

Collection perfection

In 2019, Collectibles continued to dominate the market, with sales equivalent to 21% of all toys sold. Heading into 2020, the category looks set to be bolstered by a raft of innovative new ranges and additions to existing best-sellers. Rachael-Simpson-Jones finds out more.

Despite being responsible for one in five toys sold in 2019, the Collectibles category declined by 12% last year. Interestingly, products under £5 represented the biggest decline, as the average price of a collectible rose to £5.92. It seems that for many consumers, a small cheap lump of plastic in a blind bag is no longer enough: the trend appears to be moving towards higher quality collectibles with more added value by way of accessories, play sets or packaging which can be incorporated into the play pattern.

The appropriately named Wow! Stuff launched Wow! Pods in January. These innovative collectibles make use of a nifty tech element to offer fans of character brands a totally new way to collect and display their favourite characters. A swipe-to-light function and interlocking hexagonal casing means kids can personalise their displays exactly the way they want them. Wow! Stuff is no stranger to bringing cutting edge play patterns to market – this is the company behind the multi award-winning Harry Potter Invisibility Cloak, after all – and reaction from trade shows earlier in the year, and from retailers, suggest that Wow! Pods is another sure-fire winner.

"We are keen to uphold our position as a first port of call for Tier 1 licensed brands looking for innovation in toys," Wow! Stuff CEO Richard North told Toy World. "When entering the collectibles market, we didn't want to create a 'samey' item. Our mission at Wow! Stuff has always been to create a 'wow' reaction from the end user. We wanted to utilise the licensed

brand relationships we have developed over the years and disrupt the collectibles market with something really new, different and exciting. The reaction when a kid swipes to light the Pop delivers on the wow reaction we were hoping for."

Richard continued: "But we wanted to go further by building the leading collectible for the age group of 5-12 girls and boys who love licensed brands. So, armed with the mission to make this the leading collectible for 'Young Fans of Character Brands', a strapline we copyrighted, we wanted to ensure that the item looked great when it wasn't being used. It had to be beautiful when displayed. We'd got the innovative interactive part covered with the swipe-to-light and mystery reveal feature, while the interlocking pod system, which allows kids to construct any kind of pattern across any of their favourite brands, completes the display in way that's fully customisable and allows total personalisation. The listings from retailers, as well as the continued interest we are getting from distributors around the world, shows we found a niche - a big niche - that covers collectibles, home decor lighting, licensed brands and, most importantly, interactivity and display."

As Wow! Pods is initially launching with a Trolls World Tour line, Richard welcomed NBCUniversal's recent decision to break the theatrical window on some of its upcoming movies, including Trolls, as families are urged to stay at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He explains: "We have a further dozen or more innovative toys and gifts for the Trolls licence

that have strong retailer listings, so for Universal to take this decisive action is much needed and much welcome. Kids who won't be going to the cinema due to virus concerns will get the opportunity to download and watch Trolls World Tour at home. This should provide a boost for toy retailers carrying Trolls merchandise."

Hexbug nano, from Innovation First, has made successful use of technical and electrical elements for years. These tiny, collectible, micro-robotic creatures use the physics of vibration to propel forward and explore their environment. Powered by a tiny motor, and 12 fixed, angular legs, each can traverse the ground beneath it and navigate through complex mazes designed by the collector. 2020 welcomes the Hexbug nano Flash, the fastest Hexbug nano yet, which is set to introduce an even more entertaining play experience to the collectibles and robotics space.

"The Hexbug nano is our evergreen toy," says Andy Ryan, marketing executive UK & Europe at Innovation First. "It's what people associate with Hexbug when they see, hear or think about us. We're hitting the reset button on nano, and we want to continue to give retailers and consumers everything they know and love about our products. We're confident the all-new nano Flash does exactly that. The vibration technology and STEM aspects of nano have made us stand out in the marketplace for over a decade. With speeds twice as fast as our original nano, and a longer body with even more unpredictable movements, nano Flash is sure to be a hit in 2020. We'll be supporting the range with a



360-degree marketing campaign including TV, digital and PR support."

Play sets have become a much bigger part of the collectibles experience over the years, with many leading brands now benefitting from a range of sets which enhance the play value of the toys immeasurably. Fans of Hexbug nano can choose from existing play set themes including space and fairground; product development for 2020 has resulted in new sets with rubberised walls which enable children to create a perimeter around the nano's obstacle course.

"We've really focused on developing collectible sets that can be expanded using the flexible jelly-like walls, enabling kids to unleash their creativity and imagination by building their own unique nano environments," adds Andy.

"The sets, which are compatible throughout the entire nano range, offer huge scope for variability, making the Hexbug nano experience even more fun for longer."

Traditional collectibles with simple yet evergreen play patterns are still proving hugely popular, as evidenced by the continuing success of Magic Box Toys' Superzings and Mojipops. Magic Box is on target to double its 2019 sales through extending distribution into the toy channel and is working with Lisle Licensing to increase the licensing partnerships for both brands.

"SuperZings is very much becoming an evergreen brand," comments Julia Cake, UK and Ireland commercial director, Magic Box. "We launched Series 5 in January, with a further Secret Spies series already in the pipeline for the summer. MojiPops Party Series, which also launched in January, has already exceeded sales of Series 1; we're therefore very excited for the launch of the new Adventure series later this year. Both new introductions will benefit from fresh story lines, TV webisodes and a whole universe of toys and play sets which will spark imagination and creative play."

Superzings and Mojipops collectibles are also complemented by a range of play sets which give kids the chance to bring their chosen world to life. The MojiPops play sets are offered alongside accessories and themes which let collectors make up their own stories which tap into the range's creative, role-playing elements. In line with the popular hero/villain theme, the SuperZings play sets always feature interaction; whether it be a weapon, a trap or a way to hide from the enemy. "These collectibles will remain popular because of these tried-and-tested play patterns, but the addition of play sets is a way to bring new innovation and excitement to the category," Julia adds.

Of course, it would be remiss to discuss the collectibles category without making a mention of L.O.L Surprise!, which has continued to rake in awards from the latest international toy shows, this year winning both Toy of The Year and a Dream Toy nod for the third consecutive year.

"L.O.L. Surprise! is constantly introducing innovation to the range, which keeps the brand at the top of children's wish lists whilst being incremental in driving the category forward," enthuses Andrew Laughton, SVP UK, MGA Entertainment. "A good example of this was the introduction of the L.O.L. Surprise! O.M.G. Fashion doll range; complete with new fashions and reusable play set packaging, the range increased the brand's presence within the fashion doll market, whilst retaining the characters known and loved by L.O.L. fans. The line was hugely successful from launch, with series 1 quickly selling out throughout the UK."

Andrew continues: "An extensive licensing programme has also been vital in helping to grow the brand as a property and boost sales as a whole, helping to ensure L.O.L. Surprise! continues to outperform our competition within what has become such a competitive market."

#Hairvibes launched in January, which Andrew calls the obvious next progression for the brand, in line with the interchangeable hair play theme.

The range introduced multiple hair pieces that kids can mix & match to create fun hairstyles across the collection. Hair play continues to be a hugely popular theme within the dolls' category, so MGA expects this to be a key feature within L.O.L. Surprise! moving forwards.

"As a toy manufacturer, we are extremely conscious to always innovate with many different play patterns," adds Andrew. "We work closely with retailers and NPD to understand the consumer demand and meet their needs – this includes understanding where there are gaps in the market for certain product offerings; for example, extending into boys' collectibles. MGA's portfolio has seen huge success across the board due to a winning combination of hard work, continual innovation, and creativity within every stage – from product development to marketing. Whilst L.O.L. Surprise! continues to take the industry by storm, our other collectible brands such as Poopsie Slime Surprise and Na! Na! Na! Surprise are also strong contenders within the market and by no means take a back seat. Each brand has a dedicated team behind it to ensure it is given the attention it deserves - the ongoing success of our portfolio is a credit to them."

The coming months will see a high level of support across MGA's ranges, including major PR campaigns, TV and digital campaigns, combined with ongoing licensing partnerships. So far this year, the company has already celebrated the launch of L.O.L. Surprise! #Hairvibes with a consumer activation in Manchester's intu Trafford Centre and digital influencer campaigns for the L.O.L. Surprise! Lights range, plus a major influencer campaign to launch Na! Na! Na! Surprise. "We will be keeping a close eye on the government's advice with regard to coronavirus and consumer facing events moving forwards, but fans can expect much more activity still to come throughout the year," Andrew adds.

Over the next few pages, Toy World takes a look at the newest collectibles carving space for themselves in this competitive category for 2020.

