

Man vs. Machine

by Maxwell Smith

Recently, the battle between man and machine was won—by machine. A computer named Watson easily beat two of the most famous human champions of *Jeopardy!* in a three-day competition.

Watson—or rather, all the computers that make up Watson—is the size of eight refrigerators. But on the show, Watson's face is represented by a screen showing a twirling globe wearing a look of surprise. Watson even speaks with a computer-generated voice.

The computer played two games over three days this week with two of *Jeopardy!*'s all-time champions. From the beginning, it was no contest. Watson creamed both Ken Jennings and Brad Rutter, taking the \$1 million prize. The winnings will be split between two charities.

HOW DOES WATSON WORK?

Watson was introduced to the world after IBM, a computer company, spent four years trying to develop a computer that could think. It is named after the company's founder, Thomas J. Watson.

Like a human contestant, the computer had to press a buzzer to answer trivia questions. That was one of the biggest challenges of the game.

Scientists had to figure out how to get Watson to press a buzzer when it was only pretty sure it had the right answer. They decided to make Watson buzz only if it was at least 67 percent sure of the answer.

"The computer has to know how confident it is that it has the right answer," said Katharine Frase, in an interview this week with the Scholastic News Kids Press Corps. Frase is IBM's vice president of research.

Watson also used its confidence level to decide how much money to **wager**, or bet. That confidence was based on a percentage of how much information it could put together to come up with the most likely answer. The lower the percentage, the less Watson would wager.

On Wednesday, Watson won after betting a large amount of its money on the Final Jeopardy question.

"If I have learned one thing from this project, it is that I am amazed at what a human mind can do," Frase said. "It does stuff just almost by magic that it's really hard to teach a computer to do."