

Jeff O'Connell's Brown Bag: Math goes to the movies

By ERIC DORMAN
News editor

It was an unlikely scenario: Homer Simpson, a cartoon figure with an IQ lower than most rodents, had apparently just disproved a 500-year-old mathematical tenet. It was an unlikelier setting: the cartoon was being shown and discussed before a packed house at last Friday's Brown Bag Science Seminar, led by Math Instructor Jeff O'Connell.

Though under closer scrutiny it was revealed that Homer was incorrect, there was no denying the popularity of the talk's subject matter. Throughout the presentation, the clips, which came from such sources as "The Wizard of Oz," "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" and "Die Hard with a Vengeance," met with applause from students, math teachers and third-semester calculus students alike.

O'Connell prefaced his talk by noting that while previous Brown Bag lectures—particularly the talk directly preceding his, a collection of chemistry demonstrations performed by Ohlone Professor Emeritus Jim Klent—have contained opportunities for learning on the attendees' part, such learning possibilities would be absent from his presentation.

O'Connell illustrated this point by starting the show off with a clip from the 1941 Abbott and Costello film "In the Navy," in which Costello explained that $7 \times 13 = 28$ to some more informed but less imaginative navy officers, noting that the points made were so convincing that one could walk away from the show thinking that Costello was actually mathematically correct.

After Costello's multiplication lecture, O'Connell presented

several minutes of the 1994 movie "Little Big League," showing the Minnesota Twins baseball team attempting to solve a simultaneous work problem, followed by a scene from "Die Hard with a Vengeance" (1995), in which Bruce Willis was able to disarm a bomb by measuring out exactly 4 gallons of water using only a 5-gallon and 3-gallon jug. Though the movie never showed Willis actually solving the problem, O'Connell said that it had two independent solutions, which he left for the audience to figure out on their own.

O'Connell also explained how two shows as disparate as "The Wizard of Oz" (1939) and "The Simpsons" could be connected through math. To do this, he first showed a scene from "The Wizard of Oz" in which the Wizard bestows a diploma upon the Scarecrow, causing the latter individual to spout out an official-sounding, but deeply flawed, version of the Pythagorean Theorem: "The sum of the square roots of any two sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side."

After spending a moment proving the inaccuracy of this statement mathematically (the statement is true for the hypotenuse and two legs of right triangle, not an isosceles), O'Connell showed a response from "The Simpsons." In it, Homer finds a pair of glasses in a public restroom and, upon putting them on, immediately spouts out the Scarecrow's dictum.

Rather than getting a positive response as the Scarecrow does, however, a deep voice intones to the perpetually unlucky Homer, "That's a right triangle, you idiot."

O'Connell noted that out of all TV shows, "The Simpsons are famous for their math jokes." He listed seven "Simpsons" writers/

producers who hold advanced math and science degrees, many from Ivy League universities.

This is not the first time O'Connell has delivered a Brown Bag lecture; 3-4 years ago he spoke on Game Theory and other ideas of Mathematician John Nash, the subject of the 2001 film "A Beautiful Mind."

O'Connell said the idea for a "Math in Movies" talk wasn't a recent one; "it was something I'd always had in mind." He said he thought it would be fun, and was pleased with the results.

Due to the fact that all the material shown was copyrighted, no recording was made of the talk.

The next Brown Bag will be held next Friday, Nov. 16, from 1-2 in Room 2133. It will be concerning "NanoTechnology: From Fundamentals to Function: Industry's Vision and Strategy" and will be led by Dr. Archita Sengupta of Intel.



Photo by Daniel Yuan

Math Instructor Jeff O'Connell explains an episode of "The Simpsons" at the Brown Bag Friday.

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