

INFORMATION SPACE

Jeopardy!'s Watson as "The Game of Kings": IBM Project Manager visits Syracuse University



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November 4, 2011

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Jim De Piante is the Project Manager for IBM Research and the [IBM Watson project](#). He visited campus on Thursday to talk about how the Watson system was built and how it's relevant outside of Jeopardy!; it was a great presentation for students to attend.

It was apparent that De Piante really loves talking about this project. He was full of information and quotes, and he was actually funny (such a relief). He began by describing what Watson was- it's known as the machine that beat the Jeopardy! gurus- and then moved on to discuss what lead their team to the idea in the first place. The team at IBM actually started with a chess playing machine that was able to beat the grandmaster of chess. De Piante called it taking down the "Game of Kings", so they wanted to see what else they could accomplish with this machine.

Jeopardy: A New Game of Kings

Now their team had to find a new "Game of Kings" to conquer. Enter Jeopardy! The idea was simple: beat the greats at a game of wits that requires speed, accuracy in answers, and enhanced comprehension of the English language. Simple, right? IBM had found their new "Game of Kings", but they had their work cut out for them. To add to the pressure, De Piante and his cohorts gave the project a time limit. This wasn't just any time limit to go along with any challenge; they challenged former Jeopardy! champions [Ken Jennings](#) and [Brad Rutter](#), the best humans to ever play the game of Jeopardy!, to a match in early 2011.

At this point, I could see De Piante was getting excited about his story. He is really passionate about Watson and I think is honestly a little amazed at what they produced as an end product. To make this happen, they took a program from answering questions right one third of the time every two hours to answering correct over 80% of the time in three seconds.

How Watson Works

I'm sure you all know how things turned out; you probably wouldn't be reading this post if you didn't. But, what you may not know is how Watson really works. I mean, that's what I wanted to know when I attended this event. In a nutshell, it has three (not so simple) steps:

1. Watson studies the language of the query
2. Then compares the question to its vast database or its "run-time corpus"
3. Finally, it ranks its top three answers with justification

As seen on the show, Watson doesn't completely pick a final answer. Watson finds the top three alternatives and if it has a high enough "confidence" in its top answer we get to hear it. Remember, this is all in three seconds. De Piante says Watson looks through approximately 150,000 books before it gives each answer! That's one tenth of the entire Amazon.com collection. Using natural language processing, Watson understands what we mean when we speak, just the same as we interpret other people's statements. Does Watson think? De Piante was ready for that question. His reply was, "Does a submarine swim?" Think about that one!

iSchool Students Vs. Watson

Finally, a few students from the crowd actually got to challenge Watson, with a half-second handicap to make it fair. It was on! Three of the

iSchool's best and brightest versus one supercomputer (demo). It was actually a pretty good match, they even tripped up De Piante and Watson for a second. At the end of the day, Watson triumphed. In our defense, maybe if the whole auditorium could have played the scene may have been turned out different.

At the end of the match, the final score was 4000 iSchoolers to Watson's 5600. We fought valiantly. De Piante didn't leave without answering a few audience questions and dropping some hints about the future... including a possible Twitter/Watson interface. He even teased at Watson teaming up with the masterminds over at Apple and discussed comparisons between Siri and Watson.

For more information, watch the video below from IBM's official YouTube page or view the gallery of photos from the event. You can also get a blow-by-blow account of the action from the [@iSchoolLive Twitter stream](#) or by searching the [hashtag #IBMischool](#).



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