In Real Life

Examining the intersection between real life and online gaming, IN REAL LIFE tells the story of Anda, a young and awkward girl looking to fit in and connect. Though something of an outcast, Anda discovers Coarsegold Online, an analogy to games like World of Warcraft, where she joins a guild and forms a friendship with another young girl called Sarge. Things start to get out of hand, though, when she gets involved in missions that pay real money, missions that target gold miners, players (mostly poor and mostly from Asian countries) who do menial work inside the game for a real-world living.

The graphic novel is an interesting mix of gaming and economics, activism and personal realization, as Anda begins to question what she does when she befriends one of the gold farmers, a young man who is sick but can't afford to stop working or seek treatment. Anda, whose father is part of a workers group on strike for better benefits, suggests that her friend try to adopt similar tactics, but this ends up getting him fired. On top of that, her online activities lead to tension with her parents and with Sarge.

IN REAL LIFE does a wonderful job of blending the layers of the text --- the real-world activism and suffering with the online fantasy and politics.

The book is surprisingly complex for being about online gaming, but it also brings the reader and Anda to the realization that such things are complex, that they are about more than just gaming, about more than just what seems fair and what doesn't. IN REAL LIFE does a wonderful job of blending the layers of the text --- the real-world activism and suffering with the online fantasy and politics --- and it explores how the two aspects play off each other. In the introduction to the text, the author mentions how the internet and gaming are pushing forward the possibilities for activism and for connections. The story plays that idea out, bridging vast distances and vastly different cultures to help two people connect and do something meaningful.

The art of IN REAL LIFE is well suited to the message and the dual nature of the work. The real-world Anda is realistic --- awkward but yearning for friends and connections. Online Anda is fearless and brave, an idealized self. And through playing the avatar, Anda gains confidence outside the game --- she begins to make connections at her school and understand the world around her a bit more**.** The action scenes are well-rendered and tense, and there is a sense of personality in the online segments that make it seem more vibrant and alive. Expressions are spot-on, not limited to emoticons or anything like that, and the book contains one of my favorite background characters, a penguin in a weird hat. There is a lot to see and examine, and the art matches the mood and feel of the text incredibly well.

In the end**,** IN REAL LIFE succeeds in showing just how layered something as seemingly simple as online gaming can be. For those of us in the West, it might just seem like an easy and straightforward game. But because of the economics of the game and how people have to work to earn money abroad, our experiences and prejudices have to be examined. Because the right and wrong of Coarsegold is more complicated than whether or not a creature is good or evil. It’s even more complicated than what seems fair or not. Because in real life, all people are deserving of certain human rights and to be seen as people.

Reviewed by [Charles Payseur](http://www.teenreads.com/reviews/in-real-life-1) on October 30, 2014