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 ARTS+ENTERTAINMENT



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Michael Damian Thomas and Lynne M. Thomas made the dining room of their Sears catalog house in DeKalb a "Doctor Who" shrine of action figures and other stuff.

Nerd cave decor

Items inspired by sci-fi and comics finding a place in living rooms



CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI

A couple of years ago at C2E2, during the second edition of the Chicago Comic & Entertainment Expo at McCormick Place, I bought a small terra cotta pot from an older man seated at a table. He never looked at me; he worked for the duration of our transaction, sculpting felted wool into small "Star Wars" figurines. His wife took the money and he nodded and continued churning and churning his wool into miniature cylindrical Chewbaccas and R2-D2s that he then placed into seedling pots, as though planting pop culture cactuses.



Stephen Fodor keeps his pop culture collection in his Hampshire basement at his wife's request.

If you ever come over to my home, his work is on a table in the main foyer, surrounded by a forest of framed photographs of grandparents, grinning family members, pets, vacations and the children of college friends. There's a crack in the terra cotta now, the result of a family cat (appar-

ently, more of a "Star Trek" fan).

But it's going nowhere.

Fits perfectly, even tastefully.

Something to consider if you head to C2E2 this weekend, or San Diego's seminal Comic-Con International in July, or Chicago's Wizard World in August: Amid the cult actors and comic book artists, the cosplay and Kevin Smith, there are smart decorating ideas to be found. "The truth is, C2E2 is 50 percent pop culture panels and 50 percent buying stuff," said Stephen Fodor, an Algonquin school teacher and convention veteran. "Acquiring new information is important for geeks, naturally. But sometimes acquiring stuff is easier."

Tempting too.

Of course you'll find a place for a Wookiee sock monkey. Sure, that artist interpretation of the

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Lynne M. Thomas, a big "Doctor Who" fan, persuaded her husband to stop keeping the artifacts in his collection in their original packaging: "I said, 'This is stupid, you know you're never going to sell this stuff!'"

Nerd cave decor

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vintage coin-op "Burger Time" video game will work nicely in the kitchen. Another of my favorite C2E2 acquisitions were panels of old "Spider-Man" comics where everything was removed but the word balloons, rendering the images disassociated, melancholy. I'm convinced that, hung alongside artier prints and posters, it'll acquire gravitas, a C-list Warhol aura.

But for the sensible nerd with a life, one who lives with others — and certain baseline aesthetics — incorporating a geeky find into a household without turning the place into a Spencer's Gifts is a delicate task.

There is the nerd cave, a subspecies of man cave.

Caitlin Rosberg, for instance, a Lakeview information technology analyst, has a small apartment, and therefore, by default, "the whole thing is my nerd cave." At a glance: A Thor helmet hangs over the back of her bedroom door and a Batman action figure stands over the bathroom sink, while another Thor, grandiose and tiny, is silhouetted against the frosted window. Above her desk hangs framed original comic artwork, "Sherlock" fan art and a wood carving of the Nightwing logo. The candy dishes are full of Marvel logos, and Batman portraits complete the living room.

The nerd cave model is the stereotype — complete collections of action figures hung in long rows (in the original packaging), paintings of dragons (tacked up, not framed), ninja weapons on the mantel — and source of a million jokes about living in a parent's basement. But one night I went home and realized that, in a much less overt sense, I had a nerd cave too. It just didn't seem like one. Instead, slowly, over years — an original Matt Groening here, a vintage Godzilla poster there, a framed "Superfriends" birthday party plate from the 1970s here — I had been acquiring and incorporating into my home the kind of pop culture artifacts that serious adults are not supposed to display. You might be able to get away with an action figure or two on a work cubicle, but home should be smarter.

Subtler.

And then one day you notice, oh yeah, there is a Superman puppet in that bookshelf, isn't there?

Summer Sparacini is a Chicago event manager. "Nerd culture just found its way into our home decorating," she told me. She said her style is modern and youthful, and "on first glance you might not even notice anything nerdy about us, but if you take the time to look closer, you will see it is what our lives, and our apartment, are all about." A "Doctor Who" cookie jar rests on a table.



Stephen Fodor has a "Doctor Who" pinball machine and a stand-up Midway arcade unit that plays several games.

Woven between family pictures is Captain America. Likewise, Dawn Xiana Moon, a singer/songwriter/belly dancer who lives in Andersonville, describes her home as a "well-decorated space with influences from India, East Asia and Morocco, but on second and third and fourth look, that cool portrait in the dining room is a painting of Princess Leia... and next to it, an R2-D2 soy sauce dispenser." A full-size Stormtrooper helmet serves as a bookend; Tribbles are worked into the shelves.

The trick is invisibility. Which is why Stephen Fodor's wife, Heather, asked that he move his nerd cave accumulations into their Hampshire basement. It's hard for Fodor, 40, to keep his enthusiasms invisible. He's a popular drama and computer teacher at Westfield Community School in Algonquin and the voice of the school's morning announcements. He's tall and effusive and goofy and thoughtful — essentially the Ed Helms of Kane County. He has a "Doctor Who" pinball machine and a stand-up Midway arcade game that holds scores of old-school video games. He has one of those mechanical claw games more commonly found at carnivals and pizza parlors. He has a long basement hall devoted to autographs: Monty Python, comic books, signed baseballs.

He told me: "I have been a lifelong geek. My first computer was a TI-99/4A, thank you for asking. I am known for my catchphrases, and I have my own bumper stickers" — he held up a bumper sticker that read "Because Fodor told me to ..." — "and this is my Janet Jackson autograph from 2006. This is Tom Baker ('Doctor Who'), and that is a Kevin Smith issue of 'Green Arrow' and this is a Jim Henson stamp collection. This is the table where I do my geek podcast with a friend of mine" — "Too Much Scrolling," which has 18,000 subscribers — "and that's an autograph of Nancy Cartwright (the voice of Bart Simpson), and that's Stan Lee; that's the 'Spamalot' program I had Eric Idle sign when he was here when the show was in previews in Chicago. And this is a picture of me and my college roommate with Billie Piper (from 'Doctor

Who'). She was at the big 'Doctor Who' convention here and we stood in a long line to get the picture, then we stood in a long line to get the signature, but that was special. With this stuff, value and expense — very different categories."

And it's a lot of stuff, but not hermetically sealed, untouched, closed off for posterity, coldly at a distance.

It feels homey, a nerd cave with an understanding of accessibility.

"There are more people living in this house than just me," Fodor said, "and if I were a single geek, it might have become a landfill, but because I have kids and a wife, the key is keeping it all somewhat modest, even."

Not surprisingly then, a small industry has grown in the past decade to serve the discerning adult nerd with an eye on assimilation: Blik, for instance, a Venice, Calif., design firm, offers wall-size decals of "Asteroids" and "Super Mario Bros." game screens more suggestive of a homeowner's sense of graphic design than a cultural regression. ThinkGeek, a Virginia-based online retailer that specializes in clever nerd-culture products, sells "Game of Thrones" dragon-egg cookie jars, light saber barbecue tongs and Death Star tea infusers that look more clever than kitschy. As a boy I would work my "Star Wars" toys into our frozen garden in winter and imagine I had a Hoth-like ice planet to myself. Today, I can buy an AT-AT snow walker lawn ornament.

All of which carries inevitability now: the natural, fluid progression of a contemporary culture with little zeal for the old distinctions between high and low culture, drawing instead on Warhol's celebration of commodity and pop cultural design aesthetics in equal measure. Taste aside, is it really much different for me to have a silhouetted image of Luke Cage and Iron Fist fist-bumping (a fan-created work of graphic design) in my bathroom and you to hang a reproduction of a Toulouse-Lautrec poster for the Moulin Rouge?

Just barely.

The Thomas family of DeKalb is solidly a "Doctor Who" household. Lynne M. Thomas, head of special book collections at North-

ern Illinois University, is a nerd-podcast staple and three-time winner (and eight-time nominee) of the sci-fi-centric Hugo Awards; Michael Damian Thomas, her husband, is editor of the online sci-fi and fantasy magazine *Uncanny*. Their home, a 1942 Sears catalog house, is awash in the familiar blues and British police call boxes of the "Doctor Who" aesthetic. The dining room, now more of an office, is a "Doctor Who" shrine, with action figures and play sets and customized "Who" Barbies and clocks. Stuffed "Who" characters given to their daughter, who has a rare neurological disorder and comes along to "Who" conventions, sit atop shelves of books — multiple, entire "Who" series meticulously organized, each set of spines forming long swatches of colors. It reminded me of families that still keep encyclopedia sets out in the open.

"The original plan was, stay classy," Michael said. Then he met Lynne and got married, and she became obsessed with "Doctor Who." The collection expanded, tastefully: He had kept his "Who" artifacts in the original packaging, and she put a stop to that. Recalled Lynne: "I said, 'This is stupid, you know you're never going to sell this stuff.' This was not going to be a retirement fund, we were going to enjoy this. I mean, I work in rare books, so this stuff has never felt like a potential gold mine to me." Then she insisted on removing action figures from the bedroom: "When the light hit them wrong in the middle of the night, it was disconcerting."

They settled on a two-room solution.

The dining/collection room.

"And over here, the classy end," Lynne said.

The living room was less overwhelming. A framed poster for a British production of "Hamlet" starring David Tennant, a former "Who" time lord. Lynne's three Hugo awards, each a gleaming rocket ship. On the mantel, nesting dolls from "Torchwood," a "Who" spinoff series. And a handmade ceramic "Who" TARDIS/police box, a present from Lynne to Michael on their first Christmas together (though it didn't arrive until March). Michael said: "Growing up in the '80s and watching 'Doctor Who' on WTTW, there was nothing about this that was cool."

"You still carry around shame," Lynne said.

"I do," he said, "so now we have a family and we keep those things in that room, and over here, a fairly normal-ish living room. We're normal! This is how normal people live. That other world just kind of seeps in."

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10 can't-miss events at C2E2

By CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI
Chicago Tribune

Belly laugh at "Other Space," the terrific new sci-fi comedy on Yahoo from director Paul Feig ("Bridesmaids"), starring "Mystery Science Theater 3000" creator Joel Hodgson. Feig and Hodgson will host a panel discussion — bonus points for the first nerd to ask Feig about his next film, "Ghostbusters." 11 a.m. Saturday



Shyamalan

Openly wonder at M. Night Shyamalan, the infamously plot-twist-crazed creator of "The Sixth Sense" and "Unbreakable" — and more recently the very breakable bombs "The Last Airbender" and "After Earth." What brings Shyamalan to these parts? A screening of his new Fox series "Wayward Pines," and a Q&A.

Also tagging along for the event,

"Wayward" star Matt Dillon. 3:15 p.m. Friday

Raise your hand and ask a question at one of the two most compelling panels this year: "Through Brightest Days & Blackest Nights — A Black Nerd Girl's Journey" is a panel discussion on representations and attitudes of black women in nerdism (5:30 p.m. Friday). Meanwhile, "Marry, Do or Kill: What Will it Take to Shatter Female Stereotypes in Comics?" brings together writers and artists at a pretty poignant moment: Two of the best comics of the past year, "Ms. Marvel" and "She-Hulk," take on this very subject. 5:15 p.m. Saturday

Play the hand you are dealt at Cards After Dark, a late night of comedy organized by the folks behind the locally based Cards Against Humanity game. Also features Chicago's Nerdologues and the Improvised Star Trek performers. The event, held in a space on Elston Avenue, requires a separate \$5 ticket. 11 p.m. Saturday

Meet Geof Darrow, arguably the most important Chicago comic book artist and author you never heard of. Darrow, who is best known for providing the sci-fi designs of "The Matrix" movies, will discuss his acclaimed comic book work ("Shaolin Cowboy," Frank Miller's "Hard Boiled") with Dark Horse Comics editor Scott Allie 11 a.m. Sunday

Annoy everyone and try to talk like a gurgling fish when you address Jason Momoa, your new Aquaman, to be seen in the upcoming "Justice League" movie (and "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice"). Or merely grunt your question to the former Khal Drogo, of "Game of Thrones" fame. You'll get two chances: In a panel spotlighting Momoa (12:15 p.m. Saturday) and a "Game of Thrones" panel (1:30 p.m. Sunday).



Atwell

Get in line early for "Kick-Ass Women of S.H.I.E.L.D.," also known as Hayley Atwell of "Agent Carter" and Ming-Na Wen of "Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D." discussing their roles and taking your questions (inevitably about stuff they're contractually obligated not to reveal). 1:30 p.m. Saturday

But get in line super-early for the "Orphan Black" panel, featuring co-creator John Fawcett and about two-thirds of the main cast of this absorbing BBC American cult series (now in its third season). The missing third? That's Tatiana Maslany, the show's excellent lead, who plays a slew of clones. 2:45 p.m. Saturday

Memorize the nerdiest, most myopic question you can come up with for writer Scott Snyder, the comic book world's brightest current star and author of DC's best "Batman" comics in years. He's also the force behind "American Vampire" and Image Comics' eerie "Wytches." 4:15 p.m. Friday

Gape at the second annual, probably rowdy C2E2 Crown Championships of Cosplay, a virtual parade of proud geeks in often remarkable handmade costumes. In a new twist: Chicago competitors will face off against the winners of the cosplay championships from last year's New York City Comic Con. 7 p.m. Saturday

C2E2

When: Friday-Sunday

Where: McCormick Place, South Building, 2301 S. King Drive

Tickets: \$60-\$70 for three-day pass; \$30-\$45 each day at [c2e2.com](#)