

English 230 Worksheet for Friday, September 16th

Secrets Agent, by Marina Kittaka

Available at <https://even-kei.itch.io/secrets-agent> (enable the sound)

"I care about small and peculiar systems and am bothered by large and centralized systems." Marina Kittaka at <https://even-kei.itch.io/> (accessed 13 September 2022)

Marina Kittaka (she / her) released this browser-based game in 2014. She made it using Construct 2, an HTML-based game editor. It's a "vignette game," or a short game, and takes only five to ten minutes to complete. Kittaka published it on itch.io. It's not available on consoles.

The graphics, including those for the player character, appear to be mostly hand-drawn: more like sketches than photography or pixel art. The perspective is third-person. You see your player character and move them with your keyboard. Meanwhile, Kittaka performs voice-over for the game and welcomes you to it. Then she provides some narrative exposition and tells you the "mission" of the game: "This guy stole our gemstone," she says. It's now hidden in a mansion, "with all these traps," and your goal is to steal it back. Fortunately, Kittaka has a map (even if you don't ever see it). She tells you where to go, and she also shares the solution to every puzzle you encounter (see image below). You can collect items along the way, if you wish, but the game does not track how many items you accumulate, and you do not earn any points. (The game has no "Heads Up Display" or HUD.) You cannot die, either, even if you can get hurt. You've no "lives" to gain or lose as a player character.



Contrary to the style of many AAA designs (released by mid-sized or major publishers), *Secrets Agent* is neither long nor difficult. The only controls are your keyboard's arrow keys, you need not learn any

button combos, and you need not worry whether you will progress. Meanwhile, against the grain of most puzzle adventure games, including *Maniac Mansion* (1987) and *Luigi's Mansion* (2001), as well as *Jewel Chase* (1997), which inspired *Secrets Agent*, no secrets or solutions are kept from the player. There is no suspense, and there is nothing to find or decode, either. Yet many of the solutions, such as standing on the sun and typing `DEF` to gain a shield from arrows, would be impossible to access or determine without Kittaka's knowledge, which she shares through her voice-over audio.

Kittaka's voice-over presentation suggests it is not edited or following a script. She improvises as if she is having a conversation, sharing a space, and achieving a goal *with* you, instead of being an omniscient narrator or developer who is talking *down* or explaining things *to* you. At the same time, Kittaka guides you in playing the game without simply giving you all the answers, and she does so by integrating the solutions to traps and puzzles with her stories and conversational style. Nothing is immediate in *Secrets Agent*, even if no solutions are hidden from you. Kittaka pauses at one moment because she just ate a cookie, later she sings the chorus of Ingrid Michaelson's "Everybody" (2009), she weaves humour into her observations, and she often expresses vulnerability. She notes, for example, how awkward face-to-face conversations can be, and how the "voice is so personal," yet you "give it away" and "can't control it." This vulnerability is palpable in the strange closeness of communicating with someone you (as a player or audience member) cannot see. (An academic word for such off-screen voices is "acousmatic.")

Secrets Agent offers an example of how media may be crafted with conversation and trust rather than alienation, control, or canned delivery in mind, and also how a game may serve as a stage for storytelling beyond the plot of the game itself. Echoing [the work of Leigh Alexander](#), Kittaka is not trying to keep secrets from you or reward you, and she reveals a majority of the plot in the first few seconds of the game. The more compelling story, and the more engaging interaction, emerges *as you play* and learn with Kittaka and from her: a "player story," if you will. (Maybe the game is like a prototype, which you are "testing" as Kittaka observes you or guides you.)

As you play *Secrets Agent*, I encourage you to consider the following questions:

- How would you compare *Secrets Agent* with other games you have played, or with your impressions of games and gaming culture?
- What modalities (audition, vision, and touch, for example) does the game engage to communicate a story? Try playing the game without the audio enabled. What's still possible? What isn't?
- How would you describe the experience of playing with (or as) the player character? What's the character's goal or aim? What's your goal or aim as a player?
- How do you relate with the voice-over audio (Kittaka's use of voice) in this game? What sort of interaction or dynamic emerges as the game unfolds?
- How would you describe the mood of this game? To what would you compare it?
- Tell someone you know about your experience playing this game. What's your story?