

Memory collecting

"One day everything is fine, you've got a nice hobby, a girlfriend and a life. Then one morning you wake up and find that you're a drooling obsessive with no friends, all because of the day you said, "Oh, that's a nice pencil sharpener, I think I'll hold onto that..." Three years later you're surrounded by thousands of the things, and sleep knee-deep in pencil shavings."

""Watching WWII films, reading about the GIs in London and listening to Glenn Miller just makes me go all misty eyed for that period. I love to dance the jives, wear the clothes and party like it's VE day 1945."

Jason is a thirty six year old digital producer at a top London advertising agency, a pretty normal profession. He has a long term girlfriend and lives in a trendy warehouse conversion in east London. All good so far. However, Jason has an illicit secret. In his spare time he collects things: things you or I would consider useless or superfluous. He's a memory collector.

Jason has a passion for the past, he loves the romantic view of the sixties that films like *Bullet* or the *Italian Job* or *Blow-Up* evoke. As a result he collects things that he perceives to be of that era. From scooters to clothes and watches. He also has a passion for the cars of that era, whether they are Porsches, Jeeps or the aforementioned scooters. Jason's view is that "It doesn't have to be a time you lived through, it can be an artificial memory or perception of how things used to be, like vintage Americana." And that's not all. He's a child of the seventies and his generation was the first to really be influenced by the Star Wars films, so as a result his lounge is full of Star Wars figures.

Many of us had a small obsession at some point in our lives. Whether that was Star Wars figures in our tweens, rare records in our teens, Air Jordan trainers in our twenties or vintage radios in our thirties. Such 'obsessions' are growing in number and across demographics. What is the reason for this and why do we insist on collecting things that are of no real tangible use?

Memory collectors can be grouped into several cohorts. There are those that yearn for an era and collect a range of cross-industry products that together create an evocative environment. And those that like one specific product or type of product, such as trainers or badges, and can purchase across a range of eras or styles.

There's something about the 1940s that intrigues Anne. Despite being born almost three decades after they ended, she has an incredible interest in the fashion and music of that era. Now Anne has taken her hobby, attending Forties-revival dances and wearing clothes of the era, and turned it into a business.

"It became really hard to find the clothes I wanted to wear, so I found some of the old patterns and started creating my own. People would ask where I'd got my dress from and I'd tell them I'd made it then they'd ask if I could make one for them too."

Max is in his thirties and yet he's always desired an Evel Knievel Chopper Bike. For the first time he's had the disposable income and ability to easily get his hands on one.

"They are pretty rare, but they do occasionally come up on ebay or even craigslist. I love Evel Knievel stuff. It's stuff people wanted as kids. It's definitely filling a hole in my own

childhood."

Gavin Lucas of design magazine Creative Review, is putting together a book of the best button badges ever designed. His passion for badges stems from the memories of collecting them when they were ubiquitous giveaways for companies in the 1980s.

Nick is a thirty something IT Engineer. He has devoted the past 23 years of his life to collecting tracksuits from the 1970s and '80s. He just can't resist purchasing genuine 80s UK tracksuits and hunts for lucky finds in charity shops. Completely uninterested in anything made after 1990 (as "they are just cheaply made") Nick is still seeking the holy grail of a 1986 Adidas Colorado jacket. He collects because it reminds him of a great period in his life and "they are the most comfortable clothes on earth". His interest began when he was a kid:

"In about 1983 when my mates were all too busy wearing their tracksuits out, I didn't want to ruin mine at all. It was a design that the shops sold out of. So I stopped wearing it & 'mothballed it'. Over two decades later, it's still in it's original box."

Self confessed sneaker activist, Al Cabino, took memory collecting to a whole new level in the Autumn of 2005 when he petitioned Nike to recreate the McFly trainers from Back to the Future II. The Sneaker Freaker journalist coined the term 'sneaker activism' with his campaign to see the 'Holy Grail of movie sneakers' produced. Al decided to take the future of trainers in to his own hands and advance 'sneaker culture'. Al is a huge fan of Nike Dunks, the most collected of all trainers, and had a custom pair created from Swiss chocolate for his "Al Cabino and the Chocolate Factory" project.

Another sneaker freak, Patrick, explains his first experiences:

"When I was a kid my dad used to travel a lot on business. He usually bought me some cheap t-shirt from the airport that wouldn't last longer than the first wash. However, whenever he came back from the US that was a different story. He knew I loved Nike, so he'd simply walk into the nearest shop and ask for the latest Nikes. It didn't really matter what they looked like because I was safe in the knowledge that I had at least 6 months sometimes even a year of exclusivity before you could buy them in the Wood Green branch of Olympus. Even if you went 'up west' they wouldn't be available."

"That was the beginning of my trainer fetish. By the early nineties I was cold calling sports shops in places like Framlingham asking if they happened to have a pair of Air Jordan II from '86 gathering dust in a store room somewhere. "

"Boys will boys, and boys will long for beloved childhood artifacts."

Like so many behaviours in the 21st Century, memory collecting is about collective individualism: being unique within the safety of a community. Memory collecting taps into this desire to belong and yet remain unique. For example memory collectors love to meet others with a similar passion who are based in another country but if that same person were to sit at the desk next to them in the office they'd hate it.

Tribalism - the need to belong to one group and be apart from others - is an age old human behaviour driver. It can take the form of wars, religions – or just sports such as football. Britain itself divides and sub-divides itself into tribes. It has a class structure that remains intact, despite politicians attempts to create a classless society. It has different

nationalities, regions, accents, professions and schools that all define themselves slightly different from the norm. However, this has not been enough and people want to segment themselves further and create an identity around their interests, hobbies and also their beliefs.

Memory collectors want to feel that they are part of a community. They don't want the community to be force fed to them, they want to interact with it on their terms and maintain their uniqueness. There would be nothing worse for Al Cabino than to be walking around town and seeing someone in exactly the same pair of Limited Edition Nike Dunks, but he wouldn't mind chatting to someone from Mexico who owned the same trainers. Sneaker lovers are even setting up their own parties where they can show off just how unique they are whilst still being part of the wider sneaker community.

Memory collecting is an emotionally-driven behaviour, triggered by an experience unique to the collector. It's the memory rather than the actual purchase of the item that truly motivates the purchase. It's almost like buying the item is preserving the memory. In the same way that we take photos when we go on holiday so that we keep the memory fresh, purchasing something tangible will ensure that the memory stays with us. Yes they might, like thousands of others, collect original Star Wars toys but this might not be because it was the first movie they ever went to a cinema to see or because they had a Star Wars lunch box, although these could be the triggers. It is just as likely to be the fact that they never had a Star Wars figure when they were growing up and were jealous of their best friend who actually had a Millennium Falcon or an Imperial Walker. And collecting a specific item and attaching it to a memory gives them a sense of individuality in a more and more branded world.

DeJongh Wells, from trainer magazine Sole Collector, says many sneakerheads are adults who were denied certain sneakers as children.

"It's the stories that get attached to the sneaker; 'I remember my parents refused to buy that because they didn't want to pay \$100 for some damn sneakers.'"

Unsurprisingly memory collectors are heavy internet users, "Where else am I going to find that one other person in the world who can sort me out with an Adidas Colorado jacket?" says Nick. And you can understand why he might feel like this. With literally billions of people with access to the web there is no better way to isolate and find the one thing you've been craving.

"ebay used to be great, but then everyone started using it and it pushed the prices up to a ridiculous level. I can see that happening with Craglist too."

So ebay is obviously a great place to find the memory collectors but what of the more niche locations? Nike Talk, the hub for all Nike collectors, has an online classified section and while people tend to know their stuff it's a great way measuring the market. Seeing what's available and what you should be paying. Another sneaker site is Sneaker Freak, it started life out as a collection of trainer snaps put up by various sneaker heads before people cottoned on that it was also a great place to sell their shoes. Some clever sneaker hunter has also set up a site called kicksfinder.com which searches ebay for trainers by catalogue pictures. Other key online publications are Hype Beast, Freshness Mag and the Daily Sneaker.

Back in the real world, trainer aficionados monitor the stores that Nike et al have strong

relationships with such as Slammin Kicks in Beak St and Foot Patrol in St Anne's Court. Then of course there are the events such as Sneaker Pimps run by Peter Fahey. He promotes his events by getting right to the heart of the culture.

"I basically come into a city with a format in mind of the types of people who will attend my event, skateboarders, artists, hip-hop heads etc. I link up with stores/groups/collectives, get their logo on the flyer, have them contribute to the show whether it's getting local artists to customize sneakers or loan some rare/limited edition sneakers and then they in turn promote the Sneaker Pimps show through their avenues i.e. word of mouth, email blasts, handing out flyers etc. So the major aim is to work with all the cliques in each city so you get the city talking about it."

"You've got to read the right stuff too. Sneaker Freaker magazine is a key mag."

But sneaker collecting is pretty mainstream, how do people like Anne get their hands on the real deal?

Like most memory collectors she's put in the hours of scouring charity shops and vintage stores but found that the hours required for a modest find aren't worth it when you can work smarter. "I guess a lot of what I buy comes through trusted sources like my friends... It can be pretty hard to find this sort of thing because most people don't believe there's any demand."

Thankfully Anne's network of friends takes in the WWII group and also the World War II experience. "For new people wanting to join we're great. We'll lend our stuff and try and get people settled in and help them buy their kit too."

Anne makes a lot of her 1940s clothing now with many patterns available on the web. However, for the really good stuff militaria fairs are the answer and these are local events held all around the country. Ebay has also provided a fantastic array of garments. Online stores such as Fogey Unlimited provide original 1930s to 1960s civilian fashions.

For the like of Max it is the internet that comes to the rescue again. "You can try car boot sales, but anyone with half a brain knows to stick it up on ebay." Fortunately there are also specialist sites such as bigreds.com that are prepared to do the work for him. Fan sites such as Evel1.com provide a forum for fans and offer the chance to exchange collectables, whilst ebid.net provide an alternative to ebay.

Thanks to a long property boom and an economy that has been growing year on year since 1991, consumers are more affluent than ever before. But whilst richer, many of them have been unable to afford an additional property or make major one-off purchases such as new cars. Instead they have increasingly sought to make a personal statement in a different way, with a series of 'small indulgences'. Collecting memorabilia fits in perfectly.

"The Baby Boomers are fuelling a nostalgia industry, with movie props and memorabilia being auctioned for staggering prices. 20 plastic Star Wars figurines recently sold for £10,000 having originally been bought for just 49p each in 1977." Propmasters.ent

The internet too has had a massively popularizing effect on collecting. Websites have been started that not only sell vintage or odd items, they place it in context. Whereas before you might have binned all your old clothes or your Action Man toys you can now google them and find all sorts of websites devoted to them. Yahoo has a hobbies section devoted to the odd

items that are collected. This provides a forum for collectors. It is now incredibly easy to set up a blog and talk about your hobby. Collectors inevitably find that like minded souls are linking to them, connecting them and creating new communities.

The 'long tail' the internet provides has had a profound effect on people's collecting habits. Once upon a time collectable stuff would just be someone's junk, but stick it on eBay and all of a sudden it's another person's Holy Grail. Sites such as Absolute Vintage allow collectors to get their hands on a huge array of rare clothes from the 1930s to the 1980s. Then there are, of course, bigger sites like Craigslist, Gumtree and the ubiquitous eBay. Neil Johnson, formerly an employee of the site and now an advertising analyst, says it is not just the 'cooler' items that are hugely collectible. He points to the huge market for PES dispensers (those weird sweets you always bought on holiday), coloured Bakelite, Toby jugs and vintage radios from classic makes such as Ekco, Marconi, Bush and Emerson. Such items can go for up to £1,000.

Two of the worlds most marketing savvy brands, Nike and Adidas regularly re-release classic shoes to please the "sneaker heads". Not only this, but they try to give the collectors of the future something to look for and release limited edition versions of their shoes frequently.

Brands like Mastercard are tapping into nostalgia and the eBay phenomenon indirectly. Ads for Mastercard have shown a 1970s action man figure with the slogan "Original Action Man: £89. Replacing your brother's favourite toy 30 years after you broke it: priceless."

If you are a brand that is lucky enough to have a heritage that people have emotionally bought into then there is plenty of scope for re-releases and providing consumers with the background information on collectables. There is also a scope for creating future limited edition items and fuel and the Memory Collectors of the future. Brands can also facilitate the collecting of items. It's not unheard of for companies to receive requests for information on discontinued products so why not create a forum where people can trade stories and information.

Memory collectors are ready made brand evangelists so they are potentially great brand ambassadors. In addition they can be opinion formers within their communities and provide a legitimate way for your brand to talk to people.

Memory Collecting is a mindset, it's a desire for people to relive a moment in their life- or a perceived moment in someone else's life. It's also a feeling of belonging whilst remaining unique. Memory Collectors demonstrate to us that while we try to create a profitable future, by evoking fond memories and iconic moments there is plenty to learn from the past.