

***IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in our Digital Lives.* By Chris Stedman. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020. 336 pp. ISBN 978-1506463513. \$25.00 hardcover; Kindle, \$23.00.**

When Chris Stedman, a former Harvard and Yale Humanist Chaplain and author of *Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*, announced his second book *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in our Digital Lives*, I will admit I wasn't sure the book was for me. As a millennial 36-year-old, Twitter still feels a little foreign, and Instagram is a world unto itself. But as I read it, I found myself remarkably moved, stirred time and time again, and convinced that Stedman has hit upon the human condition through his own personal struggles, hence may have pieced together one of the most important volumes in the last decade on the intersection of technology, social media, and humanity.

Stedman's account begins with a simple question: What does it mean to be "real"? Anyone who picks up the book and submits to the question will be immediately drawn into the depth through which Stedman centers his own personal narrative. The book spends a significant amount of time teasing out the nuances of everyday life, but in a way in that helps almost anyone who chooses to read it find themselves within the narrative. Ultimately, it will require readers to deeply reflective upon their own stories as well.

Stedman's account takes readers through a steady series of personal questions. The text is interlaced with personal stories and analogies. Each chapter is built around a theme. Each feels distinct at the beginning. However, all coalesce in the volume's conclusion. From online dating, to how we present online versus in real life, to the idea of permanency dictated by our social media "record," which is owned and controlled by capitalistic organizations, each chapter calls into question whether there is value in having a different online versus in real life persona, and Stedman's answer is maybe not what you would expect.

Stedman has become known for his vulnerability. Anyone who follows his Instagram account will note that Tuna, the lovable dog/companion who had seen Chris through almost everything during the last few years, tragically passed away not long after the book came out. Tuna helped to propel Stedman to more visibility in the online world. Those experiences throughout the book, alongside his previously visible presence online, provide example after example of our own tragic and beautiful lives. This author's vulnerability allows the reader to "see" the ways in which we are all taking risks, or at least can take risks by experimenting with vulnerability through online.

One of the key chapters in the book, "Mapping the Territory," illustrates the weight we place upon digital spaces in our lives and also the power it can have over us. The chapter follows Stedman's love of maps, and his exploration in partnership with cartographers and librarians to reveal a history of colonialism and propaganda. As Stedman states, "maps attempt to order the world around us—to give it structure and meaning, to make sense of something that is inherently complicated in order to make it navigable." This analogy is ripe with reflections about the ways we have been shaped by images in digital spaces, not only of location but of presence.

In another of the volume's core chapters, "Drafting Distance," Stedman carefully and methodically offers how online spaces can be utilized to reveal ourselves while also hiding from our

realities, asking readers to consider whether they are aware of when they are doing which, and for what purpose. In the chapter, he reflects upon the ways in which digital spaces can allow us to reveal hidden feelings and biases, while questioning how we might have empathy within individuals who we have never met, don't "really" know, and remain somewhat "distanced" from.

In the chapter "The Roles We Play," Stedman goes deep into our experimentation with our identities, from board games to online gaming to online discussion boards. The chapter even explores furry conventions and the concepts of cosplay while also being cautious to point out that there are dangers mentally and emotionally when we get wrapped up in the imagination. Stedman is clear, however, that "play and the identities we form through it don't have to be about escapism." He points out the ability for us to pull away from digital spaces, giving ourselves the ability to learn to enjoy just "being" and not always being entertained.

In the end, Stedman has given us a brilliant vessel from which to explore our own lives in digital spaces and beyond. He has written a deeply human volume worthy of reflection. If I cried once, I cried a dozen times—as the book is not for the faint-hearted. Once again, Chris Stedman offered once again a book revealing his depth and wisdom—and has done so in a way that even I, the old millennial, truly find resonance with.

J. Cody Nielsen
Convergence on Campus



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the JIRS staff, the JIRS Board of Advisors, or JIRS publishing partners.