

THE SCI-FI TOY COLLECTOR'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

Let's face it - toys are cool, especially when they happen to be science fiction related toys. In the past two decades there has been an unprecedented rise in the popularity and collectability of toys (or "action figures," depending on who's talking to whom) based on a variety of franchises. Whether from film classics like the *Star Wars* trilogy, TV favorites such as *Star Trek*, or even toy lines like Transformers that have themselves inspired shows, sci-fi playthings are a hot commodity these days, and they show no sign of cooling off any time soon.

So how do you get started collecting? What should you look for? What should you look *out* for? How do you avoid paying too much?

We've set out to answer all these questions, plus a few more.

Before you go off in search of all those pricey collectibles, you need to take a step back and ask yourself: what do I really want to get out of this? If you want an investment, you're better off buying stocks. Older lines will usually hold their value, but don't plan your retirement based on them. If you want a little happiness, buy toys you like and <gasp> open them.

Before you even think about what you want, you should set your spending limits. This is a hobby that can get very expensive very quickly. If you know ahead of time how much you can spend on a given item, you'll save yourself a big headache down the road. This especially applies to bidding in auctions, either in person or online (which we'll discuss in a bit).

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMINOLOGY

Toy collectors sometimes speak in very strange tongues. It would take an entire article alone to define all the terms and lingo you'll run into, but here's a quick introduction to ToySpeak 101.

Some of the more common acronyms you'll come across are MIB (Mint In Box), MIP (Mint In Package), MOC (Mint On Card) and NRFB (Never Removed From Box). There are many others, but these will at least keep your head above water. The grading scale, used to define a toy's condition (or package if unopened) starts at C1 (junk) and goes up to C10 (perfect and mint). This is a very subjective rating, so be prepared to make your own judgments. For the most part, there is no such thing as a C10 - most toys don't even leave the factory that perfect.

PRICE GUIDES, TOY MAGS AND SPECIALTY STORES

Price guides are a good way to get a feel for what the going rates are for various items. If it's

a new, currently shipping toy, this will reflect the "aftermarket" value of the piece. This is what you'll probably end up paying for a new *Star Wars* figure at a specialty shop instead of the regular price at a larger retail chain.

"Book value" is not guaranteed for the typical individual seller, however. That Toys R Us exclusive 12" Han Solo and Tauntaun may have a price guide value of \$150, but you have to find someone willing to pay that much for it. In this case, since the aforementioned toy is still currently in production and retailing for about \$60, you will probably get laughed out of the room by a smart shopper.

Most of the popular toy magazines feature a price guide of some sort. There will be some variance from one source to the next, but they're usually consistent overall. You'll also be flooded by ads from dealers all over the country, which show you who is pricing what at how much.

A good place to pick up these types of publications is a local collectible store. Often referred to as an aftermarket shop, this is the first place you'll want to look for something you can't find at retail. This is also the best way to check out vintage items without waiting for a convention.

CONVENTIONS

Toy shows and conventions are your best chance to see a large amount of merchandise firsthand, as well as do some serious comparison shopping. Although you'll find listings for many smaller local events throughout the year, it's usually more productive to travel to one of the bigger shows, like bi-annual International Collectible Toy eXpo (TX) which will next be taking place March 13 and 14 in Pennsauken, New Jersey. There are more dealers at these shows and you'll find a much wider variety of goodies.

"We do a big show," says Michael Herz, owner of Whiz Bang! Toys and Collectibles in Casselberry, Florida and producer of TX. "When a collector walks into one of our events, there's 1200 dealer tables; it's a huge expansive room full of toy dealers. (We also have) exclusive toys that are only available at our event."

This is where you're almost assured to find the higher end pieces for your collection, like a vintage MOC 12-back *Star Wars* figure. Generally, dealers sell the majority of their big ticket toys at these shows.

When visiting a convention, it pays to be a cautious shopper. If you find something that interests you, check out the price and then take a look around at the other dealer tables. You might find out the first price you see is not a bargain at all.

However, Herz warns against being *too* cautious at a show. "If you know what you're looking for and you know what it's worth and you see it, grab it because somebody else might come along and grab it. There's nothing worse than waiting on a piece and coming back and finding it gone and being upset that you didn't just get it."

There are other ways to hunt for vintage items as well. Consider placing a "wanted" ad in your local newspaper. There are countless stories of entire collections being purchased this way for a fraction of their true value. In the same vein, ask around at work, as well as your relatives. If someone near and dear to you has a box full of Mego *Star Trek* figures, and you don't inquire about them, they could end up in a dumpster!

RETAIL

Retail stores like Toys R Us, Target, and WalMart are where you're you'll end up doing most of your toy hunting. There's really no reason to pay more than retail for something that's currently in production and being shipped. If you can be patient, you can find almost anything.

Your biggest challenge will come from "scalpers." These are the guys you see waiting in their vans at 8:00 am when the store first opens. Scalpers buy whatever new, "hot" toys they can find, and then attempt to make a quick profit based on current aftermarket values. They show up at different times of the day, but you'll almost always see them in the morning.

Every store has different delivery days and stocking patterns. Try to find out when "truck day" is - this will often be your best opportunity. However, not all stores place stock on the shelves as soon as it arrives; while some may do it before or after closing, others like Target will restock throughout the day. Try to get to know the employees and *ask nicely*. You'll be surprised at what a little courtesy will get you. They may even be willing to bring something from out the back for you. It never hurts to try!

Take a look behind some of the other toys. It's not uncommon for someone to hide an item in or behind something else in hopes of coming back for it later.

Another way for collectors to come together is through local or regional purchasing groups. This is similar to online trading, and often gets started this way, except it occurs in a face-to-face manner. There's nothing better than having a friend on the other end of town who can hit the stores you can't.

Lunchtime toy runs are a great way to have a good afternoon at work. If the store has restocked since the morning rush of scalpers, your chances of finding what you want may be

better. If you want to kill two birds with one stone, hit the grocery so you can pick up a frozen entree and check out the toy aisle. Grocery and drug stores have much smaller toy sections, but they aren't visited by scalpers as often as other establishments.

THE INTERNET

The internet has made the world a much, much smaller place, and this is very good news for toy fanatics. The Net is by far the best way to stay up to date and to educate yourself on all manner of toy-related topics. Assuming you already know how to get online, surf the web, and read newsgroups, let's take a look at some great resources awaiting you.

Newsgroups are the lifeblood of the serious collector. The ability to stay in touch with others who are looking for the same toys you desire is fantastic. No matter how obscure or unusual your collecting interest is, you're likely to find someone who shares your excitement. Groups like `rec.arts.sf.starwars.collecting.misc` and `rec.toys.action-figures.discuss` are good places to start.

The best way to take advantage of newsgroups is to not do anything - at least not right away. Decide what groups interest you and then spend some time reading various posts. Learn who the regulars are. Once you're comfortable, start asking questions. One important thing - do NOT post for sale/wanted ads in discussion-only groups. That's one of the quickest ways to blacklist yourself!

There are also specialized email lists you can subscribe to. This way, discussion comes straight into your mailbox, and it's usually a pleasant atmosphere, thanks to the fact the list administrator can keep out scalpers and scammers.

Be warned, however, some lists can be very active, and you may end up with 100 email messages to read on any given day!

Trades are a great way to help fellow collectors while simultaneously adding to your own collection. Just because your local Target in Boston is overflowing with Beshpin Lukes doesn't mean the same is true in Denver. By networking with friends through the internet, you can locate items they need and in turn they can find the good stuff you want too.

Before committing to a deal with anyone, gather references as many references as possible about them. Most regulars will have a list of people they've done business with in the past, so you can check with them. The web-based search engine Dejanews will allow you to see old Usenet discussions regarding a particular name.

When it comes to the World Wide Web, many non-commercial sites feature a "for sale/for

trade" section. These usually don't get updated as often as newsgroup, but they're still a good source to check into. You'll also find many dealers with web sites and widely varying prices. Never take any price on an item as gospel; verify it with as many sources as possible for making a purchase.

The greatest asset of web surfing is the amount of knowledge awaiting you. A great starting point is Raving Toy Maniac's huge list of toy-related links at <http://www.toymania.com/links/>.

WEB AUCTIONS

Auction sites like Ebay (<http://www.ebay.com>) and Up4Sale (<http://www.up4sale.com>) allow users to bid on collectibles from the comfort of their home. This can be dangerous if you get caught up in a bidding frenzy, and begin to feel you must have it at any cost. If you bid on an item, decide ahead of time the maximum amount you're willing to spend. If the bidding goes above that point, just let it go.

JAPANESE TOYS

If your interests lie in Anime or other Japanese sci-fi, you'll want to check into websites like Felix Lu's site at <http://www.fantasiatoys.com>. You'll be amazed at how many cool toys are waiting across the Pacific. So why don't we see more of them here in the US? "Most Americans are unfamiliar with Japanese characters, although video game characters are recognizable," says Lu. "The toys' retail price point is higher than what most Americans are accustomed to."

SCALPERS AND SCAMS

If you're not careful, the Net can jump up and bite you. When it comes to toy collecting, scalpers are the most prevalent form of lowlife online. You'll find packs of them trying to sell the newest figures for more than retail -- often much more, like \$25 for an *X-Files* two-pack that should go for \$9.99.

Beware of out and out scams. The old saying "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is" rings true here. One of the best examples of this is the infamous "RenHoeck" scandal that occurred in early '96 in the *Star Wars* newsgroup. An online trader/reseller, using the alias of "RenHoeck" purported to have many C10 condition items available at great prices. But while buyers *thought* he was describing original, vintage pieces, like a \$40 Sandcrawler, turned out to only be much cheaper, currently in production X-Ray Fleet Micromachines. The full story and related posts can be found at <http://pages.map.com/starwars/renhoeck.html>.

CONCLUSION

Being a toy collector can be challenging. However, if you have the patience and you educate yourself, it can also be extremely rewarding. Above all, remember what it's all about: fun. These are toys. So live dangerously and open some of those MOC figs! Viva La Plastic!