In this file photo a girl hugs the Toys R Us mascot, Geoffrey, at the new store at a mall in Paramus, New Jersey. (AP)

Toys R Us retrenches again, shutters its last 2 US stores

Toys R Us is retrenching once again.

The only two Toys R Us stores that opened in November 2019 as part of a small U.S. comeback attempt by the iconic toy chain have now closed.

The Toys R Us store at the Galleria mall in Houston shuttered on Jan. 15, while one at the Garden State Plaza in Paramus, New Jersey, closed on Tuesday, according Tru Kids, a new entity formed when it acquired Toys R Us' intellectual property during its liquidation in 2018.

The moves come as physical stores, particularly mall-based locations, have been hurt by weak customer traffic amid the pandemic. The Toys R Us website is still in operation.

"As a result of COVID, we made the strategic decision to pivot our store strategy to new locations and platforms that have better traffic," Tru Kids said in an emailed statement Friday. "Consumer demand in the toy category and for Toys R Us remains strong and we will continue to invest in the channels where the customer wants to experience our brand."

The two shuttered locations were about 6,500 square feet - about one-seventh of the size of the old Toys R U stores and emphasized hands-on experiences. Employees unwrapped toys, for instance, so that kids could try them out.

During a visit to the New Jersey store in late 2019, kids shot Nerf blasters and sat in a circle for story time while Geoffrey, the chain's mascot, roamed around. Such experiences are now shunned at a time when shoppers have to abide by social-distancing rules. (AP)

S&P 500 index suffers its worst week of losses since October

For GameStop day traders, the moment they've dreamed about

WASHINGTON, Jan 31, (AP): They've endured a financial crisis. Two deep recessions. Mounds of student debt. Stagnant pay. Costly health care. Dim job prospects.

They've seen the uber-rich grow richer while a pandemic threw tens of millions of people out of work and left many more isolated and vulnerable at home.

Now, they feel, it's payback time.

Nearly a decade after the Occupy protest movement left Wall Street more or less unscathed, the citadel of financial might faces a new assault.

Day traders, mobilized on a subreddit page, have poured about all the money they can find into the stocks of a struggling video game retailer called GameStop and a few other beaten-down companies. Their buying has swollen those companies' share prices beyond anyone's imagination - and, not coincidentally, inflicted huge losses on the hedge funds of the super-rich, who had placed bets that the stocks would drop.

Their strategy, of course, is freighted with risk. The prices of the stocks they've bought are now multiples above any level justified by revenue, earnings or future prospects. The danger is that at any time, the stocks could collapse.

Maybe so. But as one Reddit user wrote Friday, asserting that hedge fund financiers would drink Champagne as they looked down upon Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011:

"I'd rather lose it all than give them what they need to destroy me ... I'll burn it all down just to spite them.''

Their rage and hell-bent drive to pick on powerful Wall Street financiers have sent shivers through ordinary investors and heightened fears about the fragility of the markets in general after a prolonged period of stock gains fueled by ultra-low interest rates. Those fears just caused the S&P 500 index to suffer its worst week of losses since October.

GameStop shares? They rocketed nearly 70% on Friday. Over the past three weeks, they've delivered a stupefying 1,600% gain.

"They figured out how to play the way Wall Street has been playing for a long time,'' said Robert Thompson, who has long tracked cultural trends as director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture. "I'm amazed it didn't happen earlier.''

Feeding the frenzy have been young traders like 27-year-old Zach Weir, who this week bought five shares of GameStop.

"I'm a college student, so that's basically a month's rent for me," said Weir, who is pursuing a master's degree in marketing.

He did it, he said, because he believes in the cause: Protecting a cherished game store, where he would hang out as a teenager on Friday nights, from financial tycoons who want the company to fail.

And if he loses his investment?

"If my account goes to zero, it goes to zero," Weir said. "At this point, it's not about the money. I think this is bigger than the money now"

Frustration and rage over widening financial inequities in the American economy have been mounting for years. The richest 1% of Americans collected about 19% of pre-tax income in 2019, up from less than 11% four decades earlier, according to the World Inequality Database, run by Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, economists at the University of California, Berkeley, along with other researchers.

New York University economist Edward Wolff has found that the richest 10% of Americans own roughly 85% of stock wealth, a share that has grown steadily over time.

The financial crisis that ignited the Great Recession of 2007-2009 intensified resentment toward the bankers who had financed the dodgy loans behind the catastrophe and had ignored the obvious risks, only to receive bailouts from taxpayers and largely escape accountability. Rising outrage fueled the Occupy movement, in which protesters took over New York's Zuccotti Park and other public spaces and demanded far-reaching financial reforms that mainly didn't happen.

The coronavirus inflicted further pain, flattening the economy and causing more than 20 million Americans to lose jobs. This week, a report from the anti-poverty group Oxfam found that the world's 10 richest men have swollen their collective wealth by $500 billion since the pandemic erupted in March. In the meantime, nearly 10 million people who lost jobs to the pandemic remain unemployed.

The stock market, the chosen target of the Reddit day traders, has long stood as America's premier symbol of entrenched wealth. But technology, including forums like Reddit, has made it ever easier, faster and simpler for the aggrieved to mobilize, swap information and collectively plot strategy. And e-trading apps, notably Robinhood, allow amateur traders to buy commission-free stocks with one click.

They spotted a vulnerability in the market: The so-called short squeeze.

When hedge funds and other investors want to bet that a stock price will fall, they arrange a short sale: They borrow shares of, say, GameStop. Then they sell those borrowed shares, planning to buy back the stock later at a lower price and pocket the gain.

But shorting can backfire disastrously if the stock surges instead of falling. Then the short sellers can be forced to bail out of their bets by buying the target stock. Their buying, in turn, can send the stock price ever higher and makes things even worse for the short sellers in an intensifying feedback loop.

GameStop, its future imperiled by e-commerce and a pandemic that has kept customers away, is among the most heavily shorted stocks. Some of the Reddit rebels are gamers who want to protect the retailer from the predations of Wall Street. Or just deliver a righteous blow to hedge funds and financiers who have lived large as others have suffered hardships.

Not all the day traders are inflamed by anger. They just see an opportunity to make money and pay bills.

"A lot of people are having trouble paying rent," said Alexis Goldstein, a veteran of the Occupy movement. "A lot of people are at risk of eviction. A lot of people are very desperate, quite frankly, for new ways to make money.''

Yet Goldstein worries that the revolt will ultimately fail.

For one thing, some of the Wall Street firms that are targets of the Redditors actually profit from the very volatility that the Redditors' assault has whipped up.

And the most sophisticated professional traders are no doubt calculating how to capitalize on the chaos. Normally, they have to work hard and invest heavily to determine what their competitors are doing and to profit from that information. By contrast, the Reddit day traders are announcing their intentions, brazenly and publicly.

"I suspect it's not Robinhood investors and Redditors who are making money,'' Goldstein said.

She would like to see a different slate of reforms – reforms to rein in Wall Street's excesses while helping those who've been left behind.

"Hopefully, we can ask fundamental questions about whether we want our markets to be speculation-driven or do we want them to create innovation and jobs," she said. "Stop hustling so hard for a buck and instead rebuild the social safety net.''

Tom Osran, a 59-year-old Chicago lawyer, has been reading the WallStreetBets forum on Reddit for years. But it was only last week that he decided to act for the first time, buying into GameStop. His investment, he said, is up 1,000% from last week, though he declined to reveal the dollar amount.

Osran said he figures that its astronomical stock rise can save GameStop from hedge funds that are betting that a company with 40,000 employees will fail.

"It's fun being part of a movement," Osran said.

He knows he could lose everything he put into GameStop shares. Yet he's philosophical.

"We're all adults, we all know stocks can go up and down," Osran said. "It's been insanely lucrative so far, but it could be all gone tomorrow."

Pedestrians pass a GameStop store on 14th Street at Union Square, Thursday, Jan 28, 2021, in the Manhattan borough of New York. Robinhood and other online trading platforms are moving to restrict trading in GameStop and other stocks that have soared recently due to rabid buying by smaller investors. GameStop stock has rocketed from below $20 to more than $400 this month as a volunteer army of investors on social media challenged big institutions who has placed market bets that the stock would fall. (AP)

Rashed Al-Azmi bags first prize of KD 1,500

AUB announces the winners of 'End 2020 With a Win' campaign

KUWAIT CITY, Jan 31: In a continued effort to maintain the satisfaction of its customers, Ahli United Bank (AUB) announced the winners of "End 2020 With a Win" Campaign.

AUB launched this campaign to new customers who opened Al-Hassad account during December 2020, to be a marvelous addition with which the Bank concludes a package of motivational and promotional campaigns that was launched in 2020. Those customers were automatically entitled to one chance to enter the draw for winning one of seven cash prizes

Rashed Sulaiman Al-Azmi Won the First Prize of KD 1,500, Amal Ali Youssef Won the Second Prize of KD 1,000, And Tariq Fouad Al-Ali, Mosaed Mousa Al-Ali, Gadeer Ahmed Al-Kooheji, Munirah Khaled Al-Hardan and Nassreen Jamal Al-Khatib won the prizes from the third to the seventh of KD 500 each.

This campaign was prepared as part of AUB's continuous endeavor to help its customers to provide better conditions for them and their families by encouraging them to build savings.

This campaign is a further addition to its record of the incentive and promotional campaigns AUB launches annually as part of its strategy aimed at meeting the needs of customers and enhancing communication with them.

This campaign also confirms that AUB is proud of its customers for their conviction and selection of AUB, and for their great confidence in the Shari'a compliant banking services and products the bank provides which fulfill their aspirations and needs.

It worth mentioning that Al-Hassad Islamic account offers several cash prizes for customers wishing to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. In addition to this attractive collection of prizes, customers receive projected annual profits on the basis of a Wakala contract incorporated in this account, making this account beneficial to both families and others wishing to build their savings through a number of short and long-term advantages that are lauded by existing and potential customers.

For more information about Al-Hassad Account added to the investment savings account, the prizes it offers and relevant criteria, please visit any of AUB branches, contact "Hayakom" Service on 1812000 or visit our website: www.ahliunited.com.kw.

KFH launches instant cross-border payments to KFH-Turkey

Khaled Alshamlan

"Zero-fee service, available 24/7 using RippleNet

Service available through KFHonline on website, mobile App

Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has successfully launched instant cross-border payments service to at KFH-Turkey using Ripple's technology, the enterprise blockchain solution for global payments. This confirms KFH's ongoing keenness to adopt the latest financial technology while delivering superior customer's banking experience.

Group General Manager Retail Banking at KFH, Khaled Yousif Alshamlan said that that instant cross-border payments service comes to serve customers who want to perform instant transfers to Turkey for personal expenses or investments, indicating Instant Transfer to KFH-Turkey is presented to KFH customers with zero-fees and the service is available 24/7 in a secure and fast manner through KFHOnline service on the website and the mobile App (IOS and Android).

"Financial institutions can send payments anywhere instantly, reliably and cost-effectively by joining Ripple's growing, global network RippleNet", he added in a statement, indicating the service improves and facilitates customers' cross-border payment methods through trusted global banks network, maximizing the role of blockchain instant payment in providing best service as per highest quality standards".

Alshamlan boasted that KFH was among the first Kuwaiti banks to join RippleNet, reiterating this move enhances customer experience and comes in line with KFH digital transformation strategy.

He pointed out that KFH succeeded in making significant strides with its digital transformation journey, drawing attention to its advanced and innovative financial services and products, indicating the bank successfully launched the digital service "opening bank account online" for new customers, citizens and residents within minutes without having to visit the branch.

Alshamlan listed some of the innovative financial solutions provided by KFH which are: The free of charge "SWIFT GPI" service to track local and international banking transfers electronically for individuals and corporate via KFHonline, Kuwait Clearing Company KCC dividend subscription, transfer to KFH Trade, Baiti online, deposit of cheques via mobile, Cardless cash withdrawal by (QR Code, Civil ID& Mobile Number), and a complete update of KYC request "Know your customer".

He also mentioned the digital services of opening a gold account with options of selling, buying and trading online, Skiplino to book appointments electronically in the banking branches, KFHPay electronic payment service through which the customer can pay through the KFHonline mobile application or via the K-Net page, Chatbot, Push Notification service, Instant Cheque Printing and receiving gold biscuits instantly through XTMs available at the smart branches; KFH Go, in addition to many other highly efficient digital services.

Alshamlan reiterated KFH's keenness on constantly innovating unique digital banking solutions, confirming the ongoing efforts in utilizing AI and teaming up with Fintech for the best interest of customers, while moving forward in its digital transformation strategy.

Dr Martens valued at $5bn in share sale

LONDON, Jan 31, (AP): Dr. Martens boots have been valued by rebellious youth through the decades. From Wednesday, the maker of the famous air-cushioned boots with the distinctive yellow stitching will be valued at some $5 billion when it sells shares publicly.

Born in the aftermath of World War II in the shattered remains of Germany and via a journey that saw it become an emblem of youth culture, the Dr. Martens footwear company is set to list on the London Stock Exchange for the first time next week.

Shares in the company will go on public sale on Wednesday in a flotation that values the shoe brand at around 3.7 billion pounds ($5 billion). Around 35% of the business will be available for investors to buy and sell.

"The successful transformation of Dr. Martens is a great story, and what is even more exciting is the huge potential ahead," Chief Executive Kenny Wilson said.

The company aims to use the anticipated proceeds from the sale to expand the brand, which is currently owned by private equity firm Permira.

Dr Martens boots are sold in more than 60 countries, and customers buy around 11 million pairs every year. The brand still sees room for expansion.

The Dr. Martens boots and shoes have their roots in post-war Munich in 1945 when Dr. Klaus Maertens, a 25-year-old soldier, was convalescing from a broken foot. Looking for an alternative to the traditional hard leather sole, he came up with an air-cushioned alternative that he showed to an old university friend and mechanical engineer, Dr. Herbert Funk.

By adapting disused military supplies, the pair began producing their novel shoes two years later and within a decade they had a booming business, though the big buyers at first were mainly older women.

In 1960, British firm Griggs bought an exclusive license to the shoes and made adjustments that still exist, including the distinctive yellow stitching. The first eight-holed 1460 Dr. Martens boot coincided with a radical transformation of youth culture.

From the Swinging Sixties, through the worlds of glam and punk rock in the 1970s and Britpop in the 1990s, the boots were adopted by different groups around the world. They were also popular with factory workers for their comfort.