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Fans 'Trek' on without series / With no TV spin-offs, enterprising amateurs create online episodes

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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 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 spinoffs 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 what you count as a full- fledged production. Dutch and Belgian fans are filming an episode; there is a Scottish production in the works at www.ussintrepid.org.uk.

"I think the networks - Paramount, CBS - I don't think they're giving the fans the 'Trek' they're looking for," said Sieber, an 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 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 this year. D.C. Fontana, a writer from the original "Star Trek" series, has written a script.

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."

Holly Bednar, 42, who plays an engineer in Sieber's production, is the executive director of a theater in southern Maryland and one of the few participants here with theater experience. Her husband, Mike Bednar, 45, is the propman, cameraman, science officer and a friend of Broughton's.

"It was kind of a nice thing for Mike and I to work on together," she said. "For Mike, it's the 'Star Trek' stuff. For me, it's the acting."

In a quiet moment, Mike Bednar reflected on what brings a man into the woods with Klingons, wearing a form-fitting blue tunic, jet-black pants and shiny ebony boots, and carrying a camera. He recalled meeting Broughton years ago, when his friend 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. "Next thing I know, I'm wearing a uniform."