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Journal Celebrates Mathematics in Popular Culture

Popular culture can provide students an intriguing entrée into mathematics, according to studies in the latest issue of the journal *PRIMUS: Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies*. A special issue of the journal (Volume 17, Number 1) explores the uses of popular culture in the mathematics classroom, the portrayals of mathematics in recent television shows and movies, and the increasing role of mathematicians in creating popular culture.

From math whiz Lisa Simpson to the detective show *Numb3rs* to the Oscar-winning *A Beautiful Mind*, popular culture is beginning to break down some of the long-held myths about math and mathematicians, according to articles in the special issue.

“Mathematically talented characters have become more prominent in movies and television over the last decade or so,” say special issue co-editors Christopher Goff, a professor of mathematics at the University of the Pacific, and Sarah J. Greenwald, a professor of mathematics and women’s studies at Appalachian State University. “We’re not sure why, but perhaps Hollywood is using stereotypes to try to lend extra weight to the human side of these stories by saying, ‘Look, even mathematicians have feelings.’”

Some of the articles in the special issue explore how stereotypes about mathematicians in the popular media may affect students. Others describe the use of television, movies, and other media to engage college students in the study of higher-

order math. For example, some teachers have made use of the game show *Friend or Foe* to introduce game theory, while others have adapted movies, cartoons and advertising to teach seminars on quantitative reasoning.

Mathematicians are increasingly producers of popular culture too, the editors say.

“Mathematics continues to be important in modeling ‘realistic’ scenes through computer animation in films that started with *Star Wars* as well as the work of Pixar and other animation studios in Hollywood,” say Greenwald and Goff. “It’s hard to imagine its importance declining. Computer animation has come a long way since its inception and will only continue to improve in the future.”

One article in the special issue describes the animation effects used to create a realistic Yoda in *Star Wars* films, showing how they can be adapted for students to create simple computer animations in the classroom.

Other articles in the special issue relate mathematics and popular culture to societal concerns. One describes portrayals of mathematically talented women in Hollywood and provides a framework for examining the messages that are hidden in such portrayals.

“What’s most exciting is that much of this field is relatively new,” say Greenwald and Goff. “Anyone who is interested in popular culture – anyone – will enjoy this issue. We hope that this work will encourage an ongoing dialogue about mathematics and popular culture.”

PRIMUS: Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate

Studies is a rich forum for the exchange of ideas in mathematics education at the college level. Wide in scope, *PRIMUS* is an ideal journal for those who teach college mathematics, those who prepare students for collegiate studies, or those interested in expanding their knowledge of mathematics.

While the primary interest is in first person descriptive and narrative articles about implemented teaching strategies and interesting mathematics, the journal also publishes broad survey articles, formal studies of new teaching approaches, assessments of planned and in place strategies, and general discussion writing on teaching undergraduate mathematics.

Subscription information for *PRIMUS* or a sample copy can be obtained from the address below. The journal can be viewed online at www.informaworld.com/10511970.

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Taylor & Francis
Customer Service Department
325 Chestnut St., Ste 800
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Email: customerservice@taylorandfrancis.com

To submit an article, contact:

Dr. Brian Winkel, Editor
Department of Mathematical Sciences
United States Military Academy
West Point, NY 10996 USA
Email: Brian.Winkel@usma.edu

PRIMUS: Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies

Volume 17, Number 1

To Boldly Go: Current Work and Future Directions in Mathematics and Popular Culture

*Christopher D. Goff; Sarah J. Greenwald

Using the Force: Star Wars in the Classroom

*Timothy P. Chartier

Prisoner's Dilemma Applied and in the Classroom: The TV Game Show Friend or Foe
*Paul R. Coe; Loreto Peter Alonzi; Daniel Condon; William T. Butterworth

Using Popular Culture to Teach Quantitative Reasoning
*Cinnamon Hillyard

Some Mathematical Elements in a First-Year Seminar Course
*Mike Pinter

Klein's Beer: Futurama Comedy and Writers in the Classroom
*Sarah J. Greenwald

Mathematical Heroes - No Longer Unsung
*Cynthia E. Chin

The Myth of the Good Mathematics Teacher
*Judith Lynn Gieger

Mathematically Talented Women in Hollywood: Fred in Angel
*Sarah J. Greenwald; Jill E. Thomley