Fermat's Last Tango

A Musical Fantasy by The York Theatre Co., 2001
Music: Joshua Rosenblum
Lyrics: Joanne Sydney Lessner and Joshua Rosenblum
100 minutes

Reviewed by Guntram Mueller

Gedel's Incompleteness Theorem states (loosely) that there are some theorems that can't be proved in the usual axiom systems for arithmetic, even though they are true. Over the course of the last few centuries, there arose several cases of statements that seemed to be true, in the sense that no counterexamples could be found, but that could not, or more precisely, had not, been proved. Among these were the 4-color problem (now proven), Goldbach's conjecture (open), and Riemann's hypothesis (open), but the most famous was the.

Continued on page 3

New UML Mathematics Faculty, Part 2

In our previous issue we profiled two of our new faculty members for 2005-6, Tihor Beke and Alina Stancu. In this issue we introduce you to Ravi Montenegro and Victor Shubov.

Ravi Montenegro

Prof. Montenegro was born in Los Angeles but grew up in the small northern California town of Mendocino. He returned to LA for high school and college, where he received a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics with Honors from the California Institute of Technology. After completing a Master's degree from Yale University he spent a year studying Japanese in Japan, then returned to Yale and in 2002 received his Ph.D. in Mathematics under Prof. Ravi Kannan. Before joining UMass Lowell, Prof. Montenegro spent three years as a VIGRE postdoctoral researcher at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Prof. Montenegro's main research interest is on sharpening the mathematical tools used to study the speed with which a random walk approaches its asymptotic distribution. Of particular interest is the analysis of Markov chains for approximate counting of NP-hard combinatorial counting problems. He has also worked on isoperimetric inequalities for log-concave distributions, and geometric methods for bounding eigenvalues of Markov chains.

When not busy with work Prof. Montenegro enjoys reading (primarily Science Fiction and Fantasy), and occasionally goes orienteering, dabbles in programming, and enjoys trips to the countryside for hiking, camping or biking.

Victor Shubov

Prof. Shubov originates from Russia and received his Ph.D. from the Steklov Mathematical Institute at St. Petersburg in 1982 under the direction of Olga Ladyzhenskaya. After taking positions at the Institute and at St. Petersburg University, he came to the US as an assistant professor at Texas Tech University in.
Mathematical Sciences Department participates in NSF Partnership

in the FoM districts are progressing through the program.

The centerpiece of the program for students is a Math Expo that is held annually at the Museum of Science in Boston. In 2005, there were 990 projects, of which 66 projects done by 116 students were on display in Boston, to 333 students, family and friends. The program has made a commitment to involve all students in a mathematics research experience at least once in grades 6-12. This year, three UML students are helping teachers in Lawrence guide some of their students in developing their projects.

Individual schools run their own Math Expos, with the help of judges from the universities and some of the projects from each school are selected for the event in Boston. The 2006 Math Expo, which is open to the public, is scheduled for Saturday, June 10. We extend an invitation to UML math alumni to join us in the celebration. For more details on Focus on Mathematics, visit the web site at http://www.focusonmath.org.

The Tangents Problem

An insulated window consists of two parallel panes of glass with a small spacing between them. Suppose that each pane reflects a fraction \( p \) of the incoming light and transmits the remaining light. (a) Considering all reflections of light between the panes, what fraction of the incoming light is ultimately transmitted by the window? (b) What fraction of the light is transmitted if a third identical pane is added behind the first two?

Four correct solutions from among all that are submitted by September 1, 2006 will earn a “Math Challenge” T-shirt. You can submit your solution online at mathematics@uml.edu.

Solution to the Winter 2005 Tangents problem.

The problem was

A young man and woman plan to meet between 5:00 and 6:00 PM, each agreeing not to wait more than 10 minutes for the other person. What is the probability that they will meet if they arrive independently at random times between 5:00 and 6:00?

This problem remains open—nobody submitted a correct solution as of the time of this printing.
Fermat's Last Tango

enigmatic Fermat's Last Theorem (ca. 1630). So tantalizingly simple to state, it has been proved over time for $n = 3$, $n = 4$, then all $n < 4,000,000$, but not for all $n$. Could it be one of those undecidable propositions Gödel talked about?

Adding to the allure and mystery was Fermat's beguiling statement that he had found a most "marvelous proof of this theorem", but that, alas, "the margin of this book is too small to contain it." So what is this enigmatic theorem? Here it is.

"The equation $x^3 + y^3 = z^3$ has no whole number solutions in $x$, $y$, and $z$ for any integer $n > 2$.

That's it? This seems pretty pedestrian stuff, especially since everyone recalls Pythagoras' Theorem, which deals with this equation when $n = 2$, and $x = 3$, $y = 4$, $z = 5$ make perfectly good solutions. But of course Fermat said $n > 2$...

The great minds over the centuries, Euler, Kummer, etc., knocked heads with this conjecture, and managed to raise the $n$ for which it is proved, until in 1993 Andrew Wiles announced that he had finally proved it for all $n$, after 7 years of hard work in his attic. In Fermat's Last Tango, the protagonist is the fictional Daniel Keane, but there is never any question that Joanne Sydney Lessner and Joshua Rosenblum had Wiles in mind. The ecstasy that accompanied the announced proof was as unbounded as the $n$ for which it was proved: instantaneous entry into The Pantheon of Mathematicians of All Time. (And he could finally reacquaint himself with his wife and children.) But, chutz, there was a little fogliness, a little unclarity, a little glitch, a little gap: a big fat hole.

The ecstasy and the agony: only an opera of Italian proportions could suffice to render this story in anything close to justice. Well, instead of Puccini, we get something more like Claude Chabrol in the Umbrellas of Cherbourg, with the gas station attendant asking in earnest song: super ou régulier? A little hard to take, until you get the hang of it. But the pace and humor pick up dramatically with the entrance, during Wiles' reveries, of Fermat himself, as wily and adept at mental torture as he is at numbers. The interplay—all right, the battle—between the febrile Wiles and the wily Fermat follows Wiles' attempts to fill the big fat hole, and is carried off brilliantly. Fermat forces Wiles to play a nasty little game show called Prove My Theorem, consisting of an increasing sequence of intellectual and emotional traps. It's opera, it's musical, with dance numbers and elliptical curves, modular forms, Euler systems, the Taniyama-Shimura conjecture, and all that good stuff. It has a strong supporting cast of Wiles' long-suffering wife, and Pythagoras, Euclid, Newton, and Gauss from the Aftermath. And I won't tell you who wins.

My final rating: ★★★
(out of a possible 4)

New UML Mathematics Faculty, Part 2

Texas was too hot and he and his wife Marianna moved east. After a year visiting Colby College, Victor accepted a position here at Lowell.

Victor's research has touched on many different areas but the emphasis has been on the theory of evolution equations. In 1997 he won a substantial grant to work on tornado dynamics and since then his interests have moved towards the study of turbulent flows and mathematical control theory.

Lubbock Texas where he was promoted in 2001 to full professor after publishing some fifty papers. He decided in 2004 that

The Mathematical Sciences Web Page

Have you visited Mathematical Sciences web page lately? The address is http://www.uml.edu/dept/math. You don't need to remember the address—just Google "uml math" and the first link should be ours.

Have you lost your past issues of Tangents? Go to the alumni section of the UML Math web page links to back issues.

James Graham-Eagle, Chair
Writers: Ken Levasseur, Raj Prasad, Ann Marks Hurley, Dan Klein, Guntram Mueller, Mary Stock and Alan Olsen

Tangents is produced biannually by the Publications Office for the Department of Mathematical Sciences. Your comments are welcome.
For the past two years, the UML Department of Mathematical Sciences has been a partner in Focus on Mathematics (FoM), a five-year partnership funded by the National Science Foundation. The goal of FoM is to improve student achievement by providing mathematics teachers with the content knowledge and skills valuable in their profession. To this end, the project is developing a mathematics community running across several school districts, universities and educational organizations.

Professors Al Doerr, James (Kiwi) Graham-Eagle, Ken Levasseur and Marvin Stick have joined mathematicians from Boston University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Education Development Center in this effort. Program evaluation is conducted by a team from Lesley University. As part of the program, each mathematician works with teachers in a school in one of the FoM districts: Arlington, Chelsea, Lawrence, Waltham and Watertown. Under the guidance of mathematicians, teachers work in study groups to explore various mathematical topics in order to deepen their mathematical knowledge. Mathematicians and teachers decide on the topic based on interests and needs of the teachers in each school. For example, a study group of middle school teachers in Lawrence learned some calculus in order to better understand how their own curriculum builds toward calculus. A group in Watertown studied the geometry of voting and recently presented their work at a national mathematics conference. In another group, teachers explored ways to integrate the Geometer's Sketchpad program into their courses.

Professor Ken Levasseur has developed an online mathematical problem-solving course as part of FoM. Besides discussing the educational issue surrounding the development of their students' problems solving skills, the teachers have an opportunity to refine their own skills through a variety of activities. Teachers from all of the FoM districts, together with some UML students, have taken the course in the past year. A mini-course on Fibonacci numbers has been developed and offered twice in order to introduce the teachers to the online education process.

Various activities such as seminars, colloquia, and summer institutes round out the activities that are open to all mathematics teachers in the districts. A graduate program leading to a Masters degree in professional development for mathematics has been established at BU and a strong contingent of teachers.

Continued on page 2

Thanks For the Contributions!

Our thanks to all who have contributed to the Department of Mathematical Sciences over the past few years. Your generosity has allowed us to make purchases, award scholarships, and engage in activities that would otherwise have been impossible.

Many of you have responded generously to UML phonation and other fundraising contacts. These requests can benefit the Department of Mathematical Sciences directly if you specify that you wish to have your gift directed to Mathematics. Otherwise it will provide valuable assistance to the University at the College level.

What Are You Up To?

Want to keep your classmates up to date on what you're doing and where you are? Take a few moments to tell us where you are, and whatever else you might like to share. We'll add it to the UML Math Alumni page, http://www.uml.edu/dept/math/alumni.htm.

We can be contacted by mail at Department of Mathematical Sciences, North Campus, UMass Lowell, Lowell, MA 01854. Telephone: (978) 934-2410. Email: mathematics@uml.edu

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