

## Toys for big boys

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Toy sales in the US have steadily dropped for the past few years. But for more than a decade, the bright spot in an otherwise gloomy market has been toys aimed at grown-ups. In 2007, retail sales of playthings geared to the over-18 set were up nearly 10 per cent.

"This is definitely one of the industry's biggest trends," says Gareb Shamus, New York publisher of the industry magazine Toy Wishes. "And it's only going to increase as this demographic gets older."

Whether it's the Los Angeles rock musician who owns thousands of dollars of "Star Wars" action figures and costumes, a Dutch physiology professor with a basement full of LEGOS, or a Washington State chef with storage units and glass bookcases jammed with Muppet toys, this is a trend that grew from the era of mass-market tie-ins.

"These companies got accustomed to reaping the profits from film and TV tie-ins," says Shamus. "And they regrouped and retooled their products to hold onto their customers as the fans began to get older."

Even as adults are holding onto their toys longer, children are setting them aside at an ever-earlier age. Toy industry expert Richard Gottlieb calls this "age compression".

Increasingly, he says, both ends of the spectrum aspire to the "sweet spot of our time, which is teen culture. Everyone wants to be that eternal youth."

Icons of baby boomers' childhood years have crafted sophisticated campaigns targeting their nostalgia and pocketbooks.

LEGO celebrated the 50th anniversary of the famous plastic brick this year, Barbie rings in her golden anniversary next year, and even the Cabbage Patch Kids marked a quarter century with a birthday bash in New York's Times Square this year.

These companies have gone to great lengths to hold onto their fans and have been rewarded with a deep, abiding loyalty.

The Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOL), which grew 22 per cent this past year, is a sophisticated international network that could rival any teen fan club in Hollywood.

"Manufacturers have retooled to produce more sophisticated versions of the products the kids were buying in their first encounter with films such as Star Wars," says Reyne Rice, a trend tracker for the Toy Industry Association.

As examples, she points to such items as a Spiderman collectible action figure with more than 50 moveable joints and a Star Wars sculpture with the fine detailing of an adult work of art. "This is workmanship that a child wouldn't care about. It's clearly targeted at adults."

### Changing attitudes

Earlier generations regarded adults who played with children's toys as "creepy," says Christopher Noxon, author of the book *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-Up*.

But attitudes have changed with the times. "Clearly, there are some adults who use an obsession with childish things to avoid adulthood responsibility," Noxon adds, "but these days, it's much more complex."

The model of putting away childish things when moving into adulthood is an artifact of the industrial, urban world. That image has been replaced by a more flexible, adaptable age-resistant worker, one for whom the childlike qualities of curiosity and openness are now as important as a "serious, adult-like attitude," he says.

Montana Miller teaches a course for adults to "re-learn" the values of childhood play through activities such as fort-building and Play-Doh.

"I think the whole world would be a better place if everyone were able to embrace a love of play," says Dr Miller, assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Longtime teddy bear collector Yvette Jessen, who lives near Frankfurt, says that her extensive stuffed ursine cadre brings out the "internal child" in everyone who comes to visit her.

If more people would allow that playful side to emerge, "then perhaps we could find a means in which to coexist with one another in a peaceful way," she says.

"That is where creativity and imagination thrive," says Miller. "And as long as these individuals aren't becoming a burden to society or doing something terribly criminal, I see nothing wrong with continuing to play with toys throughout adulthood."

With a basement full of LEGO constructions, Ohio State University assistant professor Paul Janssen is an enthusiastic and unapologetic member of AFOL. A father of three, Dr Janssen says he is no longer embarrassed to admit that he loves to play with the little bricks.

AFOL members even have a name for the years spent away from the beloved building toys. "We call them the Dark Ages," says Janssen with a laugh. "For most, it's roughly the years between 15 and mid- to late 20s."

For him, beginning to collect LEGOS in his 20s came about after he got a job and was able to buy the products on his own. And, of course, finding like-minded aficionados along the way.

While adults have long collected children's toys, musician Richard Patrick says that for most of the people he knows who have children's playthings (and he knows many, he says), the toys are just a cover for doing what they really want.

He has hundreds of 'Star Wars' figures and memorabilia all over his house, "except for the bedroom where my wife and I sleep," he says. He figures the trove is worth thousands of dollars by now, "but I wouldn't ever sell it. I just love having the stuff around."

Jim Hemstead, a chef in Bothell, Washington, has much the same feelings about his extensive Muppet collection, housed in various parts of his home, including his 7-year-old daughter's closet, not to mention in additional storage units. He occasionally rearranges Kermit and Miss Piggy in a few of his favourite scenes.

## **A symbol**

For this trio of toy lovers, as with many other adults, the toys are as much a symbol of another time as they are playthings. "I love what the [Star Wars] movie meant to me," says Patrick.

That's a sentiment echoed by Hemstead. "The Muppets aren't just toys," he says, adding that he deeply admires Muppet creator Jim Henson. "He wanted to show a world where all these different characters could

get along, and I love that vision of peace."

This deep, emotional connection is what toymaker Jason Feinberg tries to tap with his line of "dolls" for adults. He sculpts famous figures from history and modern life and mass-produces them. The Barack Obama figure has been a bestseller for the company he founded, Jailbreak Toys.

Beneath this adult attraction to a "toy" is something deeper, Feinberg says. Other cultures have long respected the desire to have a physical, outward symbol of people or things that are close to the heart, "We've lost something by reducing this need to merely being a child's toy."