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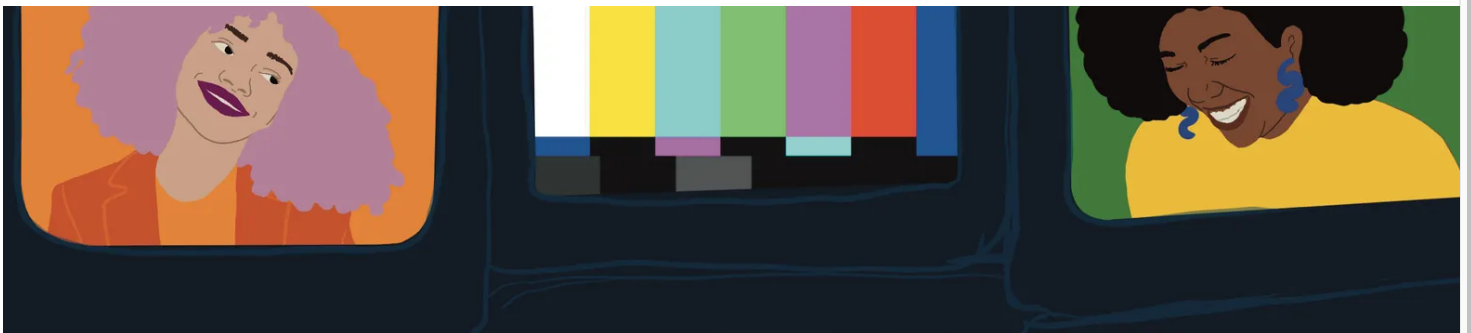
DIVERSITY IN GAMING

Black Girl Gamers Band Together Against 2023's Final Boss: Loneliness

Rethinking the stereotype of the solitary gamer.

BY SIERRA LEONE STARKS

August 22, 2023



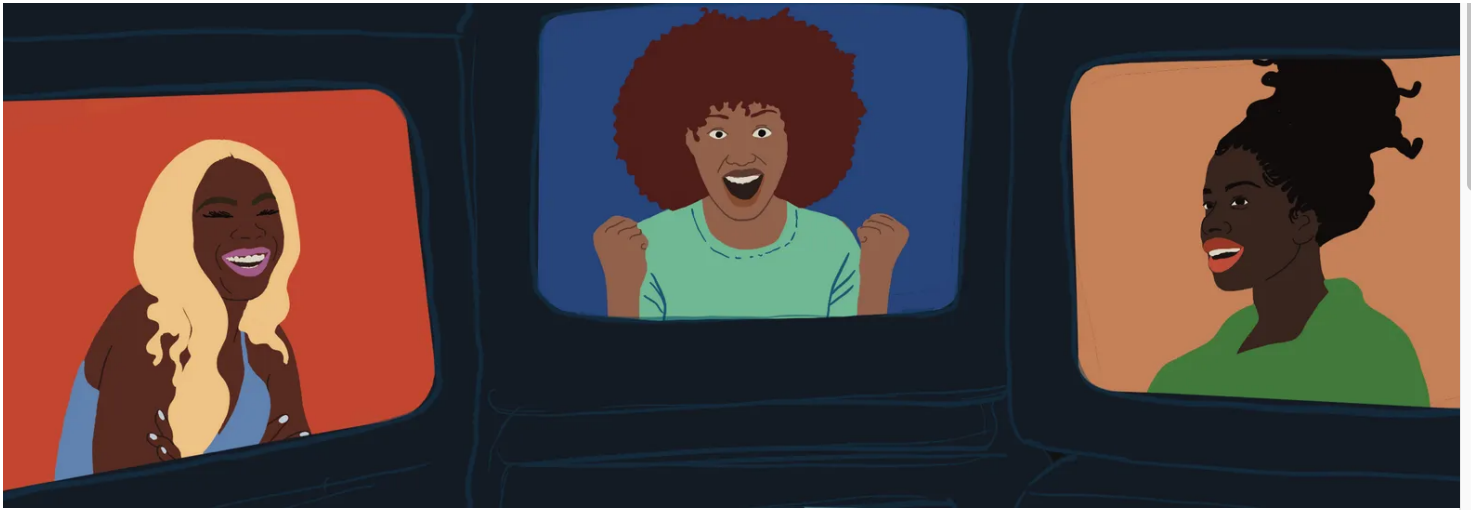
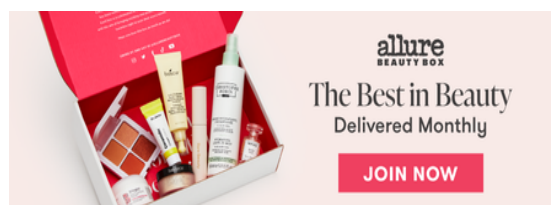


Illustration by Uzo Njoku

Jahara Jayde remembers the first time she felt isolated as a Black girl who obsessed over all things **geek culture**. During a sleepover, “I remember leaving the room and coming back to a couple of my friends talking about how I liked anime, which I didn’t talk about openly to a lot of people,” she recalls. “They were like, ‘She just wants to be Japanese so bad. Jahara doesn’t wanna be Black; she wants to be Japanese.’”



This wasn’t the only instance that left Jayde, now a gamer-streamer-cosplayer with over 23,000 followers **on Twitch**, feeling judged about the things she liked to do for fun. “I was used to

feeling like the hobbies I had almost made me less 'Black,'" she says. "Because that was the understanding I was getting from people around me."





Jayde as Barret Wallace from Final Fantasy 7 Remake Jahara Jayde



Jayde as Geralt of Rivia from Netflix's *The Witcher* Jahara Jayde

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It wasn't until the pandemic, when Jayde began streaming on Twitch, that she realized there were thousands of women like her, all around the world. Other **Black women gamers** flooded the chat in her stream, commenting on how affirming it felt to see someone who looked like them hosting a livestream on Twitch, appearing front and center at video game releases, and dominating the cosplay game.

“I was used to feeling like the hobbies I had almost made me less ‘Black.’”

The feeling of isolation that Jayde had previously experienced was no anomaly. In May, the US Surgeon General's office **released an advisory** to call the public's attention to loneliness as an epidemic and an urgent public health issue. Loneliness is among the top-three concerns for people who self-screen through Mental Health America's online program. **According to 2022 data**, 48% of those who scored at-risk for a mental health condition listed loneliness or isolation as a contributing factor to their mental health problems. For young people under 18, that number was slightly higher, at 50%.

Against the backdrop of a loneliness epidemic, at a time when social connection matters more than ever, Black women are creatively crafting a space within geek culture that fosters belonging, validates their lived experiences and, above all, promotes a healthy environment for them to indulge in the delight of play.

A history of white supremacy in the gaming industry

The concept of play, or a **state of being** that occurs when we're engaged in activities for enjoyment and recreation, is supposed to be a universal joy. In the gaming space, however, that joy has often been gatekept by those with racist and sexist ideas of what the gaming industry, and the players and developers therein, can and should look like, says **TreaAndrea M. Russworm**, PhD, professor of interactive media and games division at the **University of Southern California**. "Historically, the medium has had its racial biases, very overt racist codes," Dr. Russworm says. "A history of white supremacy runs deep in the gaming industry, both past and present." Dr. Russworm, who identifies as a Black and queer woman, writes and teaches about the intersection of race and gaming culture. The video game industry's user base is diversifying daily, moving from white-male dominated platforms and streams to spaces filled with robust **communities of color**, in which people play everything from Candy Crush to **Call of Duty**. Still, says Dr. Russworm, the industry doesn't value or even acknowledge Black women players.

There remains a lack of diversity in first-person protagonists, skin tones, and hair types in the video games that Black women play. When they are included, they aren't always depicted well. For instance, the Afros in concept art for The Sims 4 were **compared to cauliflower**. And Black streamers, like Jayde, use moderator bots to screen for racist language and behavior from viewers who tune into their content. "There are members of society at large, but also specifically of the gaming community, who do not want to see Black women on a Twitch stream, ever," says Dr. Russworm.

Black women's very existence in the gaming space and geek culture is an act of resistance.

Platforms like **Twitter**, **Twitch**, and YouTube have become notorious for having users who spew racist and vulgar vitriol on livestreams, threads, and chats. Women gamers and members of the LGBTQ+ community have reported online harassment from men, prompting a we-will-do-better **statement** from Twitch's cofounder and then-CEO Emmett Shear.

Black women's very existence in the gaming space and geek culture is an act of resistance against these systems of oppression, says Dr. Russworm. They dare to cosplay as characters other than Storm from X-Men or Marvel's Monica Rambeau, and they dare to indulge in an industry where the overwhelming majority of protagonists in video games is male and **only 8% of characters are nonwhite women**.





Krystina Arielle as Captain America Koury Angelo

It is a hard reality to reckon with when a culture that can be a source of contentment and amusement can also be one that attacks Blackness at every turn. This has been the case for Krystina Arielle, tabletop gamer, cosplayer, and host of *The High Republic Show* on StarWars.com. When she got the call that she had been selected as the front-runner for the sci-fi web series, she says, it was a fangirl's dream come true. "I was very, very excited because there were going to be little girls that got to see me in this space.... the same way that I saw **Nichelle Nichols**," she explains. "There's a certain level of permission in seeing someone in those spaces."

But her good news was met with **targeted harassment from critics on social media**, who pointed to tweets Arielle had made during the racial reckoning of 2020 that criticized racism in America. To Arielle, it felt as if the keyboard warriors' message was loud and clear: No Black women allowed.

"No matter what I say, no matter what I do, no matter who I am, my existence in this space becomes political," she says. "No matter how qualified I am, no matter how many conversations I can hold about pop culture or geek culture or any of these things — I can have the wealth of knowledge that I do, but I'm still not qualified [to them]. I am a 'diversity hire.'"

The incessant hostility pushed Arielle to a place of anxiety and isolation, she recalls. To combat those feelings, she says, she threw herself into cosplay. During Black History Month, the hashtag **#28DaysofBlackCosplay** brought the community together to engage in performance art and post creations on social media. Arielle got into character as Supergirl, Captain Marvel, and **Sailor Neptune**, among others.

"I posted the pictures that made me feel the most powerful," she says. "It was reminding myself of who I am. It was also saying [to the doubters], 'You can say anything about me, but I'm going to show you who I am.'"



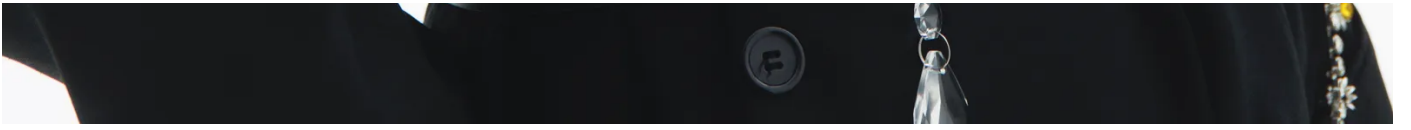
Members of Black Girl Gamers Black Girl Gamers/Jay-Ann Lopez

Finding community in gaming

There's an ongoing debate about whether video game play can ease feelings of loneliness and isolation or further contribute to those feelings. But gaming has always been a vehicle for people to find community, says **Lindsay Grace**, Knight Chair in interactive media at the **University of Miami**. Analog games like chess and monopoly were meant to be played against opponents, but arcade games are known for their ability to bring people into a communal environment. Digital and online games are an extension of that environment, says **Grace**.

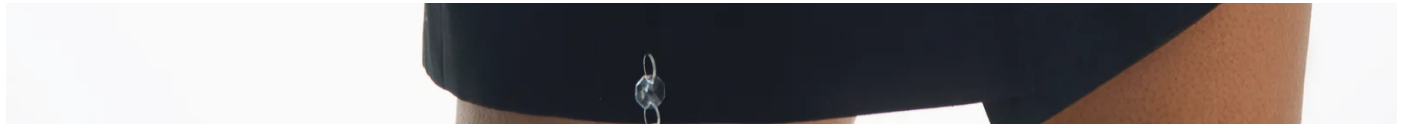
“What digital games do is they allow for much wider scale and geographic dispersion, which is awesome, right?” says **Grace**. “So we can actually talk with someone in California. And, other than the time difference, everything's great. But we're doing it often toward a common goal, which is super exciting in itself.”





Jay-Ann Lopez Black Girl Gamers/Jay-Ann Lopez





Black Girl Gamers/Jay-Ann Lopez

In 2015, Jay-Ann Lopez created **Black Girl Gamers** (BGG), a platform to empower Black women in the gaming space and enable them to vocalize concerns about the industry. What began as a Facebook group has since grown into a community-powered brand and business, Lopez says. BGG's members span the globe, with Black women from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas represented.

Lopez has seen friendships and close bonds form through BGG and has even taken some of her own relationships from Discord to IRL. "We will talk or chat every day, and sometimes it just

goes beyond those gaming platforms,” she says. “You start to build those genuine connections, knowing what’s going on in their life outside of gaming.”

Video game play has been typecast as a lone endeavor, which is an unfair stereotype, according to Lopez. She challenges the narrative that says the quintessential video game player is a **white man sitting solo in his basement**. In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) took a critical stance against gaming, making headlines for naming “**gaming disorder**” an addictive behavior that is marked by an inability to stop game play, which can interfere with personal relationships and everyday tasks, like school or work. During the pandemic, however, when Animal Crossing saw a massive uptick in players and **daily viewership doubled on Twitch**, WHO then took a different stance **in a separate release**, encouraging video game play as a way to improve mental well-being and stay socially connected.

“As a Black woman, I didn't really realize how lonely I was until I started doing what I do now.”

Jayde knows from personal experience the social connection that gaming provides. The community she’s built on her Twitch channel and other digital platforms, based on her love of geek culture, has become a source of comfort and support. She and Arielle became fast friends when they hosted **TwitchCon’s Cosplay Contest** together in 2022.

“As a Black woman, I didn't really realize how lonely I was until I started doing what I do now,” says Jayde. “[I didn’t realize] what I had been missing in terms of other Black women and Black culture to surround myself with and feel kinship with.”



Jayde as Sailor Mercury from *Sailor Moon* | Jahara Jayde

Connectedness to other people is something that fosters human health and overall wellness, says **Ayanna Abrams**, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist based in Atlanta. The different identities humans hold also play a role in who they are in relationships with, she says, how safe those relationships feel, and how connected they are allowed to feel in those relationships.

“The more identities you hold that are pushed to the margins, whether that be race, sexuality, if you are considered a religious minority, if you have any physical limits or disabilities,” says Dr. Abrams, “all these different identities you may hold that push you further and further to the social margins of what is typically protected and privileged.”

In the loneliness advisory, the surgeon general advocated for the development of “pro-connection technology” to create safe spaces for communication. Online platforms, whether for dating, cultivating platonic relationships, game play or otherwise, have become places where people seek out and connect with other people, says Dr. Abrams.

As we move toward a society that’s more shaped by technology and technological advances, she continues, these platforms are indeed a valid form of connection. Sometimes technology is the only way Black women can connect with other Black women if their profession or another life event has pulled them away to live in a remote area or environment where they’re surrounded by oppressive systems.

“I’ve seen so many conversations where people diminish online relationships, whether romantic, friendship, whether by interest group,” says Dr. Abrams. “And that’s not actually helpful. Because if those relations weren’t important, [these online groups] wouldn’t still be something that are so, so, so active.”

As more **Black women begin to prioritize their health and well-being**, **LaNail R. Plummer**, EdD, a DC-based licensed professional counselor and CEO of **Onyx Therapy Group**, calls it “revolutionary” that Black women are able to make time for and operate in the spaces of fantasy and imagination that geek culture provides.

Playing video games is often a part of recreational pleasure. While some have made gaming their actual 9 to 5, for most people it’s a hobby, says **Dr. Plummer**. Confinement and isolation only perpetuate feelings of loneliness, but having a hobby to enjoy with others — even if it’s only one other person — makes a world of difference, she adds.

“When we are engaged in a hobby, we release certain chemicals in our body (like oxytocin and serotonin – both of which reduce stress), which has a strong impact on our mental and physical health,” Dr. Plummer explains. Being able to show up in the spaces of fun, fantasy, and imagination with genuine friends, as is the case for Jayde and Arielle, or to show up with an army

of 8,000 members, as is the case with Black Girl Gamers, solidifies a shake-up in geek culture that is, truly, game-changing.

This story is part of a new Allure **Melanin Edit** series exploring the question, “What does a nerd look like?” Here, more stories about the communities Black women have built:

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Sierra Starks is a freelance journalist who covers beauty and how it intersects with health, wealth, communities, and culture. After waving a few mic flags in TV news, she now has a full-time gig with the Department of Defense where her role is to connect the U.S. Army with the people it recruits... [Read more](#)

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