

'Free Guy' brings a bank teller into a video game

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 115 minutes

Movies based around video games have always been a tough prospect for filmmakers. Perhaps it's the already exaggerated and artificial nature of the source material, but many adaptations of these properties have had difficulty generating much in the way of tension and excitement. The latest attempt is "Free Guy," which benefits from being an original tale not based on any preexisting game. It manages to earn a few laughs from its entertaining and charismatic lead, but struggles to build dramatic momentum as it begins jumping in and out of its video game setting.

Guy (Ryan Reynolds) is an upbeat bank teller who lives a predictably routine existence in a colorful city. Unfortunately for our protagonist, crime is rampant and violence is generally accepted among the populace. In fact, it is immediately clear that Guy is actually a background character in an online game. One morning, the hero decides to change and improve his life.

He approaches a woman on the street on whom he has a crush, named Molotov Girl (Jodie

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Comer). As it turns out, this figure is an avatar of a real person named Millie. She claims to be one of two programmers who built the online environment before it was taken over by sinister entrepreneur, Antoine (Taika Waititi). Millie and Guy search for evidence in the artificial world to prove that she and her friend Keys (Joe Keery) are the actual game designers.

But on the outside, Antoine plots to stop Millie and Keys by shutting down the program and installing an upgraded version that will wipe out all preexisting characters and information.

There's a lot of potential early on and the film does poke fun at its odd and fabricated world. It is amusing to see these friendly characters deal with horrible things occurring around them with little more than a shrug as they accept their sad position in life. There are some funny bits as Guy attempts to change his life within the game. This results in confusion from other background characters, like friend Buddy (Lil Rel Howery), who doesn't know how to respond to these new unexpected hiccups in their daily habits.

And of course, as Guy becomes more adventurous and puts himself in danger, he actually develops a following in the real world, with avatars of gamers reaching out to make his acquaintance.

Not all of the jokes work, but there are some chuckles as Guy develops his personality and becomes a fuller person. What does hobble the movie are its frequent trips outside of the game environment, which begin to take over the running time. The story decides to emphasize and address a romantic subplot between Millie and shy programmer Keys, as well as detail their adversarial relationship with Antoine. Co-star Waititi does manage to land a few funny comments in his over-the-top part, but the frequent cutaways to the real world generally aren't as effective and at times even feel jarring.

The unrequited love story doesn't make an impression and it isn't long before the likable Guy begins to feel like a secondary character in his own movie.

Thankfully, there are some clever visuals during the climax as pieces of the online environment are slowly deleted and Guy is forced to square off against an appropriately ridiculous online opponent to save his existence and those of the game's background characters. These scenes are enjoyable and one wishes the film had kept viewers completely contained within the unique,

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unusual digital world and removed the story’s conventional and predictable elements occurring outside the game.

Reynolds is always fun to watch and his friendly quips make for an entertaining contrast with the surreal chaos occurring around him. It’s just too bad that viewers are often taken out of the fun and jostled between multiple subplots occurring in different worlds. “Free Guy” has a great set-up and certainly possesses some enjoyable moments, but the screenwriters clearly weren’t sure about which characters and elements to focus on. As a result, the story’s more routine elements end up diffusing Guy’s personal journey and make the movie less of a standout than it should have been.

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