

## A Reading Group Guide to

### ***Slay***

By Brittney Morris

#### **About the Book**

Seventeen-year-old Kiera fields unwanted questions about Black culture from her white classmates and deals with unchecked racism in online multiplayer games. In response, she develops *SLAY*, a secret Afrocentric multiplayer online role-playing game celebrating Black excellence across the diaspora. Through social media and word-of-mouth, hundreds of thousands of Black people around the world join this safe space for a chance to be their unapologetic selves. Full of intricate details about the *SLAY* universe and introspective anecdotes about gaming while Black, the novel makes it easy to understand why Kiera will do whatever it takes to protect her game—even if it means mourning in silence after learning a teen is murdered because of an argument over *SLAY* in-game currency. Kiera chooses not to reveal her identity as the game developer despite media pressure and an anonymous troll threatening to sue her for “anti-white discrimination.” Her point-of-view is interspersed with perspectives from other gamers, giving insights into what *SLAY* means to each of them. It’s time for Kiera to realize the community she’s brought together is ready to fight alongside her, but is their collective power enough to save their world?

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Kiera introduces readers to her two identities, a parallel which challenges her throughout the book as she tries to keep her worlds separate. How does this divide affect her relationships and responsibilities? How does it affect the way she views herself? Have you ever felt like you needed to change who you are to fit a certain scenario or within a group of people? How does it feel to enhance or hide parts of yourself?
2. Why do Wyatt and Harper expect Kiera to be the voice on Blackness, even after reading numerous articles and comments online? Why don’t they listen when Kiera, Steph, and Malcolm offer their thoughts?
3. Discuss the importance of gaming communities and what distinguishes them from other communities. Why do you think Kiera is more comfortable making decisions and expressing her opinions in the *SLAY* world? Do you play any online multiplayer games? How does your experience compare to those of these characters?
4. What is diaspora? How does the diaspora contribute to different experiences of Blackness? How is Blackness defined and is it universal? What counts as a “Black thing” and who gets to decide?
5. How does *SLAY* encourage community building among players? How do you see this reflected in the chapters written from other gamers’ perspectives?

6. If you created something as incredible as *SLAY*, would you keep it a secret? Explain your answer. What do you think might have happened if Kiera had told her parents about the game earlier? Do you think she would have eventually revealed her identity to the world? Do you think it would have affected the game?

7. Why doesn't Kiera feel excited about going to Spelman? Describe a time when you felt the opposite of how you expected to, such as nervous and confused instead of excited and relieved. Have you ever had the feeling of blessed assurance? Share either experience with the class.

8. When Claire experiences racism on the train in Paris, she wonders "if everyone in America is as nice as that couple in my neighbor's flat." Why does she think this? How might you answer her question, based on your experiences in America?

9. Consider the significance of Claire's moment on the train alongside Maurice's experience in China. How is Blackness perceived around the world? What are the dangers of traveling as a person of color? Discuss how *SLAY* acts as a safe space from racism.

10. There are only twenty-five students of color out of 580 students at Jefferson Academy; Kiera says, "It feels weird to reach out to the only students who look like you. It makes you look desperate. It makes you look shallow." What influences Kiera to think this way? Do you agree with her statement? Is this something white students worry about? Explain your answers.

11. If Kiera were to reach out to these other students of color, do you think she would still need *SLAY*? What about if she went to Spelman and was around Black students exclusively? Explain your answers.

12. How did you feel when you learned about Jamal's murder, or when the characters referenced the photograph of him playing Ping-Pong? Explain why you felt that way. How do Kiera and Claire each cope with guilt and grief? How might you comfort a friend in that situation? How about Jamal's family or your community? What do you need when you feel distraught?

13. Think about why Kiera created *SLAY*. Why do you think people feel comfortable demonstrating abusive behaviors in online multiplayer games? How might game developers work to prevent or combat this behavior? What do you think can be done to protect vulnerable people?

14. In a tender moment, Jaylen stands in her dark basement hugging herself while her *SLAY* character hugs Emerald on screen, beautifully capturing the wonders of virtual reality (VR). How can trans, non-binary, and/ or gender nonconforming people explore their identities through VR and gaming? Why is *SLAY* a necessity in Jaylen's life?

15. Through descriptions of Jaylen's VR gloves in contrast to Steph's expensive matching pink set, we can decipher that *SLAY* players come from all different economic backgrounds. Jaylen may have been lucky to find her gloves at a garage sale, but what about gamers who can't afford to purchase VR accessories? Are they still able to play the game? How can they participate? Do you think this is something Kiera thought about when creating the game? What

might this mean for the future of VR games and participants?

16. Can you relate to the scenes with older family members learning to use VR technology? Do you get the hang of technology quickly? If yes, how can you get people involved and excited? If no, how does it feel when people get frustrated that you aren't learning something as fast as they are? Do you think *SLAY* is an intergenerational game or is it exclusionary? Give examples from the text to back up your answers.

17. Claire believes her dad should be held accountable for the consequences of his own actions instead of blaming the Internet. How does this relate to the blame she places on herself over Jamal's death?

18. What do you think is behind Malcolm's anger? What has shaped his extreme views? We get a glimpse of his relationship to video games as a child. Compare his experience to the six- and eight-year-olds playing *SLAY*. Do you think younger kids should be playing this game? How might Malcolm feel differently if he gave *SLAY* a chance?

19. Throughout the book, Kiera has several mantras she repeats to herself, including, "You are a queen, and this is your game." How do these mantras help her? Do you have any mantras? Share them with the class and work together to create one that everyone can use.

20. Explain the importance of the worldwide support Kiera receives from *SLAY* players as she duels Dred. How do you think it makes her feel? How would you have handled the situation with Dred? Were you surprised when Dred's identity was revealed? What did you think of this choice?

21. Kiera and Steph discuss the complexity of being in danger but feeling scared to call the police because of the history of police brutality against Black people. This emotionally intense scene calls to question the concept of justice. How would you define justice? How can there be a system of justice that protects all members of society equally and without prejudice? Do you think justice can be achieved interpersonally?

22. Do you think there is any possibility of Kiera and Malcolm talking about what happened? How might they do it safely?

23. Wyatt tells Kiera he never would have said some of the things he did if he'd known that Kiera created *SLAY*. Do you think he's telling the truth? Does it matter? Explain your answers. Wyatt, Harper, and the news reporters offer a mirror for whiteness. Do you think their representations are accurate? What purpose do their characters serve? Could this story have been told without them?

24. Discuss the paradox between Malcolm insisting that Kiera is his queen and that he supports Black women, and his willingness to sabotage Kiera's work in the best interest of Black people as a whole. What role does misogyny play in Malcolm's definition of Blackness, and where exactly is the line between the two? Do you think he's conscious of this intersection? What other paradoxes do you notice in your community or in the wider world? What do you think contributes to these paradoxes?

25. Social researchers and activists have defined racism as the sum of prejudice and power, disputing arguments that white people experience discrimination based on their race. Locate examples in the book that support this definition. How does racism socially, emotionally, economically, and politically harm people?

26. Although *SLAY* is accused of antiwhite discrimination, the news reports do not address the discrimination and violence that occur in games like *Legacy of Planets* and *Mummy*. Why do you think this is, and how does this relate to the above definition of racism?

27. What are respectability politics? Kiera states that writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois couldn't see the potential of the Black community. What do you think it takes to see potential? What are some steps to changing narrow mindsets and challenging stereotypes?

28. How do you define success? Can social progress only be accomplished through classical education, reading and writing books, and engaging in politics? Provide examples from the book or real life that challenge this thought.

29. A major theme in the book is the power of community. What is your favorite instance of community building in the book? What about in your own life? What does it take to be a part of a community? Are there any local communities you can join? How can you start your own?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Think about answers to the following questions: Why did the author insert other characters' perspectives into the story? How might the story have been different otherwise? What other person's perspective would you have liked to read and why? Where in the story would that perspective fit? Then write a chapter from the perspective of a character whose viewpoint we did not read, and share it with a partner. Discuss how these perspectives influence the story.

2. Various opinions are offered on *SLAY*, from Malcolm's conspiracy theory that video games are "a distraction from becoming great" created by white people against Black men, to news reporters calling it an underground Internet gang, to Dr. Abbott's suggestion that "like any other video game, it can be an innocent learning tool, or it can be dangerous." Stage a debate on video games by splitting into two groups with your classmates. Debate the following questions: Who is at fault for issues arising with video games, the players or the developers? Who should be held responsible for disputes? After the debate, analyze its effectiveness. Did anyone on either team change their mind? Were any points brought up that you hadn't thought about before? Was there a viewpoint in the book that closely matched your own?

3. Kiera creates *SLAY* in part because she feels lonely at school, and also because she's tired of playing video games that don't have characters who look like her and where she experiences "racial slurs and the threat of violence." She's disappointed that even fantasy games focus on Eurocentricity, including castles, dragons, and Greek and Roman gods. In a four-person discussion group, decide on a different online multiplayer game for each member to explore. Then examine your game's worlds, paying attention to the character options. Does the variety of skin tones accurately reflect real life? How is gender expressed? Is there racist imagery?

Explore social media discussions about the games. Is anyone bringing up problematic or abusive behavior? Once you've collected your research, come back together as a group and share your findings. Is there something you can do to combat any issues? Is there contact information for the game developers? What are other teens doing to fight against abusive behavior in the gaming community?

4. When Kiera seeks legal counsel after receiving threats of being taken to court and sued, she learns that she'll need a civil rights attorney to defend her case. Were you as surprised as Kiera with that answer? What different types of law do attorneys practice? Search for a civil rights attorney in your neighborhood. What can you find out about their fees? Who is the closest attorney that looks like you, if any? Are their services accessible in cost and distance? Research civil rights movements in your city and across the nation. Are there any related to video games? Find one you are passionate about and offer your support by volunteering at a civil rights organization, signing a petition, sending a letter to government officials, sharing information on social media, or joining a protest.

5. *SLAY* playing cards celebrate Blackness and Black culture, represented through Afrocentric icons, food, relatable experiences, memes, language, food, values, and more. Kiera and Claire demonstrate immense cleverness and innovation in brainstorming artwork and powers for the cards. Which card did you think was the most creative? Consider your cultural identity and values. Design a playing card for your own version of *SLAY*. How can you use metaphors to create powers and visuals for your card? Is it a defense, hex, or battle card? Will you choose a person, artifact, food, childhood memory, or something else? Is your card more personal or universal? What colors represent your card? Draw your card, write down its power, and then share it with the class.

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