

The COMEBACK kids

Retro toys like Tonka trucks and Lite-Brites are all the rage again

BY FRANK LOVECE
Special to Newsday

Many toys and games are perennials — Monopoly, anyone? But others are now relics consigned to museums and eBay: The board game Careers. The Great Garloo toy robot.

Old toy lines and games are in the midst of a roaring revival, as children of the 1990s and 2000s have become parents themselves — and as nostalgic as any boomer with a collection of vinyl LPs and a 1965 glow-in-the-dark Green Ghost game.

“It’s a generational thing of when we’re nostalgic for certain types of toys,” says Jennifer Lynch, a toy trends specialist at the trade group, The Toy Association. “I grew up as a ’90s kid and I’m a little bit nostalgic for those toys. We’re seeing today’s parents wanting to share with their kids the toys they themselves played with as kids.” Or didn’t play with. “Once you’re an adult and you have your own money,” she notes, “you’re able to purchase the toys that maybe you couldn’t purchase as a child.”

Toy and game nostalgia is

nothing new: The company Ideal, for instance, reissued its 1978, albeit not as a put-together kit like the original. But this current resurgence of classic toys and games has been turbocharged by social media,

which has amplified consumer nostalgia and demand.

“Social media was around in 2000, 2005, 2007, but nothing like it is today,” says Jay Foreman, CEO of Basic Fun!, a toy and game revival specialist with lines including Care Bears, My Little Pony, View-Master and more.

“Social media is, I think, one reason why it is so easy to revive certain toys,” agrees Samantha Connell, associate editor of the trade magazine *The Toy Insider*. People getting on TikTok and talking about the toys they loved “really gave a lot of toy companies the momentum to revive certain products” — often with modern updates and technological enhancements.

“There’s a real element of connection” with nostalgic toys and games, adds Bradley Bowman, a senior director at the iconic toy company Hasbro. “Kids can sit with their parents or grandparents and enjoy the

same thing their parents enjoyed when they were young. It’s not just about nostalgia,” he insists. “It’s about giving kids a chance to share experiences with their families and learn in a fun, low-tech way.”

What are some of the highest-profile toys and games that have been revived or updated in time for the 2024 holiday season? Here are five, generally available for less than the manufacturer’s suggested retail price — plus an open-secret sixth set for early next year, Nintendo Switch 2, so you might want to give your kid an IOU this holiday season.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Tonka Mighty Dump Truck (1965)

WHAT’S NEW: Tonka Retro Mighty Dump Truck (\$49.99)

The company founded in 1946 as Mound Metalcraft,

maker of garden tools and the like, expanded into toy trucks the following year. By 1955, the company had abandoned rakes and hoes and renamed itself Tonka Toys. Its bright yellow Mighty Dump Trump, introduced the following decade, became Tonka’s bestselling item for the rest of the 20th century, even after Hasbro — the world’s third-largest toy company, with 2023 revenue of \$5 billion — acquired the company in 1991, according to The Strong National Museum of Play.

This year Basic Fun! brought out a new version with what the company says is double the amount of steel parts as the original. The truck still carries the Tonka name, since it’s part of a licensing partnership.



At left, the “it” toy of 2016, Hatchimals; Tonka’s steel dump truck, right, first caused a stir in the 1960s and became the company’s bestselling toy for the rest of the 20th century.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Lite-Brite (1967)

WHAT'S NEW: Lite-Brite Super Bright HD: Hello Kitty Edition, Lite-Brite Super Bright HD: Pokémon Edition (\$24.99 each)

Another Hasbro boutique brand is Lite-Brite, an upright lightbox with a grid into which you insert colored light-up pegs.

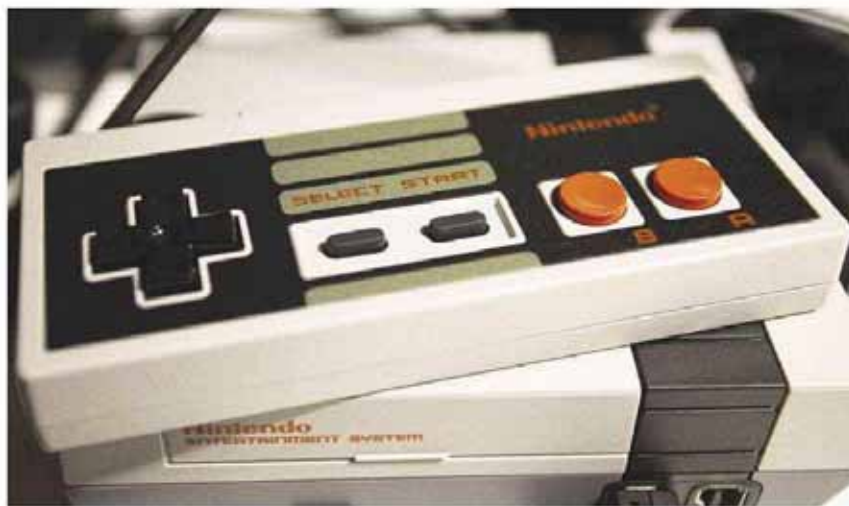
"The classic version of Lite-Brite continued to be sold until the late '90s before production slowed down," says Hasbro executive Bowman, "but the love for Lite-Brite never truly went away." Hasbro reintroduced an updated version in the 2000s, and sporadically again through the years before licensing it to Basic Fun!

This year's two new versions — with LEDs having long supplanted the light bulb that burned more than a few young fingers — offers brighter images than past editions, Basic Fun! says on its website. Among other enhancements are four light modes — steady, bounce, flash and clockwise — and newly licensed characters.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Nintendo Entertainment System (limited U.S. release 1985, nationwide U.S. release 1986)

WHAT'S NEW: Nintendo Switch 2

The original NES may have been a relatively primitive 8-bit home video game system like the pioneering Atari 2600 when it came to the United States in 1985, but it produced a higher quality of graphics and gameplay. Consisting of a console and a pair of hard-



The Nintendo Entertainment System, left, debuted in the United States in 1985. Littlest Pet Shop toys, right, were introduced in 1992.

wired controllers, the NES dominated the market. NES titles like Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda became massive hits and helped revive a slumping game industry.

But rapid advances in technology led to a best-selling competitor in 1989, the groundbreaking 16-bit Sega Genesis. Nintendo countered with its own 16-bit Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1992. By the time Nintendo stopped production on the original NES three years later, that model had sold more than 60 million consoles and hundreds of millions of game cartridges.

Nintendo went on to produce many successors, including the 64-bit Nintendo 64 (1996), the Nintendo Wii (2006) and, in 2017, the Nintendo Switch, which could be played as a handheld game,

be docked at home for play on your TV or connect to the internet for multiplayer online gaming.

Nintendo has said it will announce its next-generation model by March 31.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Littlest Pet Shop (1992)

WHAT'S NEW: Littlest Pet Shop Generation 7 (Playset \$39.99, Surprise Singles three-packs \$3.99 each)

Introduced in 1992 by Kenner Toys, by then a Hasbro division, Littlest Pet Shop is a collection of stylized, big-eyed, uber-cute animal figurines, 2 inches tall. Beginning with Generation 2 in 2005, they had bobbleheads.

More than 3,000 different figurines have been released, with the line's collectible appeal amplified in recent years by fans posing them for Instagram photos with narrative scenarios — a shark at a beach, about to "return to the sea"; dogs at the bakery counter of a dollhouse-like LPS play set — or even stop-motion animation on YouTube and TikTok.

In 2020, however, the line took a breather, only coming back this year. Basic Fun!'s new Generation 7 promises "more expressive eyes and faces" and "unique accessories," according to the website.

The Toy Association's Lynch gives much credit to the company's social media engagement for the line's revival. "They revitalized the brand by tapping into that original audience that grew up with it through speaking directly to their fanbases on

online forums that they live in," she says.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Tickle Me Elmo (1996)

WHAT'S NEW: Chicken Dance Elmo (\$29.99)

The most rabid toy craze since 1983's Cabbage Patch Kids, the laughing "Sesame Street" doll Tickle Me Elmo, originally produced by Tyco Preschool, set off literal riots.

Tickle Me Elmo and variations later were released in turn by the Mattel-owned Fisher-Price and the then-Hasbro-owned Playskool. Fisher-Price had a Chicken Dance Elmo that ran from 2002 through at least 2010. Updated this year by Just Play, the new animated plush toy giggles, dances, sings and tells jokes. "You have the new technology built in that upgrades the toy to make it more feature-rich," says Lynch.

And it's Insta-Reels-ready, too. "Elmo's dance moves constantly go viral online," she says.

ORIGINAL CRAZE: Hatchimals (2016)

WHAT'S NEW: Hatchimals Alive! Mystery Hatch (\$59.99)

Can there be nostalgia for something created not even a decade ago? Apparently so.

The "it" toy of 2016, Hatchimals, from the Canadian company Spin Masters, is a collection of plush dolls of fantastic creatures that hatch from eggs and then require care and faux feeding. You don't know which Hatchimal you've bought until it actually hatches.

New this year: Hatchimals

Alive! Mystery Hatch, which up the electronics through mist, lights and more than 100 sounds and reactions.

"This has the same gameplay concept" as regular Hatchimals, "like all these revived toys typically do," says Connell, "but this takes it to a new level. . . . There're so many new elements. There's a bunch of music and mist and rainbow lights and the eggs themselves are larger and more colorful."



Tickle Me Elmo was the big toy craze in 1996.

QUIZ ANSWERS: 1. C 2. A 3. D 4. False: It was a chain of discount clothing stores 5. B 6. C 7. B-A-D-C 8. A 9. B 10. D 11. A 12. C 13. B 14. B 15. A and D 16. "Call Chicken Delight"; "cows"; "prices are insane" 17. A 18. B 19. D 20. C 21. B 22. C 23. A 24. B 25. A

ON THE COVER Angela Nudo, of Westbury, looks at dolls with daughter Michele at the Korvette's in Carle Place on Dec. 21, 1971.



The classic version of Hasbro's Lite-Brite continued to be sold until the late '90s. This year's two new versions use LEDs.

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