# Memories of video rental shops reveal a lost era of film culture and community



The Guardian is reporting a rich tapestry of personal recollections and anecdotes from former customers and employees of video rental shops, capturing the cultural phenomenon of renting VHS tapes in the pre-digital era. These reminiscences reflect on the pivotal role local video stores played in the social and entertainment lives of individuals throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s across various locations, from British towns to parts of the United States and Ireland.

One notable aspect highlighted is the high cost of VHS tapes during a specific release window. As explained by a contributor named MrChevette, after a film completed its theatrical run but was not yet available for general sale—known as the ‘Home Release’ period—a single VHS tape could retail at around £100 (approximately $133). This practice proved profitable for rental shops, though it also tempted some, including MrChevette’s local video shop owner, into legal trouble for copying tapes. He remarked, “you only needed two VHS machines and a colour photocopier for the box cover and you were in business,” illustrating an era when technology allowed illicit duplication on a small scale.

The warmth and personal connections fostered by video rental shops are a recurring theme. For example, a user named BeaverHsteman recounts how his daughter persistently requested a poster from a local store as a birthday surprise: “She went in on her way home from school and badgered them – canIhavethepostercanIhavethepostercanIhavetheposter – until they finally gave it to her, just in time for my birthday.” Similarly, MarySays, who worked in a small “mom and pop” video rental store from 2004 to 2008 during college, spoke fondly of her interactions with customers, tailoring film recommendations and enjoying the respectful relationship with patrons. “Best job I’ve ever had... I loved handing a film to a customer on the Friday night shift and then hearing their review on the Saturday afternoon when they returned it,” she said.

The social aspect of renting and watching films is reflected in stories that highlight shared viewing experiences. One user recounted regular “Blockbuster Friday” nights during the 1990s, where friends selected “the dumbest looking horror films” to enjoy together, resulting in laughter and unforgettable memories. Another, signing as ProfyleNeim, described a specific family memory involving the questionable horror film "Geek" or “Backwoods,” noting the shock of a parent at a particularly grisly scene: “My mum came into the lounge... before walking out of the room and letting us watch the rest of the film.”

Some anecdotes evoke a strong sense of nostalgia for the unique atmosphere of video rental shops. Bartel vividly recalled the sensory experience of visiting the upstairs horror section of a local store: “I can still smell the musty carpet to this day,” and how the experience fostered a lifelong interest in extreme horror films and physical media. These shops were often tiny and idiosyncratic, such as the home basement video store in Blandford Forum described by TeeDubyaBee, which catered to a local clientele with a fascination for lurid cover art and cult films. The shop owner’s personal attention extended to holding back promotional posters for a loyal young customer for decoration.

In terms of film preferences, the recall of memorable titles is diverse. Several contributors mentioned classics such as The Big Lebowski, The Terminator, and Midnight Express. Dotcom1970 shared that he rented The Terminator despite being underage, describing how the experience profoundly influenced him: “Since that night, I’ve owned The Terminator in nearly every format it’s been released… Almost 40 years on, it still stands as my all-time favourite film.” Others remembered delight and frustration, from the difficulty of finding popular titles amidst a sea of less desirable options to humorous customer interactions, such as a Dublin video store worker recalling a man searching for 'cowboy pictures' and renting the cult film Dead Man.

The Guardian’s contributors collectively illuminate the cultural ecosystem of video rental stores, which served not just as businesses but as community hubs, sources of entertainment, and starting points for many people's lifelong passion for cinema. While the digital era has transformed how people access films, these memories preserve a sense of place and time when visiting the local video shop was an event filled with anticipation, surprise, and personal connection.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.threads.net/@darrenhusted/post/DE9YXZHAFOz> - This URL supports the claim about the high cost of VHS tapes during the rental window, with testimony from someone who worked managing video stores in the 1990s stating that VHS tapes were routinely over $100 during that period.
2. <https://www.gtplanet.net/forum/threads/who-remembers-movies-on-vhs-costing-this-much.383371/> - This forum discussion confirms the high price of VHS tapes in the 1980s and 1990s and provides context about rental and retail prices for VHS movies, supporting the article's statement about costs.
3. <https://dfarq.homeip.net/how-much-did-vhs-tapes-cost-in-the-80s/> - This source details the pricing of VHS tapes and rental costs in the 1980s, including explanations about blank tapes and the pricing challenges faced by companies, corroborating the article's economic context for VHS tapes.
4. <https://www.threads.net/@2ndtimearoundtoysandcomics/post/DE9U0v9x_yx> - A firsthand account from a video rental store owner confirming that new release VHS tapes could cost over $120 CAD each, supporting the article's claim about expensive tape prices and rental store investments.
5. <https://boards.straightdope.com/t/when-did-vhs-tapes-of-movies-become-affordable-to-the-masses/659733> - This discussion thread gives anecdotal evidence on VHS pricing history, mentioning the high costs prior to the early 1990s, which aligns with the article's timeline of expensive rental windows and subsequent price declines.
6. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/1980s/culture-1980s-vhs-rental-video-shops-social-impact/> - This article explores the cultural and social importance of video rental shops in the 1980s and 1990s, emphasizing their role as community hubs and sources of entertainment, thus supporting the article's theme of personal connections and nostalgia.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/apr/25/video-store-rental-memories> - Please view link - unable to able to access data