They just keep on Trekking

The "Star Trek" franchise lives on through fan films, crafted by people outside the industry. In terms of money, it's a whole different universe.

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THE house — a three-bedroom stucco ranch in South Pasadena with daffodils in the front and a carport on the right — looks normal enough.

But walk through the living room with its overstuffed couches, ignore that door on your left where a young man is getting leopard spots painted on his face, and you'll end up in a small room with a stained beige carpet and two bureaus whose contents are described by pale yellow sticky notes affixed to each drawer. Among them are Bajoran earrings, Alien PADDs (person access data devices), Sirol mind devices, hairpieces, ears and Klingon blades.

This is the set of "Star Trek: Hidden Frontier," the longest-running series in fan film history.

First, a definition: Fan films are movies made by people outside the entertainment industry who write or improvise a script set in a familiar universe (like "Star Trek" or "Star Wars" or "Batman" or "Harry Potter") and shoot it themselves.

It's not illegal as long as nobody makes any money from it — although some companies, Marvel in particular, don't like their characters and worlds messed with. Anyone can do it, but it's not easy. Time-consuming. Costly. And if you want to do it really well, there are actors, special effects, props, background music, costumes, makeup and distribution to consider.

That's when making a small fan film becomes a Herculean labor of love.

Rob Caves, creator and executive producer of "Hidden Frontier," wanted his series to be good. He's a diminutive 28-year-old with an almost unnervingly calm demeanor. As a kid watching "Star Trek: The Next Generation" with his father, and later "Deep Space Nine" on his own (he never liked the original series), he learned less toward the usual "Trek" fan impulse of "I wish I lived there" and more toward "I want to make that."

Caves inherited the South Pasadena house from his grandmother, and for the last seven years he has spent most of his weekends in the back room or spaces much like this one, getting ready to make film. He's done the money, the writing, acting, directing scenes, holding a boom mike, filling in for missing actors, solving technical problems, consulting on costumes, shaking the camera for the "ship just got hit" shots and doing all the other thankless things an executive producer of a fan film series has to do. (To make money, he works as a freelance film editor, when he has time.)

Most weekends he is joined by a cast and crew that numbers in the 30s — a mix of plus-size Trekkies, slim aspiring actors, gray-haired former aspiring actors, a couple of wannabe screenwriters and a handful of soft-spoken (and less soft-spoken) gay men who fell in love with "Hidden Frontier" because of the same-sex relationships it explores.

Since he first made "Star Trek: Hidden Frontier" available for free downloading on the website http://www.hiddenfrontier.org ("Boldly going where no fan film has gone before"), Caves and his revolving team (not everyone sticks around when nobody is getting paid) have completed 50 episodes of the series.

Traffic on the site picked up when the last official television series, "Star Trek: Enterprise," ended in 2005, and fans scavenging for any new "Star Trek" material began to find Caves' work in snowballing numbers. "Hidden Frontier" picked up so many viewers that some cast members started getting recognized at official "Star Trek" conventions they were attending as fans. Now 50,000 people download each new
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episode, and even more watch the series on YouTube, Ifilm and other video-sharing sites.

"THEY always say it's just a ship."

Risha Denney (former actress, current astrology student, mother of two) is dressed in a replica "Star Trek" uniform with four gold pips (round pins) on her collar to indicate that her character, Elizabeth Shelby, is a Starfleet captain.

She is standing in the back room of Caves' house in front of a thin piece of plywood that's been painted green. When Denney's scene is edited and the digital background inserted, viewers will see Shelby surveying the wreckage of her starship Excelsior, which just crashed, with her and her crew inside, at half-impulse speed into the main concourse of a space station.

"What do they know?" says Robin Lefler, Shelby's second in command, played by Joanne Busch, a sometime actress, sometime liver-transplant nurse. She joined the cast shortly after befriending Denney in an acting class. "So, not evacuating?"

"I can't leave her behind," Shelby says. "Not when she can still do some damage. Can you run it with what?"

"Ninety-three."

"Ninety-three people?"

"Including us."

Shelby inhales deeply and narrows her eyes. "The Tholians won't know what hit them."

ASK Caves why he started a fan series, why he has kept it going for seven years and why he opens his house to strangers each weekend, and he'll mention that he loves "Star Trek" and he wants to be part of its legacy.

He also can't seem to stop. "It takes a lot of determination to put something like this together," he said. "A lot of people talk about wanting to start up a fan film, but there is so much work involved, 99% of them don't get past an idea."

"But once you reach a certain point and you have an episode out there, it is like crack. You just want to do more and get more response and keep telling new and interesting stories. It is really addictive, but not dangerously addictive. I'm not driving myself into the financial ruin column yet."

Caves, of course, is not the only addict, and "Hidden Frontier" is not the most famous "Star Trek" fan film series. That distinction belongs to the New York-based "Star Trek: New Voyages," which picks up where the original "Star Trek" left off before it was canceled after three seasons in 1969.

"New Voyages" was created by Elvis impersonator and "Star Trek" fan James Cawley and his friend, Jack Marshall. Cawley put more than $100,000 of his own money into building a replica of the USS Enterprise set (he was given the original blueprints in the mid-1990s).

Thanks to the quality of the set and his dedication to the series, he has been able to lure show business professionals to donate their time to his production, including Oscar-winning makeup supervisor Kevin Haney and D.C. Fontana, a story editor for the original series. He has even gotten "Star Trek" stars such as George Takei and Walter Koenig to make guest appearances.

"New Voyages" is renowned for having the best production value of the fan films. The team shoots only one episode a year; even with plenty of free labor, each costs more than $40,000 to make.

Caves shoots seven episodes a year at $200 per episode, and he has never built an actual set. "Hidden Frontier" may not be the most professional-looking fan series, but in the world of "Star Trek" fan films it is known as the series with the most heart.

Dave Noble, editor of Fan Film Quarterly, an online magazine that chronicles this rapidly expanding genre, put "Hidden Frontier" on his list of top 10 pivotal moments in fan film history. "Usually, for a fan film, a group gets together for one, two or three films and then moves on to bigger and better things," he said. "But [Hidden Frontier] started developing seasons, and each installment was like an episode. A fan film can take a group of people up to one year just to do one project. These people were doing an episode every six weeks."

BOBBY Rice ("actor, philanthropist, entrepreneur, improviser, lover," according to his bio) is shirtless and strapped by two strings of plastic lights to a machine we can't see.
He is the second actor to play Ro Nevin, the sexy and sexually confused science officer on "Hidden Frontier."

His restraints don't look too sturdy, but apparently they are: Even when he struggles violently, he can't seem to free himself. He has been abducted by the silver-faced villain of the series, Siroc (Jim Davis), and his green-faced evil henchwoman, Betras (Rebecca Wood).

"That's a pretty nasty piece of equipment you've got there, Betras," Nevin says. "Just the kind of sadistic thing I would expect from your twisted little mind."

"Don't try to sweet-talk the woman, Nevin. You'll only make her enjoy the next part more," Siroc says broadly.

"There is a way to do this that is entirely painless," Betras sneers. She sticks out her long tongue and slowly licks Nevin's face. "We won't be using that method."

The camera pans out to the sounds of Nevin screaming.

NINETY percent of "Hidden Frontier" is shot on a green screen in Caves' small back room, but occasionally he ventures outdoors. For the final shoot of his series, a wedding scene, he chose the arboretum at UC Irvine. The shoot coincided with the first day of the Excelsior Ball II, "Hidden Frontier’s" fan convention. ("The fans are all nervous when I come around; it's so cute!" Denney said later.)

Caves had decided that seven years was long enough for one series, so last fall he announced that the 2007 season would be the last for "Hidden Frontier." (His next series, "Star Trek: Odyssey," begins this fall and stars some of the same actors.)

The arboretum would have been a perfect choice (pretty, free) if only it weren't so near John Wayne Airport. The shoot kept getting interrupted by the rumble of low-flying planes.

The wedding party, dressed in matching white jackets, looked like waiters from a 1940s drama. The guests were a mix of series actors, digital camera-toting fans dressed in "Star Trek" uniforms and a few members of a local Klingon club. The grooms (it was a gay marriage) were hopeless romantic Lt. Corey Astor (played by filmmaker J.T. Tepnapa) and Lt. Nevin. Their love story had been a continuing arc since Season 2, when Caves, who is gay, insisted that there be a gay story line.

(When questions arose about how people in the future will respond to gay relationships, Caves said they will be socially advanced enough that nobody will think twice about it — "Whatever powers your starship," as one of Nevin's friends tells him.)

"As you begin your new lives together, I can't help but think of this day as an ending — the conclusion to a journey that most of us started seven years ago," said Denney, speaking as Capt. Shelby before the official ceremony got underway.

"We watched Corey and Nevin's relationship begin…. We watched them separate and grow with other friends and lovers, and our lives went on through its victories and bitter defeats. We suffered the loss of friends, and we rejoiced when they returned to us.

"Through all that, something held us together. Something that even in the worst of times made us whole. We had each other, of course, through the storm, through the cold, through the long night, we had one another."

"And clapping," Caves said, panning his camera over the crowd as they burst into applause, "and clapping … ."