

Old-school is cool

Even as technology evolves rapidly, some collectors still hold on to cherished gadgets from the decades before the smartphone



Console connoisseur

Mr Gerald Tan's apartment is home not only to him and his fiancé, but around 70 game consoles from various eras that will conjure nostalgia for any gamer.

In the room he dubs his "messy mad scientist lab" are treasures such as his 1982 Vectrex – a vector display-based home video game console – and his 1995 red Nintendo Virtual Boy.

Another device from his collection, the 2004 edition of the PlayStation Portable (PSP), is on loan to the National Museum of Singapore for the Off/On exhibition.

Asked how his fiancée feels about sharing their living space with these devices, the 39-year-old business developer laughs. "I guess I could be partaking in other forms of vice, so she doesn't mind this."

Mr Tan started gaming at the age of five, after being introduced to the hobby by his older brother.

"In 1988, we brought home the NES and seeing Super Mario Bros for the first time was mesmeris-

ing," he recalls. "I still have the original box and console from back in the day."

While he used to play games such as Tetris and Street Fighter on gadgets from his collection, he says that, nowadays, he collects more than he plays.

He is a member of Retro DNA, a Singapore gaming collective founded around 10 years ago. It has 30 to 40 active members who are as passionate as Mr Tan about vintage gaming consoles.

Over the years, they have been to events like IT shows to do retro set-ups that spotlight games of the past.

It is always very interesting to see people of my generation go there with their kids and share with them, 'This is what pa used to play back in the day.'

MR GERALD TAN

Mr Tan says the group is brought together by the joy of collecting and sharing their common passion.

"It is always very interesting to see people of my generation go there with their kids and share with them. 'This is what pa used to play back in the day.'"

"We are all nostalgic for the things we did in our youth. Then we get stuck in that generation, thinking that nothing will ever be as good."

Members of the collective also refurbish consoles.

For example, Mr Tan – who has a degree in computer engineering – replaced the power supply of his Sega Dreamcast with something more compatible with modern television sets.

He says that Retro DNA dreams of collating all of the members' collected devices and showcasing them in an exhibition.

"If I had a child who would be interested in this, I would pass it to him or her. Otherwise, it would be nice if we could do something like Off/On, but focused on games," he says.

"You can see explicitly when people get hit by the wave of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a bit of a drug, really."

He helped bring the Internet to Singapore

In 1985, National University of Singapore (NUS) dean of science Bernard Tan was sent to Austin, Texas, to attend a conference on computer networking.

There, he discovered there was an inexpensive way for universities to connect, via a newfangled technology known as the Internet.

He returned and told NUS they should join Educom, a consortium which deals with computer and networking issues in higher education, and Bitnet, a computer network for United States universities.

Two years later in 1987, NUS successfully connected to Bitnet.

"We were only the second country in Asia – after Japan – to have a connection to the Internet," says Prof Tan, now 79.

Witnessing the rapid-fire evolution of technology through the decades is what led the NUS Emeritus Professor to start collecting obsolete devices.

These include the Apple II series of microcomputers from the 1970s and 1980s. Prof Tan has a functioning Apple IIe personal computer, which he loaned to the National Museum of Singapore for the Off/On exhibition.

"The Apple IIs are special to me because they were the first computers that I got to know very well," says Prof Tan, who also owns an Apple II and Apple II Plus.

He used the computers for more than 30 years, for personal work, research or teaching topics such as microprocessors.

When Apple discontinued the



Professor Bernard Tan (left) with his vintage "brick" phone from the 1990s, Apple IIe computer (top) and film-camera collection (below).
ST PHOTOS: JASON GUAN

model in the mid-1990s, the university upgraded to more advanced computers and put the Apple IIs into storage. Prof Tan chanced upon them again two years ago and knew he had to "rescue" them.

As a physics professor, he was able to easily refurbish the devices.

"After determining that the circuit board was not working, I went to eBay to search for that same board to replace it."

He also collects film cameras and

old mobile phones, ranging from Ericssons and Motorolas to "brick" cellphones from the 1990s. Some are still working, though they cannot be used because the telecom signals they require are not generated any more. "For me, mobile phones are one of the most iconic forms of technology," he says.

He stores his collection in his semi-detached house, where he lives with his wife and eldest son. "My wife already says I'm a junk col-

lector, so I try not to collect too many things now."

He never expected to be living in the age of the smartphone.

"In 1960, I would have said that the smartphone would not be possible for another century."

"My generation has been fortunate enough to live through the period when digital electronics came into our lives. We lived through the advent of the personal computer and the smartphone and all that."



Shannon Ling

What is the value in preserving the technology of the past when its purpose is to connect you to the future?

In this age, when you can call somebody with a few taps of your finger or be transported into a game world through virtual reality, many have forgotten gadgets such as the rotary phone or Nintendo Entertainment System.

Yet, some still passionately preserve devices that predate the smartphone. Among them is Mr Owen Tee (right), 21, who owns a small but growing collection of vintage cameras and vinyl records. His passion for analogue devices began when he was 16 and his family uncovered his grandfather's Olympus OM-1 camera while spring cleaning. Mr Tee would save his lunch money to buy film rolls and shoot with it from time to time. "I feel like we have grown tired of



without over-complicating things." Vintage cameras are among the devices featured in the National

gadgets being a "jack-of-all trades," says Mr Tee, who is waiting to start university as a film-making major. "I find affinity with items that excel in their sole purpose without over-complicating things."

Museum of Singapore's ongoing exhibition, Off/On: Everyday Technology That Changed Our Lives, 1970s-2000s, which showcases now-obsolete devices that were ubiquitous in the lives of Singaporeans decades ago.

The gadgets on display – from typewriters to game consoles – are either from the museum's collection, or donated or loaned by the public.

The exhibition is part of the museum's Collecting Contempo-

rary Singapore initiative, which museum director Chung May Khuen says "aims to document the diverse lived experiences and perspectives in contemporary Singapore".

She adds: "We want to encourage the public to think about our history and identity through the lens of technology."

"As technology rapidly evolves through the years, we hope to broaden and update the museum's collection in this area, by inviting

the public to contribute their technological items and stories that will collectively enrich the documentation of our own history for generations to come."

The Sunday Times speaks to four Singaporeans who have in their homes devices of a bygone era.

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• To contribute to the National Museum's public call for vintage technology, visit str.sg/wRYa

OFF/ON: EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGY THAT CHANGED OUR LIVES, 1970S-2000S

WHERE Exhibition Gallery, National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road

WHEN Till Oct 30, 10am to 7pm daily

ADMISSION \$18 for special exhibition ticket, free for Singaporeans and permanent residents

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Heeding the call of antiques

Along the walls of Mr Harry Ang's home are rows of antique gadgets that will take you back in time.

From gramophones to rotary telephones, his five-room Housong Board flat looks like a heritage museum. One of his rooms even serves as a private workshop where he repairs and restores devices.

"I started collecting antique items in general from as early as 1954, but by the late 1970s, I began specialising in antique gramophones, phonographs, telephones and clocks," says the 80-year-old, who has been fond of antiques since he was 13.

"It started as a tickle. Now, this is my passion for life."

Since he retired in 2003 after working in logistics for 20 years, he has been providing repair services for old gadgets. He had previously worked in the hardware and furniture-making industries.

Over the years, he has owned more than 1,000 antique telephones and over 200 gramophones.

While he used to travel to purchase items, he mostly acquires them online nowadays.

He is unable to choose a favourite from his collection, but is happy to point out unique facts about different gadgets.

For instance, antique French telephones have attached to them a flat cylinder known as a "mother-in-law receiver", these second-party receivers allowed one to listen in on phone conversations.

"There was a daughter making a call to her boyfriend when her mother took up this piece and started overhearing the conversation," he says, explaining the name's origin.

The bulk of his collection has been sold to other collectors through his Carousell page, @grandphone. These include a Diamond Big Horn Gramophone, which went for \$2,350, and an Edison Amberola Phonograph, sold for \$1,750.

His items could easily sell for up to five figures in the market, but Mr Ang keeps his prices considerably lower because he is driven not by profit but by passion for authenticity.

"The world today is flooded with fake and reproduced antiques," he says, expressing concern for inexperienced collectors who may



Mr Harry Ang's (left) collection of old telephones include those with "mother-in-law" receivers (above and top), which allowed a third party to listen in to conversations. ST PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG

be discouraged after shelling out for fakes. "I'm not a dealer – I'm a specialist. I am serious about educating others."

His buyers include museums, politicians, media companies and hotels in Indonesia and the Philippines.

He says: "Collecting these artefacts is quite an expensive hobby, so the demand may not be as high. But, on average, I have people approaching me weekly."

Though most would see these devices as dated, he believes they still hold value because of their pioneering status.

Comparing phones from different eras, Mr Ang says: "Given how conveniently calls can be made, smartphones can cause users to lose the skill of memorising phone numbers. This is unlike analogue rotary phones, where we had to dial eight digits to make calls."



Flea market fan loves all things retro

Seven years ago in Paris, Mr Alvin Sim fell in love with a cream-coloured, spherical space-age television set from the 1970s.

Unfortunately, it also weighed 10kg and he had a whole European tour ahead of him. Nevertheless, he lugged it from city to city in his arms.

"I bought it in the first city I visited, so I was hopping around various locations and hotels with this television set."

"As I was worried about rough handling, I hand-carried it onto flights, inviting a lot of stares from people around me and numerous rounds of inspection by airport security."

The 44-year-old, who is a trainer in the skills development industry, adores retro devices.

Besides TV sets, he decorates his condominium apartment with a wide array of vintage objects such as clocks, typewriters, cassette players and toot-a-loop radios, made by Panasonic Japan in the early 1970s and designed to be wrapped around the user's wrist.

He has a wall of gadgets in bright green and yellow, as well as a mannequin of iconic 1960s model Twiggy and a 1966 fluorescent orange RR26 radio from Italian electronics company Brionvega.

"The vibrancy helps me feel energised whenever I leave for or return from work," he says.

Some of these vintage gadgets are still functional, while others are only for display.

While he used to clean and respray items that have undergone discolouration due to ageing, he no longer does so. "Over time, I realised the beauty is in how it develops its natural patina. Now, I tend to leave my items in as-is condition."

His interest started in 2000 when his friend took him to the former Thieves Market in Singei Road. "From then, I started buying all kinds of knick-knacks that I remembered seeing in the 1980s."

After a few years of disorganised hoarding, storage constraints forced him to streamline his collection. He decided to focus mainly on items from the pop retro and space age eras, and sold the rest.



Growing up, I would play with these items, sometimes even destroying some. Acquiring them today is my way of redeeming myself for spoiling those in the past.

MR ALVIN SIM

Born in the 1970s, he grew up in the Space Age, when furniture and appliances had designs inspired by the American moon landing in 1969.

These include videospheres – TV sets shaped in the form of a space helmet – which Mr Sim owns in several colours.

"Growing up, I would play with these items, sometimes even destroying some. Acquiring them today is my way of redeeming myself for spoiling those in the past," he says.

Mr Sim lives with his wife, a business analyst, and cannot imagine sharing the space with children. "It would be their turn to destroy these items like I did when I was younger."

He now goes to flea markets in every country he visits. "I love collecting because I love surprises," he says. "The best part of flea-ing is that you do not know what you will find. I love how things can be so unexpected."

Mr Alvin Sim's collection of flea-market finds includes a space-age television set (above, left), which he lugged from city to city during his trip in Europe, and toot-a-loop radios made by Panasonic Japan in the early 1970s (above, right). PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ALVIN SIM