

Sitting Back in Conversation

Recent Setbacks continues its interview with conservation grate JK Thostrang.

RSC That's fascinating. So, what is your most recent development?

JKT A conservation computer game. You start out at level 1, choosing if you are a chemist, art historian, or tourist. Then you select your weapons, hand-held spectrophotometer, slide carousel, or loud shirt. After this, its into the conservation dungeon.

RSC But how is this scored?

JKT Like any of these adventure games you have points for enthusiasm, experience, intelligence, money, food. These points are run up and down by actions of your character in the game. If important ones hit zero, you die, metaphorically.

RSC So it simulates reality.

JKT Emulates. Level 1 is full of educational opportunities, volunteer jobs - honey traps and obstacles conquered by flashes of raw enthusiasm and careful living. Those who do not flame out here move on to Level 2.

RSC And what fresh hell is this?

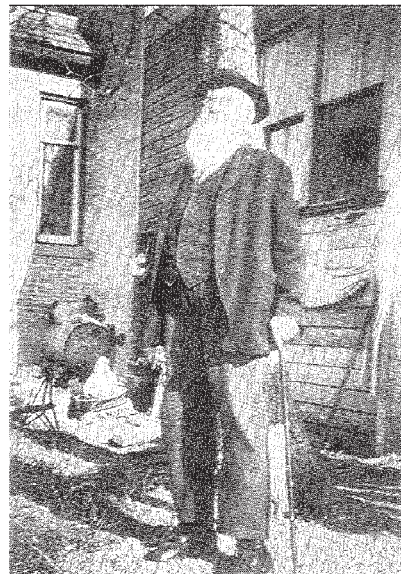
JKT A term position in a government lab.

RSC Collection rehousing, WHIMIS compliance, loading the fumigator.

JKT Exactly. What one absorbs here in collection care and organizational experience drains the novelty and enthusiasm points that got you this far.

RSC What's Level 3?

JKT Everyone gets turned into snails.



J. K. Thostrang, Biarritz, 1913

RSC Snails?

JKT Yes, with boxes balanced on their shells.

RSC This is out of Lewis Carroll!

JKT More like Lewis and Clark. You see its an allegory.

RSC Oh.

JKT The balancing box is for ideas that one picks up while crawling over the professional landscape.

RSC And this is all on the computer screen?

JKT Only what your character can see. The immediate detail and tantalizing but rather distant horizon. In colour too, like the Wizard of Oz.

- RSC So what's the point?
- JKT Precisely. You pick up an idea or food when you crawl over it and choose whether to drop it in the box or not. Many a time the idea tilts the box and pins you to the floor.
- RSC And you die?
- JKT No, you can choose to move and rebalance the box. Your position on the landscape changes as you accomplish this. Of course this movement brings you into contact with new ideas, and the cycle continues. It is very difficult to end up where one initially heads out for.
- RSC So who survives Level 3 before running out of food points?
- JKT Commonly two strategies, the pointy shelled snails with big boxes, or the flat shelled snails with little boxes.
- RSC I get it, an allegory about specialization.
- JKT If you like.
- RSC What next?
- JKT It depends. Level 3 is endlessly entertaining with conference bags full of snacks, newsletters to read, objects to touch. The multiuser multimedia version is a knockout, hooks into World Wide Web exhibits and newsgroups. But now and again one can fall through - to the Level 4 pool.
- RSC A sunny retirement?
- JKT The reflecting pool. I decorated it in Chinoiserie. Oriental numerology holds 4 to be the number for death, this is where the characters get to re-assess themselves.
- RSC Rather sombre for a game.



"... a sense of desperate urgency."

- JKT You mean boring. No there is here a sense of desperate urgency. The longer you remain, the more colours fade to grey, and you play twisted games of power politics with mandarins. Players frantically sort through their boxes for clues and tools to win these contests and get out of the meeting rooms.
- RSC Is there any hope?
- JKT It glimmers. There are moments of high comedy too.
- RSC Oh goody, I was worried.
- JKT Hey, I want this puppy to sell like hotcakes. A fave is power lurching over air quality requirements. You reach into your box for a magic list of mould spores that have been found on paper. Gotta get the filtration specs on your side.
- RSC What happens?
- JKT Poof, it turns into a list of places George Washington slept. Yucks all round!
- RSC So all is not what it seems.

- JKT There is that side of things.
- RSC How do you move on?
- JKT Play the game. Level 5 is a library.
- RSC We become archival conservators?
- JKT No. You occasionally get chewed out by one from Level 2 for cracking a spine and letting the knowledge seep out. No - the unwon battles of Level 4 are listed with your points. These are the challenges to meet in Level 5. You pour through the original data, synthesizing arguments that win the Mandarins over.
- RSC So this is where you finally progress to success and victory?
- JKT No. This is where the greatest setbacks in conservation occur.
- RSC I don't follow.
- JKT You see, you find that all the level 3 grind has been ground before.
- RSC For example?
- JKT The library allows you to travel the history of thought on many lines. You generate bibliographies rife with ancient texts that had laid out guiding principles for all time and were forgotten soon after.
- RSC Then you succeed?
- JKT Not immediately, no. The acclaim generally goes to players who cite themselves a lot. This gives the impression of an original thinker and impresses the mandarins.
- RSC And are you playing?
- JKT My latest character is cursed with the power to see ghosts in the library. You see, one is forced to release them from their haunting before the stacks close for all time.
- RSC Are you building more levels?
- JKT I was, but I find myself playing more and more now.
- RSC But surely this is cutting edge stuff that could help us all.
- JKT Maybe, but lately I feel better just playing in Level 1 where I can be young and entranced.

Recent publications of disinterest by J.K. Thostrang:

Recent Setbacks in Conservation - An Ecdotal Processional Bibliography. Backbeat, March 1993.

Recent Kickbacks in Conservation - Transcript of testimony before the Royal Commission on the Status of Conservation. June 1992-August 1994.

Recent Cutbacks in Conservation - Revised edition, in preparation, pending the United States Federal Reserve short term interest rate for overnight loans between banks which affects the lives of hundreds of twenty year old amoral male money-market speculators on cocaine who control our country even though we did not vote for them.

Thostrang, J.K., "The recent occurrence of *educational opportunity* in published works", *Letters: the Journal of the Literary Society*, Vol MTV, 1881, 147-49.