

June 19, 2006

'Star Trek' fans explore final frontier on film

By Danny Hakim

The New York Times

June 19, 2006

MASON NECK STATE PARK, Va. -- Paul Sieber was wearing a "Star Trek" uniform in the deep Virginia woods when he found himself surrounded by a leathery-looking gang.

Fortunately, the ruffians were dressed up as Klingons, and Sieber, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, was preparing to film them with a \$6,000 digital video camera. At times like this, Sieber, the writer and director of "Starship Farragut," must come to grips with the obvious -- not all Klingons are trained actors -- and bellow, "Quiet on the set!"

From these Virginia woods to the Scottish Highlands, "Star Trek" fans are filling the void left in a galaxy that has lost "Star Trek." For the first time in nearly two decades, television spin-offs from the original 1960s "Star Trek" series have ended, so fans are banding together to make their own episodes.

Fan films have been around for years, particularly those related to the "Star Wars" movies. But now they can be downloaded from the Web, and modern computer graphics technology has lent them surprising special effects. And as long as no one is profiting from the work, Paramount, which owns the rights to "Star Trek," has been tolerant. (Its executives declined to comment.)

Up to two dozen of these fan-made "Star Trek" projects are in various stages of completion, depending on what you count as a full-fledged production. Dutch and Belgian fans are filming an episode; a Scottish production is in the works at <http://www.ussintrepid.org.uk/>.

A group in Los Angeles has filmed more than 40 episodes, according to its Web site, <http://www.hiddenfrontier.com/>, and has explored gay themes that the original series never imagined. Episodes by a group in Austin, Texas, at www.starshipexeter.com, feature a ship whose crew had the misfortune of being turned into salt in an episode of the original "Star Trek" but has now been repopulated by Texans.

"I think the networks -- Paramount, CBS -- I don't think they're giving the fans the 'Trek' they're looking for," said Sieber, a 40-year-old engineer for a government contractor who likens his "Star Trek" project, at www.starshipfarragut.com, to "online community theater."

"The fans are saying, 'Look, if we can't get what we want on television, the technology is

out there for us to do it ourselves,' " he added.

And viewers are responding. One series, at <http://www.newvoyages.com/>, and based in Ticonderoga, N.Y., boasts of 30 million downloads. It has become so popular that Walter Koenig, the actor who played Chekov in the original "Star Trek," is guest-starring in an episode, and George Takei, who played Sulu, is slated to shoot another one later this year. D.C. Fontana, a writer from the original "Star Trek" series, has written a script.

For many Trekkies, contemporary science fiction on television -- like "Battlestar Galactica" and the more recent "Star Trek" spin-offs -- are too dark.

"Modern science fiction takes itself too seriously," said Jimm Johnson, 37, who presides over Starship Exeter.

John Broughton Jr., who founded the Farragut project, agreed.

"One thing about the classic 'Star Trek' is at the end of the episode, it was pretty much a happy ending," he said. "It was sort of like 'The Brady Bunch.' It was all tidied up."

Broughton, a wiry Navy veteran with spiky hair, is a serious collector of all things "Star Trek."

His avocado tunic, he said, is made from bolts of the nylon used for the original "Star Trek," purchased at \$100 a yard. His boots are made by the son of the man who made the boots used in "Star Trek," he said. His megaphone, bought for \$325 on eBay, was the one used by William Shatner when he directed the movie "Star Trek V."

Such attention to detail can be infectious. Just ask Mike Bednar, 45, a propman, cameraman and on-screen science officer who met Broughton a few years ago when he was ending his stint in the Navy.

"I used to joke with him, 'You'd never get me in a 'Star Trek' uniform, even on Halloween; it's not going to happen,' " he said, wearing a form-fitting blue tunic, jet-black pants and shiny ebony boots. "Next thing I know, I'm wearing a uniform."