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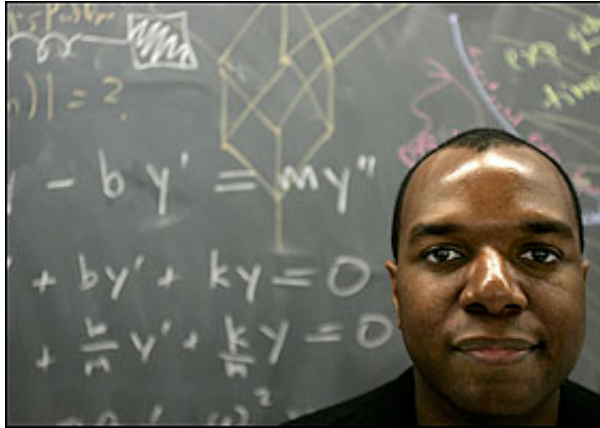
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Jonathan Farley (left) created a consulting business that supplies technical advice to filmmakers and writers on science-driven projects such as CBS's "Numb3rs" (right, with David Krumholtz). (Globe Staff / Bill Greene; Photo / Randy Tepper)

Divide and conquer

The Boston Globe

May 17, 2005

Page 2 of 3 -- Most math consultants used in Hollywood seem to get the job by chance. For "A Beautiful Mind," director Ron Howard found Dave Bayer, a Barnard College math professor, after reading Bayer's theater review of "Proof" in the publication "Notices of the American Mathematical Society." The primary math consultant for "Numb3rs," Gary Lorden, chair of the math department at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, says he got the job while the show's creators were shooting scenes at Caltech last August and getting a feel for the math world by talking to him and other professors at the school.

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Hollywood Math wants to take a more direct path to getting this work.

"The angle we've taken is try to get publicity for [the company]," says Burns, 30, who now uses the PhD in biochemistry that she received at Oxford to create artwork that helps the general public understand science better. "It's very difficult to approach a film company. One of the main things is raising our profile to let people know that we're here. We're appealing to film writers and film producers to approach us."

How does Farley think pop culture portrays math and science? "Very badly," he says. And not because it makes economical sense for him to say that.

He talks about Hollywood's tendency to focus on the "outrageous mathematician" or put math professors in white clothing when, Farley says, "everyone knows that mathematicians dress in all black." As if to prove his point, on this particular day, Farley has indeed covered his tall, lanky frame in a black suit jacket, black pants, black shoes, and black T-shirt. Farley recalls watching "21 Grams" and hearing Sean Penn's

math professor character utter the linguistically incorrect phrase "mathematics are."

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Then there's the 2002 James Bond film, "Die Another Day," which Burns points to as one of the scientific nadirs of pop culture. In one scene, an invisible car sneakily rolls up on the bad guys. "I think a lot of people [in the audience] kind of laughed at that," she says, because it was so unrealistic. Yes, the invisible car is based on modern technology, says Burns. But a car wouldn't be as invisible as the one shown in the film. You would see the car's rubber tires, she says. You would see its nuts and bolts.

In addition to helping filmmakers save face, Burns also wants to aid audiences. "If people are being given completely the wrong science," says Burns, "how on earth at the end of the day are you to know what's possible and what isn't? It's down on some level to a matter of professionalism. If there was a film that's a period drama, then you would hope that the props and the dresses would be appropriate to that time. If you're going to involve science and try to explain it in a film such as the James Bond films, I think you should want to get it right." [Continued...](#)

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