

## HOW WE LIVE

# 'It's not just stuff:' Why retro toys, games and entertainment are all the rage



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It's been decades since 44-year-old Mark Dockum opened a new "Star Wars" toy — but in a sense, it seems like yesterday.

"I can still remember what it smells like to open a new 'Star Wars' figure — there is that vinyl smell," said the Philadelphia resident. "It really is transportive. It puts me in a good mood because I'm remembering simpler times."

Dockum is a lifelong collector of 1970s and '80s memorabilia, including toys, rock T-shirts, vinyl records and movies. And he's not alone. These days retro culture seems to be dominating everything — from the mall to the big screen, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Documentaries about Beanie Babies and Abercrombie & Fitch recently hit streaming services. Reboots of once-popular '90s shows like "Sex & The City" and "Saved By the Bell" did the same. Princess Diana content has been flooding our screens (it had a short run on Broadway), and some services have even created original content off popular '90s fodder, like Netflix's "The Baby-Sitters Club."

Shoe stores are stocking the clunky trainers and lug soles that every '90s fashionista once owned. Popular clothing stores like Express, American Eagle Outfitters, Gap and H&M are full of '90s finds like cardigans, bike shorts, cargo pants and fanny packs.

And no one is complaining. Instead, we're loving these comfort-inducing throwbacks, especially following the devastation of the past two years.

## Back to the past

The Silverball Retro Arcade in Asbury Park has about 150 games from the 1950s through 2020, including Pac-Man, Skee-ball, Knock Out and Joust. It has seen huge growth every year since it opened 14 years ago, but once COVID-19 hit, demand became sensational.

After restrictions eased, business got better than ever before. Now, arcade owners are working on a 50-game expansion that will be complete by autumn.

"As soon as the world opened back up again, there were weeks when people were in at noon and coming with coolers," said senior vice president Patty Barber. "We have games and '80s music poppin', so it's just a happy feel. People seemed to really flock here right as things loosened up so they could get away from it all. In strange economic times, people look for something close by and simple to have fun, rather than take a big vacation far away."

Joe Veteri is the owner of Veteri Productions, which operates about 20 collectible, comic book, toy and other pop culture shows and conventions each year, including ToyConNJ in Wayne, Comic Art Con in Secaucus, and the Trading Card Expo in Wayne.

He has seen huge growth in his shows since he started producing them in 2009. And these days, interest is "like never before."

Prices of nostalgic, collectible items such as those related to "Star Wars" and G.I. Joe, as well as comic books and video games, have gone through the roof. He has seen items sell from thousands of dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some of the most popular items right now, Veteri said, include Pokemon, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, NES and Super NES video games.

"The attendance has been record numbers," Veteri said. "The interest constantly, on a day-to-day basis, of who wants to be a vendor and who wants to sponsor a show is amazing. The demand is up, the interest level is through the roof, and the only thing that changes is the age of the people and what they're into."

Dockum thinks so, too. He said that since the advent of the internet, and especially in the last three to four years, he has noticed that some vintage items have nearly doubled in value.

The COVID-time interest in retro items only comes after a success that was already in motion, Veteri said.

"The pandemic was a catalyst to the enthusiasm behind these collectibles that was already going on," Veteri said. "Once the pandemic hit, life slowed down and maybe you got to that closet you haven't look at in awhile and pulled out the items you didn't have time for before. It was a scary time for a lot of people, so they turned to things that made them feel good."

## Simpler times

That ability of retro items to make someone feel good was so strong that it inspired Eric Ingala to open Time Lapse Vintage in Collingswood. He's long been a collector and gets that "dopamine rush" when he picks up an item in his collection.

Time Lapse Vintage opened in March and sells retro décor and ceramics, books, vinyl records, VHS tapes, gumball machines, lava lamps, old bookends, vintage clothing and "every toy you can think of," Ingala said.

Some of those include My Little Pony, Care Bears, "Star Wars" figures, He-Man, Rainbow Brite, wrestlers and stuffed animals. Ingala has already seen thrilled reactions from clientele when they spot an item from their childhood.

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"It's not just stuff," Ingala said. "People see a toy that they hadn't thought of since they were kids, and I think that's a really special thing because it can trigger something powerful. It brings up memories that were stored deep in your brain."

That's especially true now.

"It's an escape, obviously," Ingala continued. "We have this very rancorous divided political landscape, COVID-19, a major world power attacking a neighbor, so if you can find something for \$10 to \$15 that brings you back to a happier time and put it on your shelf and look at it, that's really appealing. It's great to have that escape."

That isn't a guess – it's reality. Kristina Durante, vice chair and professor of marketing at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, said that, for example, music from a person's childhood is so therapeutic that it's used in residential treatment programs because it spikes feel-good hormones. Items work just the same way – they bring a person back to simpler times.

That's how Dockum feels, too.

"The idea of what can make you happy is a much broader and more convoluted concept when you are in your 40s versus when you were 5 or 6," he said. "If you got the new action figure that you always wanted, that is your whole world and happiness in a concise moment."

**Gamers' paradise:** 5 gaming havens in NJ

It means so much to some people that they're making identities out of it, which is why retro clothing is also making a comeback.

"If it's public, that is an identity-relevant product. You can express your personality through these products," Durante said. "People feel the ethos of the '80s, so they are going to wear a T-shirt with Q\*bert on it. It's an extension of ourselves."

## Transcending generations

Teenagers and children seem to be gravitating towards retro items, too, although most of these items stopped being made long before they were born.

Durante has seen it happen firsthand with her 11-year-old daughter, who has even told her mother, "I should have been born in the '80s."

Her daughter told Durante that she wants to live in a time when bullies can't access you on your cell phone, when there were ways to have fun that had nothing to do with social media or the internet.

"Young people haven't lived in that time, but they have an idea that it might have been simpler," Durante said. "For these digital native Gen Z's, it's never been simple. It's always been a chaotic, cataclysmic social nightmare because of social media. They've never lived in a time where they played all day in the backyard and their mom's voice called them in, so they're basically co-opting it as their time of tranquility."

"Although you can't pry their phones out of their hands, they are feeling the negative impact that social media has to their well-being."

**Local honors:** Edison man becomes Skee-Ball world champion

One of Ingala's favorite parts of owning Time Lapse Vintage is seeing kids come in and discover retro toys alongside their parents, who grew up playing them themselves. Barber has seen it at Silverball Retro Arcade, too.

"What's really cool for us is that young people have started to come in big crowds and they have discovered us as this retro cool thing," Barber said. "Ninety-nine percent of the kids that don't want to come in in the first place, their parents can't get them out."

The retro items also help kids and parents connect with one another, a phenomenon that Veteri sees constantly at his shows.

"People think that the shows are just about the items that are there, and they're not," he said. "It's about sharing the experience, having a great time, enjoying your hobby with other like-minded people and creating memories. I don't care if they remember Veteri Productions or even the name of the show. But they'll remember 20 to 30 years from now that experience that they had with their parents, and that's what it's about."

The generation determines what retro items are "in" at the moment. People in their 30s, who have careers and disposable income, often become interested in buying and collecting items from childhood, which causes the cost of those items to rise, Veteri said.

Dockum remembers his high school years, when many people were interested in circa-'60s and '70s culture, including bands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. But right now, it's items from the 1980s, '90s and 2000s.

It's also a hobby that can be an investment for these business-minded adults.

"You can give that money to a financial adviser and there's nothing fun or attractive about it, there's just numbers on a piece of paper," said Veteri. "But if you have a high-end collection of vintage 'Star Wars' (items) that you grew up with, it brings you joy every day to look at it, and it's also making you money. Everyone wants to own Tesla stock, but it's not fun."

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