“I’m typing this with sticky fingers” — my cutest interaction on Math Stack Exchange

Kamil'σ math blog • 29 Feb 2024

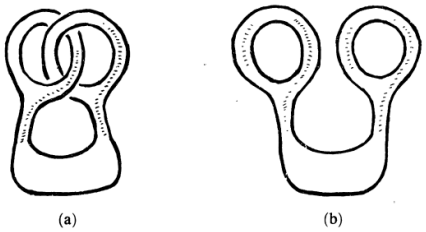
Hostility on Math Stack Exchange is a meme. That’s why I am especially happy witnessing or participating in playful *exchanges* on MSE. I want to share an example of it :)

In the summer of 2023 user blz asked how to solve this puzzle:

Exercise 1.4. Sketch a sequence of steps to show how this man – let us first appoint him amoeba-like abilities – can unlock his hands while his fingers remain together and continue to form the two loops.



I answered that one can equivalently transform those shapes (from *Intuitive Topology* by Prasolov):



I attached a solution (hidden as a spoiler, ofc!). But also suggested playing with a salt dough — it worked for me, #whateverworks. “Question closed”, I thought.

But somebody on the other side of the globe, namely user David Raveh, was still confused. They asked for some video since they still weren’t able to see the “untangling”. I couldn’t find any videos, so I reiterated the “play with dough” suggestion. And… after two hours they replied:

> I ended up taking your advice (I’m typing this with sticky fingers), and I get it now. I am having a hard time taking pictures of my solution, but thanks for your help.

That’s beautiful. I was moved. This is the kind of thing I am looking for on the web!

Freestyle side note. Maybe a partial solution to the hostile climate of MSE would be to keep two scores: one for merit, and another for the vibe (as it is on the LessWrong forum).

The #whateverworks is a reference to the Woody Allen’s 2009 movie.