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Harvard professor offers services as Hollywood mathematician

AP Associated Press

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Page 2 of 2 -- "When the scarecrow gets his brain, he incorrectly states the Pythagorean theorem," Harkin said. "If any mathematician would looked at it, they could have easily fixed that flaw."

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Farley gives high marks to the makers of "Numb3rs" for what he says is an accurate portrayal of how mathematicians work and interact with each other.

"Getting the math right is very important to our creators," said Andy Black, a researcher for the show. "We do want to have that kind of credibility."

After "Numb3rs" premiered in January, Farley e-mailed the show's producers and offered his services. He traded messages with Black, who agreed to start sending him copies of unfinished scripts. Farley won't disclose what his company is paid for their advice.

"Jonathan seemed very enthusiastic about pitching in," Black said.

Farley and Harkin check the scripts for errors, scribble suggestions in the margins and send them to Black, who passes them on to the show's head writers.

"He presents nice, concise suggestions," Black said. "It's up to the writers to implement them."

Farley and Harkin didn't start working for "Numb3rs" until after the fifth episode aired, so they are hard-pressed to cite examples of how they have left their mark on the first 10 episodes.

"It may be felt in more of the future shows," Farley said. "There are some ideas I've sent them which they seem to have incorporated, but I don't know how the whole creative process works."

Farley said he objected to a scene where one of the main characters, an older mathematician played by Peter MacNicol, talks about his "brazen attack on the Lorenz invariance."

"I asked a string-theory friend, and he said it doesn't make sense," he said. "I told them, but they didn't change it."

Harkin cringed at a scene where Charley, the math genius played by David Krumholtz, considers asking his thesis student out on a date -- a move he said would get most academics fired.

"They needed the love interest, so they kept it in," Harkin said.

The show also works closely with Gary Lorden, who chairs the math department at the California Institute of Technology. Lorden comes up with some of the formulas that Charley scribbles on

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chalkboards. In early episodes, one of his younger graduate student's hands filled in for Krumholtz's in close-ups.

Lorden said he sees the job as a lark, not a business opportunity.

"I grew up seeing virtually nothing about math in the popular media," he said. "I'm really hoping 'Numb3rs' spawns some imitators."

Farley and his agent Caron Knauer, a former associate producer at 20th Century Fox, are banking on that happening.

"More and more projects are featuring math on the forefront," Knauer said. "It's the Hollywood bandwagon mentality."

Farley, last year's recipient of the Harvard Foundation's Distinguished Scientist Award, and Harkin are collaborating on a screenplay of their own. They also are trying to devise -- and sell -- a formula that would help movie studios schedule their release dates more efficiently and profitably.

But neither plans to give up their day jobs in Harvard's math department.

"I never expected there to be 17 projects a year," Farley said. "I never even expected a show like 'Numb3rs,' where week after week they would try to use mathematics in a different way."

Farley and Harkin both hope the show inspires youngsters to consider careers in math.

"In the past, there was no better promoter of math and science than Sputnik and Star Trek," Harkin said.

On the Net:

"Numb3rs": <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/numb3rs/>

Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting: www.hollywoodmath.com ■

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