~32%
- **Key Innovation:** Heavy HMM weighting (50x) with RL refinement

Main Challenges:

1. Severe overfitting (60%+ gap)
2. State space explosion
3. HMM-RL balance

Key Insights:

1. Trust the expert (HMM) more than the learner (RL) in domain-specific tasks
2. Bidirectional context dramatically improves predictions
3. Pattern matching is most accurate when vocabulary matches
4. Exploration must be guided (by HMM), not random

Future Work:

- DQN for better state space handling
- Curriculum learning for progressive difficulty
- Transformer-based HMM for long-range context
- Meta-learning for test set adaptation

The system demonstrates solid understanding of HMM, RL, and their integration, with clear paths for improvement given more time.-----**Total Development Time:** ~40-50 hours
Lines of Code: ~1,500
Key Files: `final_hmm_rl.py`, `hangman_env.py`, `demo.py`