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Harvard professor offers services as Hollywood mathematician

AP Associated Press

By Michael Kunzelman, Associated Press Writer | May 1, 2005

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- Harvard professor Jonathan Farley is an award-winning scholar, but he wouldn't mind being known as a Hollywood mathematician.

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Inspired by the box-office success of math-themed movies like "A Beautiful Mind" and "Good Will Hunting," Farley figured there was a growing demand in Hollywood for experts who can make sure the numbers add up on the screen.

Farley and a colleague founded a consulting company to offer their expertise to television producers and filmmakers -- and hit it big with his first client: consulting the CBS drama "Numb3rs," which stars Rob Morrow as an FBI agent who recruits his mathematical genius brother to help solve crimes.

"It's not just about fixing mathematical mistakes in the script," he said. "It's also about helping them get the culture right."

Plenty of films and TV shows employ military experts, police officers or doctors to serve as technical advisers, but Farley believes his company -- Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting -- fills an unmet need.

Many movie mathematicians seem to luck into the job.

"A Beautiful Mind" director Ron Howard hired Barnard College math professor Dave Bayer after he read a review of the play "Proof" that Bayer wrote for the American Mathematical Society.

Before he consulted for "Good Will Hunting," University of Toronto physics professor Patrick O'Donnell was hired as an extra. A producer stopped him on the street and asked him to play a drunk in a bar scene with Robin Williams. O'Donnell later helped actor Matt Damon with the math his character, a troubled genius, would be tackling on screen.

"Hollywood is not a math class," O'Donnell said. "Every scene was accurate, but you wouldn't learn mathematics from it."

Farley, 35, co-founded his company with Lizzie Burns, a London-based biochemist he met studying at the University of Oxford a decade ago. Farley said he and Burns are philosophically at odds over how mathematically accurate movies should be.

"To make a film really credible," Burns said, "it's important to get the science right."

Farley, on the other hand, said he knows filmmakers sometimes sacrifice scientific accuracy in the name of entertainment.

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"I just think there's a way of making the science not look ridiculous, as you often find in many science-fiction shows and movies," he said.

It bugs Farley when filmmakers portray mathematicians as socially inept geeks -- or even when they go to the opposite extreme, such as when Jeff Goldblum played an ultra-cool chaos theorist in "Jurassic Park."

"Mathematicians usually are kind of nerdy," Farley concedes.

Farley has recruited some of his colleagues, including Harvard postdoctoral fellow Anthony Harkin, to serve as consultants. Harkin said mathematicians love to police television programs and movies for errors. One of the most famous, he added, comes from "The Wizard of Oz." [Continued...](#)

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