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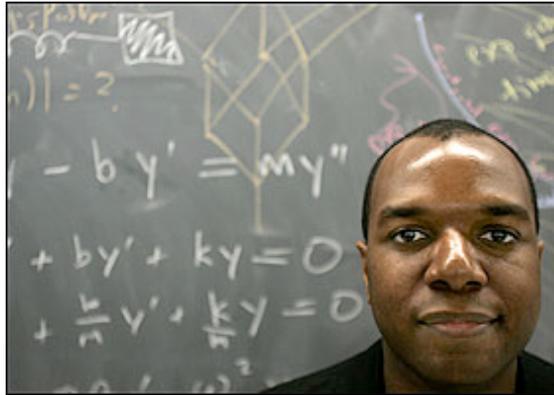
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Jonathan Farley (left) created a consulting business that supplies technical advice to filmmakers and writers on science-driven projects such as CBS's "Numb3rs" (right, with David Krumholtz). (Globe Staff / Bill Greene; Photo / Randy Tepper)

Divide and conquer

The Boston Globe

Harvard math professor helps Hollywood get its science straight

By **Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff** | **May 17, 2005**

"I've always loved movies -- especially science fiction," says 35-year-old Jonathan Farley. As a kid, he watched the original series of "Star Trek" and "Battlestar Galactica" on TV and perused the futuristic novels of Isaac Asimov and Larry Niven. His memories of the '80s include sneaking into the computer-science lab at the State University of New York in Brockport, the town where this son of two university professors was raised. He and his friend Anthony Harkin would play a "Star Trek" game using the school's creaky 300-baud modem.

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But it wasn't movies that Farley chose to focus his career on at the early age of 14. A vocation aptitude test told him he should study math. Now he's an award-winning, Harvard-educated mathematician about to wrap up a semester doing research in his alma mater's math department.

Three years ago, Farley came up with a way to dovetail his interests in pop culture and math. He started the business Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting with Lizzie Burns, an artist in residence in the biochemistry department of England's prestigious University of Oxford, and Toronto businessman Lennox Farrell. (His friend Harkin, now a postdoctoral fellow in applied math at Harvard, occasionally

pinch-hits with some consulting work.) The company's goal is to offer technical advice to Hollywood's creative types when they incorporate math or science into their television shows or films. Type "hollywoodmath.com" into your Web browser for information on Hollywood Math's mission, staff, and projects.

The latter includes Farley and Burns's first consulting job in 2002 giving guidance to British

screenwriter Ewan Kilgour on a film called "Square," which focused on a mathematician analyzing the human genome. In October, a busy Farley sent Harkin, at the request of the film's promoter, to talk about the physics of time travel at the Boston premiere of last year's indie time travel film "Primer." Earlier this year, Farley reviewed three scripts for CBS's hit Friday night math nerd/procedural cop show "Numb3rs" for accuracy and helped a "Numb3rs" researcher create a future episode by answering such questions as, "Is it possible to have only five pieces in a 1,000 piece puzzle, yet know what that entire puzzle is?" The show revolves around a math whiz (David Krumholtz) who helps his brother in the FBI (Rob Morrow) solve crimes.

The consulting work, Farley believes, is definitely there. He e-mails a list of movies, plays, and television shows that have incorporated math or science in some way in recent years. It includes "A Beautiful Mind," "Good Will Hunting," "21 Grams," "Pi," and a play that will soon be released as a movie, "Proof." But Farley is reasonable enough to know that math and science consulting may not generate three or four jobs a year, let alone one. So he's launched another consulting business, Phoenix Mathematical Systems Modeling Inc., that will explore ways to fight terrorism using his math specialty, lattice theory -- a form of abstract algebra. Math could, for instance, help military officials figure out how many terrorists they would need to capture to disable a terrorism cell, Farley explains. His next job, a yearlong gig as a science fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, will allow him to delve more deeply into the subject. [Continued...](#)

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