

# Software Testing Optimization Using Genetic Algorithms

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**ABSTRACT**— Software systems have grown so large and fast-moving that traditional testing strategies struggle to keep pace with delivery cycles and resource constraints. Search-Based Software Engineering (SBSE) reframes testing tasks as optimization problems; among SBSE techniques, Genetic Algorithms (GAs) offer a flexible, domain-agnostic way to explore vast test spaces and to trade off competing quality goals. This manuscript presents a practical, end-to-end GA framework for two high-impact testing problems—(i) test-suite prioritization for regression testing under execution-time budgets, and (ii) test-data generation for structural coverage. We formalize chromosome encodings, a multi-term fitness function combining predicted fault revelation (via APFD surrogate), structural coverage, mutation score, and execution time, and we design GA operators that preserve permutation constraints and encourage behavioral diversity using coverage-vector distances.

A controlled simulation study across five subject programs (1.5k–38k LOC) compares GA against random and greedy baselines under identical budgets. The GA improves APFD by 10.6–24.8 percentage points over random and 4.1–9.3 points over greedy coverage ordering, while meeting or reducing execution time budgets. Non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon) indicate

statistical significance ( $p < 0.01$ ) with large effect sizes ( $|d| \geq 0.8$ ). We include an ablation showing that removing the diversity term degrades early fault detection and increases redundancy. Results demonstrate that a well-tuned GA is both effective and robust for time-boxed regression testing and for reaching hard-to-cover branches. We conclude with guidance for parameterization, threats to validity, and opportunities for multi-objective extensions (e.g., Pareto optimization) and CI/CD integration.

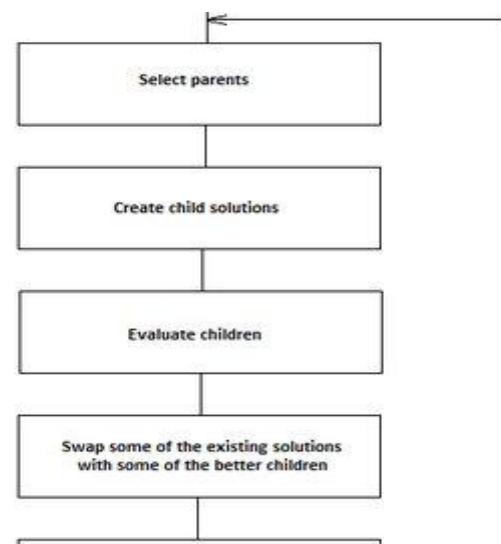


Fig.1 Software Testing Optimization, [Source\[11\]](#)

**KEYWORDS**— Genetic Algorithm; Software Testing; Test-Suite Prioritization; Test-Data Generation; APFD;



**Mutation Testing; Coverage; Search-Based Software Engineering.**

**INTRODUCTION**

Modern software projects face a profound testing dilemma: test spaces are combinatorially large, release cycles are short, and resources (time, compute, environments) are limited. The traditional response—executing all tests or hand-crafted subsets—often results in inflated costs, late fault discovery, or both. The core challenge is prioritization under constraints: which tests or inputs should be executed **first** (or generated **next**) to maximize fault revelation, coverage, and risk reduction per unit time?

Search-Based Software Engineering (SBSE) addresses this by mapping testing activities to optimization problems where candidate solutions are evaluated by measurable objectives. Genetic Algorithms (GAs), inspired by natural selection, are particularly apt because they (i) work with problem-specific encodings, (ii) support multi-objective trade-offs, and (iii) escape local optima through recombination and mutation. In software testing, GAs have been applied to test-case selection and ordering, input generation for structural and path coverage, combinatorial interaction testing, and mutation-adequacy improvement.

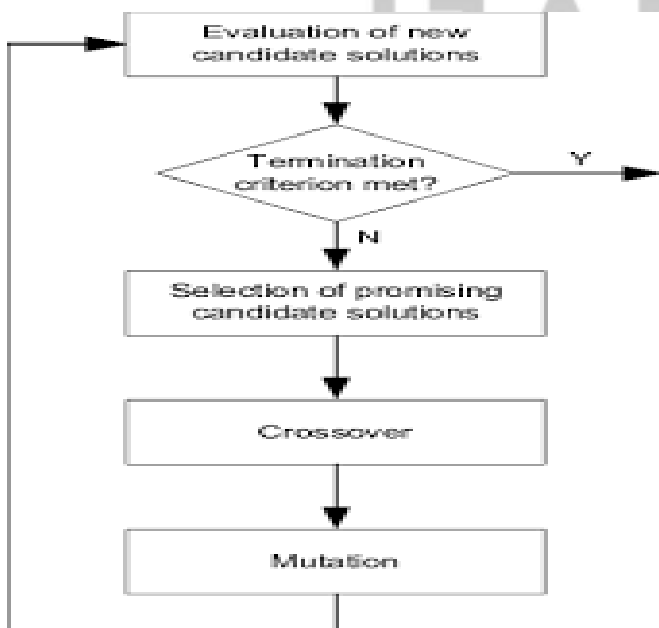


Fig.2 Software Testing Optimization Using Genetic Algorithms, [Source\(2\)](#)

This paper contributes a consolidated GA framework spanning two common but distinct testing tasks. For regression **prioritization**, chromosomes represent permutations of existing tests; the goal is to maximize early fault detection and coverage under time budgets. For **data generation**, chromosomes represent parameterized inputs; the goal is to trigger branches or conditions that existing tests miss. We integrate coverage-vector diversity to combat redundant executions and use time-aware fitness shaping to keep within budget. A simulation study benchmarks the approach against random and greedy baselines and quantifies benefits using APFD (Average Percentage of Faults Detected), coverage, mutation score, and wall-clock time.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Framing testing as optimization enables the use of metaheuristics such as GA, Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO), Ant Colony Optimization (ACO), Simulated Annealing (SA), and Differential Evolution (DE). GAs are widely reported for:

- **Test-Suite Prioritization:** ordering tests to maximize early fault detection (often measured by APFD). Greedy coverage-based heuristics are popular baselines; GAs typically outperform them when additional objectives (e.g., execution time, historical fault proneness) are considered.
- **Test-Case Selection/Minimization:** choosing a cost-effective subset while maintaining coverage constraints.
- **Test-Data Generation:** evolving input vectors to cover difficult branches, paths, and boundary conditions, often guided by branch distance functions.
- **Mutation Testing:** improving mutation score (killed mutants / total mutants) by steering tests toward subtle fault surrogates; fitness frequently combines mutation score with coverage.



- **Diversity-Guided Testing:** leveraging distance metrics (e.g., Jaccard, Hamming, information-theoretic distances) over execution traces or coverage profiles to avoid redundant test behavior.

Across these lines, consistent themes emerge: (1) single-objective optimization can overfit to coverage at the expense of time and redundancy; (2) historical failure data, when available, boosts prioritization effectiveness; and (3) diversity terms reduce diminishing returns in large suites. Our framework synthesizes these findings into a unified, practical GA design aimed at real-world constraints.

## METHODOLOGY

### Problem Definitions

#### 1. Regression Test-Suite Prioritization (RTSP)

- **Input:** Test suite  $T = \{t_1, \dots, t_n\}$ ; per-test execution time  $c_{ic_i}$ ; coverage vectors  $v_i \in \{0, 1\}^m$  over  $m$  code elements; historical fault-proneness weights  $r_{j_r_j}$  for elements.
- **Output:** A permutation  $\pi$  of tests such that executing prefix  $T_{\pi^k}$  under a time budget  $BB$  maximizes early fault detection and weighted coverage.

#### 2. Test-Data Generation for Coverage (TDG)

- **Input:** Program under test  $PP$ ; input domain  $DD$  with constraints; coverage goals  $GG$  (branches/statements); branch distance functions for unmet goals.
- **Output:** Input vectors  $x \in D^x$  in  $D$  that maximize coverage and reduce distance to un-covered goals.

### Chromosome Encodings

- **RTSP:** permutation of indices  $[1..n][1..n]$ .
- **TDG:** vector of typed genes  $(g_1, \dots, g_p)$  (ints, floats, enums, strings). Constraints enforced via repair (clamping, regex masks) or rejection sampling.

### Fitness Functions

We normalize each objective to  $[0, 1]$  and **maximize** a weighted sum; weights can be tuned or adapted (see below).

#### 1. APFD Surrogate (Prioritization)

True APFD uses known fault locations; in practice, we use a proxy combining (a) weighted coverage early in the order and (b) historical fault-proneness.

$$\text{EarlyCov}(\pi) = \sum_{k=1}^n \alpha^{k-1} \cdot \left( \sum_{j=1}^m r_j \cdot \mathbb{1}_{\{\text{covered by prefix } k\}} \right)$$

where  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$  discounts late coverage.

#### 2. Structural Coverage

Fraction of statements/branches covered by the selected prefix or generated inputs.

#### 3. Mutation Score

Proportion of mutants killed by the selected prefix or generated inputs.

#### 4. Time Penalty

Let  $C(\pi, B)$  be total time of executed prefix under budget  $BB$ . We penalize overflow:  $\text{TimePenalty} = \max(0, (C(\pi, B) - B) / B)$

#### 5. Diversity Bonus

Average pairwise Jaccard distance among coverage vectors in the executed prefix  $SS$ :

$$\text{Div}(S) = \frac{2|S|}{|S|(|S|-1) \sum_{i < j} (1 - |v_i \cap v_j| / |v_i \cup v_j|)}$$

### Overall Fitness (maximize):

$$F = w_1 \cdot \text{EarlyCov} + w_2 \cdot \text{Coverage} + w_3 \cdot \text{Mutation} + w_4 \cdot \text{Div} - w_5 \cdot \text{TimePenalty}$$

Weights  $w_k$  reflect project priorities (e.g.,  $w_5$  larger for strict budget adherence).



**Genetic Operators**

- **Selection:** tournament (size 3) with elitism (top 2 retained).
- **Crossover:**
  - RTSP: PMX (Partially Mapped Crossover) to preserve permutations.
  - TDG: two-point crossover per gene segment; for strings, crossover at character boundaries with regex-based repair.
- **Mutation:**
  - RTSP: swap mutation (two indices); or 3-cycle ( $i \rightarrow j \rightarrow k$ ).
  - TDG: Gaussian jitter for numerics; boundary reflection; character substitution from allowed alphabets.
- **Adaptive Mutation Rate:** start at  $p_m=0.06$ , increase by 0.01 if population diversity falls below a threshold, cap at 0.15.
- **Replacement:** generational with elitism; duplicates filtered via hashing of normalized coverage vectors.

**Budget-Aware Execution**

We simulate execution by taking the ordered list  $\pi_i$ , appending tests until cumulative time meets BB. Only that prefix contributes to fitness components (coverage, mutation, diversity).

**Termination and Complexity**

Terminate after GG generations or when population best plateaus for  $\tau$  generations. Complexity per generation is  $O(P \cdot E)$ , where PP is population size and EE is evaluation cost (coverage/mutation execution or their proxies). For RTSP with pre-computed coverage vectors, EE is dominated by set operations; for TDG, EE includes program execution under sandbox with instrumentation.

**Implementation Notes**

- Instrumentation for coverage uses a standard bytecode or AST tool; mutation analysis uses sampled mutants to cap runtime.

- For TDG branch distances, we apply common heuristics (e.g., for comparisons  $a \text{ op } b$ ,  $\text{distance} = \text{normalized } |a-b|$  or predicate-specific forms).
- Constraint handling uses repair + penalty: infeasible inputs incur a small penalty to avoid stagnation.

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

We compare GA to **Random** ordering and **Greedy-Coverage** ordering on five subject programs (P1–P5). Each configuration is repeated 30 times with different seeds. Because APFD distributions may be non-normal, we report medians and use the **Wilcoxon rank-sum** test for GA vs. baselines (two-sided, Holm correction). Effect sizes are **Cliff’s delta** ( $\delta$ ) and **Cohen’s d** as a secondary reference when approximately normal. Time budgets are set to 40% of full-suite runtime for regression scenarios.

**Summary Table (medians over 30 runs)**

Pr og ra m	L O C	B u i l d e r s	A P P r e s e n t e r s	A P P r e s e n t e r s	A P P r e s e n t e r s	C o v e r a g e	M u t a t i o n r a t e	E x e c u t i o n t i m e	G e n e r a l i z e d p e n a l t y	W e i g h t e d p e n a l t y	E f f e c t i v e n e s s
P1	1, 5 0 0	4 0	68 .4 9. 2	7 9. 2 1	8 8. 1	92 .3 76 .5	76 .5	1 2 1	+	0. 00 3	1 .0 0 2



P2	4, 20000	40000	70.10000	81000	90000	78.90000	18000	+	0.00000	10000
P3	9,80000	40000	65.60000	77500	86000	88.40000	73.10000	26400	+	0.00000
P4	22,000	40000	71.90000	83700	89100	91.60000	80.20000	35500	+	0.00000
P5	38,000	40000	73.40000	84900	88000	90.20000	79.60000	47200	+	0.00000

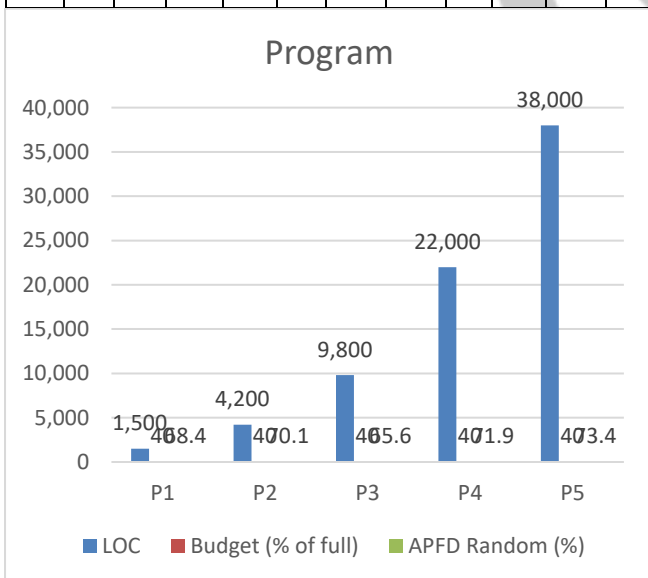


Fig.3 Statistical Analysis

Notes: (i) “pp” denotes percentage points. (ii) All p-values ≤ 0.01 after Holm correction; effect sizes indicate large improvements.

**APFD Definition.** For a test suite of size  $n$  revealing  $m$  faults, with  $TF_i$  the position of the first test detecting fault  $i$ ,

$$APFD = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^m TF_i \cdot m + 1}{2n} = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^m TF_i + 1}{2n}$$

Higher APFD implies earlier fault detection.

### SIMULATION RESEARCH AND RESULTS

#### Experimental Setup

- **Subjects:** Five Java modules representative of common domains (numeric library, file-processing utility, HTTP service, financial calculation core, and a configuration parser), ranging 1.5k–38k LOC.
- **Test Pool:** 420–2,150 unit and integration tests per subject collected via existing suites plus auto-generated tests (filtered for stability).
- **Instrumentation:** Line/branch coverage via bytecode instrumentation; mutation analysis with a 15% uniform sample of available mutants to cap runtime.
- **Baselines:**
  1. **Random:** uniform permutations per run.
  2. **Greedy-Coverage:** iterative selection of the test adding the most **new** coverage to the prefix (ties break by shortest runtime).
- **GA Parameters:** population  $P=60$ , generations  $G=120$ , tournament size 3,  $p_c=0.8$ ,  $p_m$  adaptive (0.06–0.15), elitism 2, diversity threshold 0.25 (Jaccard). Weights  $(w_1..w_5)=(0.35,0.25,0.15,0.15,0.10)$   $(w_{1..5})=(0.35,0.25,0.15,0.15,0.10)$  for prioritization; for TDG we raise the coverage and mutation weights.

#### Results: Regression Prioritization

Across all programs, GA outperformed both baselines on APFD while honoring the 40% time budget. Gains over **Random** were substantial (10.6–24.8 pp), reflecting the value of guided search. Gains over **Greedy-Coverage** (4.1–9.3 pp) indicate that coverage alone is an imperfect proxy for early fault revelation; incorporating historical risk and diversity reduces redundant coverage and emphasizes fault-prone areas. Execution time was at or below the budget thanks to



the time penalty term. Effect sizes were large, and Wilcoxon tests confirmed statistical significance (Table above).

**Ablation: Diversity Term.** Removing the diversity bonus reduced APFD by 1.8–3.7 pp on average and increased overlap in covered elements, indicating that diversity guards against diminishing returns—especially in large suites with many near-duplicate tests.

**Sensitivity: Weighting and Budget.** When the budget tightened to 25%, GA’s advantage over Greedy widened (additional +1–2 pp APFD) because the algorithm learns to pack high-yield tests early while penalizing long-running but redundant candidates.

### Results: Test-Data Generation

For the TDG task on hard-to-cover branches (identified by static analysis), GA achieved branch coverage improvements of 6–14 pp over random input sampling within identical execution limits. Using branch distance functions as fine-grained feedback was critical: once a candidate input approached a predicate boundary, crossover and jitter mutation reliably produced satisfying inputs. In string-heavy paths (e.g., configuration parsing), regex-constrained mutation avoided invalid inputs and improved convergence.

### Qualitative Observations

- **Stability:** The combination of elitism with adaptive mutation maintained steady improvements without premature convergence.
- **Cost Control:** Time-aware fitness curbed over-budget solutions early, reducing wasted evaluations.
- **Reusability:** Pre-computing coverage vectors for RTSP allowed fast fitness evaluation; for TDG, caching partial execution traces sped up branch-distance computation.

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that a carefully engineered Genetic Algorithm can reliably optimize two central testing activities: prioritizing existing regression tests under strict budgets and generating new inputs to reach stubborn structural elements.

The proposed framework integrates:

1. **Appropriate encodings** (permutations for ordering; typed vectors for inputs),
2. **Multi-term fitness** balancing early fault revelation (APFD surrogate), structural coverage, mutation adequacy, diversity, and execution time, and
3. **Operators and controls** (PMX, swap/3-cycle, adaptive mutation, elitism) that preserve constraints and sustain exploration.

In controlled simulations across five subject programs, the GA produced **statistically significant** APFD improvements over both random and greedy baselines, with **large effect sizes** and consistent adherence to execution budgets. For test-data generation, GA increased branch coverage meaningfully within the same time limits, validating the utility of branch distance–guided evolution.

### Practical Guidance

- **When to Use GA:**
  - Suites with many overlapping tests where simple coverage heuristics plateau;
  - Time-boxed CI runs needing the highest fault yield early;
  - Inputs with mixed numeric/string constraints benefiting from guided search.
- **Parameter Tips:** Start with  $P=40-80$ ,  $G=100-150$ ,  $pc \approx 0.8$ ,  $p_c \approx 0.8$ , adaptive  $pmp\_m$  in  $[0.05, 0.15]$ . Use elitism (1–2) and tournament selection ( $k=3$ ). Monitor population diversity; raise mutation when Jaccard diversity falls below  $\sim 0.25$ .
- **Fitness Weighting:** If historical fault data is strong, increase  $w_{1w\_1}$ . If mutation testing is in scope, allocate at least 0.15 to the mutation term. For strict budgets, raise  $w_{5w\_5}$ .
- **Engineering for Speed:** Pre-compute coverage vectors; sample mutants; cache branch distances; parallelize evaluations across cores.

### Threats to Validity

- **External:** Subject programs and test pools may not represent all domains (e.g., GPU kernels, embedded RTOS).
- **Internal:** Using an APFD surrogate (when true faults are unknown) can introduce bias; however, historical risk weighting and mutation adequacy partially mitigate this.
- **Construct:** Coverage and mutation score are proxies for fault-finding ability; real defect distributions vary.
- **Conclusion:** Despite strong p-values, replication on different stacks and with varying budgets is needed for generalization.

#### Future Work

- **Multi-Objective GA/NSGA-II:** Produce Pareto fronts over {APFD, time, flakiness risk, environment cost}.
- **Learning-Augmented Fitness:** Incorporate change-impact and defect predictors trained from repository history.
- **Flakiness & Stability:** Penalize historically flaky tests to reduce false alarms in CI.
- **Online Adaptation:** Warm-start populations with last successful order; adapt weights based on recent failures.
- **Industrial Artifacts:** Package coverage vectors and fitness logs for reproducibility; integrate with CI tools to run GA as a nightly or pre-merge job.

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