

PHOTOS BY FRANK H. CONLON

Two people play Tokyo Wars, a 1995 tank battle video game on display as part of the Videotopia exhibit at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

# Blasts from the past

By Alan Seginwall  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

By noon on any given day, Keith Feinstein will likely have blasted alien invaders, rolled tanks through Tokyo, raced in the Daytona 500 and slain dragons.

And that's on a slow day. Feinstein, 29, is the architect behind the Electronics Conservancy and its traveling exhibit, Videotopia, which is designed to preserve and teach the history of video games. The exhibit is running at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia through the summer.

In a way, Feinstein has always had video games in his blood. As an eighth grader at New Providence High School, he went on a field trip to Great Adventure. Rather than jump on the biggest roller-coaster in sight, Feinstein led his friends straight to the video arcade, where they played Zaxxon all day.

He studied to be a chiropractor in college, but his heart wasn't in it, and shortly after graduation, he came up with the idea of the Electronics Conservancy. In the seven years since, Feinstein and the Conservancy have privately raised a fortune to purchase video games, new and old, as part of the Videotopia exhibit.

Part arcade, part quiz, part history lesson, Videotopia

features virtually every important game in the history of the medium, and Feinstein has an interesting story to tell about all of them.

On Computer Space, the first arcade game, designed by Nolan Bushnell (later the founder of Atari): "It's a really simple game, but at the time (1971), people couldn't handle it. It flopped."

On Death Race, a racing game in which trolls attempted to run over pedestrians: "There's only three or four of these left. People were so upset by this game it was pulled off the market. Today you have games like Mortal Kombat where guys get their spines ripped out, and this looks like nothing."

On I, Robot, the first game with three-dimensional polygon graphics: "This was a bigger bomb than Computer Space. People just weren't ready for it in 1984. They had absolutely no idea what was going on. Only 500 were made, and most were shipped to Japan when it flopped. We have reliable sources who say that a bunch of them were just dumped in the ocean."

On Donkey Kong, the arcade game that introduced the character of Mario, soon to become the hero of Nintendo's wildly popular Mario Bros. series: "He was never named Mario in the game — back then he was just 'Jumpman.'"

On the tank game Battlezone: "The Army actually had

PLEASE SEE VIDEO, PAGE 43



Keith Feinstein of New Providence, designer of the Videotopia exhibit, at the power station, which tests knowledge of the history of video games.

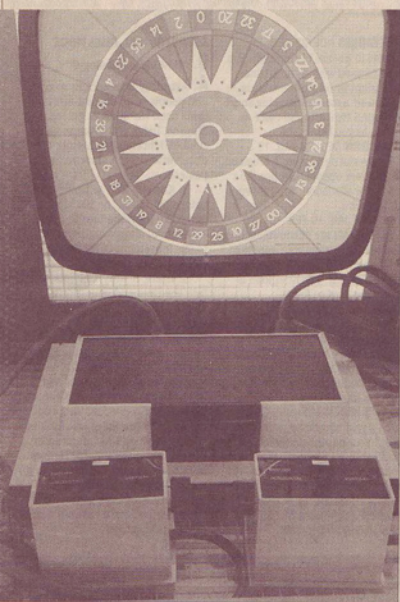


PHOTO BY FRANK H. CONLON

The first home video game, Magnavox Odyssey, manufactured in 1972, is on display at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

## Video

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

### Tracing the history of computer games

... of these made to train their own tank crews on (one of which is part of the exhibit). It's not as much fun."

The way Videotopia is designed, by the time a visitor is through, he or she should come out with nearly as much knowledge as Feinstein.

Next to each video game is a placard explaining its significance as well as random bits of trivia. While tenants to the exhibit will get a small number of tokens for free, they'll have to earn additional games by visiting one of the Power-Up Stations, which provide seven-question quizzes based on the games and the information around them.

"They're not too hard," says Feinstein, "as long as you've been paying attention to the (information) cards. You might ask something like 'Who invented Computer Space?' and if you talked by the Computer Space display, you'd know that it was Nathan Bushnell."

(Visitors who choose not to try their luck at the Power-Up Stations can also purchase tokens on their own.)

The Power-Up Stations are just part of Videotopia's mission to be educational as well as fun. There are also various displays explaining how the games work, what each electronic component does and what kind of games are available in the gaming industry.

In Feinstein's view, video games have been largely neglected and ignored for their role in the development of home computers.

"When Atari came out, what

Tokyo Wars are exactly the same game: driving a tank around a maze trying to blast the hell out of your best friend."

While most of the games selected for the exhibit have some sort of historical or technological value, a few were added for sentimental reasons.

"We picked certain games just because they got requested so much. We'd have people crying, 'Please have Frogger, please have Frogger, please have Frogger!'"

And at Videotopia's previous stop, at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Feinstein learned just what kind of emotional hold some of the machines had.

"At Carnegie, we'd have people in their 40s and 50s come in, and when they'd see Tank, they'd mist over. You'd hear all sorts of stories about couples who met playing Breakout, or some guy who said, 'I met my wife the day I got my high score on Asteroids!'"

#### If you want to play

"The Ultimate Arcade: Videotopia" is on display at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia through Sept. 1.

The institute is located at 222 North 20th St., at Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

For hours, prices and further information, call (215) 448-1200, or contact the museum on the World Wide Web at [www.fi.edu](http://www.fi.edu).