Joy of toys

For some adults, the toys and costumes from their favourite shows are more than just childhood playthings

One kid’s “toy” is another man’s “collectible”, maybe even art.

Singapore filmmaker Eric Khoo, who collects figurines of vintage G.I. Joe action figures, says: “When people see my collection, they look at it as a work of art. They think it’s unique – not something you easily find off the shelves.”

The 43-year-old, who has more than 100 G.I. Joe figurines, started seriously collecting and trading them 20 years ago.

He says: “They are like my first actors. When I was eight or nine, I used to do basic animation work with these figures, so they would come alive. I have a personal attachment to them.”

More than an instance of a growing trade in toys, his attachment to his G.I. Joes is a sign of popular culture’s embracing influence on a generation of people who treated movies and TV shows with a seriousness normally accorded more “adult” obsessions.

When the new Star Trek movie was released in Singapore recently, the distributor organised a special screening just for fans, many of whom attended in Star Trek uniforms and assorted paraphernalia.

Indeed, according to Ms Ann Goh, founder of Simply Toys and Toy Outpost, her stores see a tenfold spike in sales of related merchandise when a new movie opens.

“There is a huge potential in this market and since we started in 2001, business has increased by six times,” she says.

Simply Toys retails various movie and TV series collectibles in its three outlets islandwide. Sister store Toy Outpost rents out display cases for owners to exhibit and sell their collections. They are looking for a suitable location to open a second Toy Outpost.

Simply Toys’ most expensive item is a 90cm-tall bronze statue of Darth Vader from the Star Wars movies which is worth $20,000.

About 80 per cent of the store’s customers are men in their 20s to 40s, including professionals such as lawyers and doctors.

Ms Goh says: “They are regaining what they missed out on in their childhood now that they have the purchasing power.”

A spokesman for Hobby Art Gallery, a shop in Bencoolen Street selling model kits of anime robots, says: “We started out seven years ago and every year, there is about a 10 per cent increase in sales.”

But Mr Chang Yang Fa, founder and chief executive officer of the private Mint Museum of Toys, which also has a retail shop, says: “In general, toy collecting is still a niche activity in Singapore. Because we have so many other priorities in society, toys are not recognised as valuable.”

He says there is a greater demand in Japan and Hong Kong, where the markets are large enough and where there are manufacturing factories for toys.

“Tos are an extension of what collectors can identify with – a physical representation of their fantasies,” he adds.

“You can call it escapism, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

It may be about more than escapism. Delve deeper into the collectibles universe and you will find that science fiction takes up a large chunk of the pie, from robots to starships, lightsabres and aliens.

Mr Leonard Chia, 34, forum administrator of Singapore’s Star Wars fan club Starwars.sg, says: "Science fiction explores the boundless limits of technology and innovations. If mankind always remained so grounded in reality, the breakthrough Wright Brothers flight, for example, would never have been."

Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, who is a poet and founding adviser to the Science Fiction Association of Singapore, elaborates: “The sci-fi genre has been a very potent force for at least half a century. Sci-fi stuff have an appeal because they deal with the future and so are unique and odd.

‘Cynics should visit science fiction museums where the history of such collectibles is well documented. They might change their minds or even join the ranks of fans.”