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## **Women Who Love Vampires: Analysis of the Popularity of the Astarion Character from *Baldur's Gate 3* Video Games Among Non-Male Players**

**Abstract:** Although it is evident that more and more women are playing video games of all genres today, this media is often treated in public discourse as exclusively for men. In accordance with this stereotype, the characters from video games are most often made for the male gaze. However, when *Baldur's Gate 3* (the third part of the now legendary franchise) was released in 2023, it was evident that the character named Astarion had become extremely popular among female gamers. Therefore, this paper analyses what attracted them to Astarion, with special emphasis on the vampiric nature of character. Looking at the history of the vampire archetype and its connection with sexuality and taboos, as well as women's love for vampiric fantasy, the paper researches if Astarion fits or doesn't fit into this trope, and what are the reasons for overwhelming female love.

**Keywords:** video games, vampires, female gaze, popular culture, digital anthropology, *Baldur's Gate 3*

### Introduction

When *Baldur's Gate 3* was released in August 2023, there was significant buzz surrounding its launch. Universally regarded as both a critical and commercial success, it became an instant hit and is considered one of the best games

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in recent history. In addition to the praise, it received for its gameplay, visuals, and story, the characters developed by Larian Studios became immensely popular, with players feeling a strong connection to them. Each character has their own dedicated fan group, and the character of Astarion is no exception. He has a loud and proud fanbase, primarily composed of women and non-binary gamers, who are deeply invested in his story, producing fan media and discussing the character online. While female gamers are not a new phenomenon and have been the subject of previous studies, it is interesting to explore what specifically draws them to this character and sustains their dedication.

Vampires have been popular ever since their breakthrough in 19th-century Gothic literature and remain prominent across all types of media, which does not “permit vampires to die” (Dresser 1989, 79). As such, these creatures have been the subjects of thousands of anthropological studies, some of which attempt to answer the question: why do female fans like vampires? The answers vary depending on the character, the historical moment, and the medium, as vampires in Western media and popular culture can be analysed through various lenses. We could focus on the political and economic aspects of vampire stories and their popularity, but we can also examine them from feminist, gender, and sexuality perspectives (Trbojević 2021, 34–36).

Łuksza has stated, “The importance of vampire narratives in the contemporary cultural landscape and their focus on feminine identity and sexuality allows us to perceive these narratives as a ‘meta social commentary’ to gender issues in Western societies” (Łuksza 2015, 431). This idea is foundational to this research, as this paper aims to explore what meta social commentary can be drawn from Astarion’s character and which vampire trope traits he possesses that fascinate women. Additionally, the analysis will seek to establish the connection between vampirism and the topics of gender and sexuality that female and non-binary players consider crucial<sup>1</sup>.

## Vampires: Folklore, Popular Media, and Dungeons & Dragons

Vampires are folk creatures that have a very old and rich history worldwide. Various cultures have some representations of similar undead beings

<sup>1</sup> While the title mentions only women in the first part, I have included two non-binary and one demi-woman informants in the research. This is because the game itself treats the concept of gender very fluidly, and in the wake of different explorations of topics of gender and sexuality, it is important to discuss identities beyond binary gender, including all gender minorities that differ from standard patriarchal stereotypes. This is also important for the analysis of topics related to sexuality.

with demonic qualities that harm humans, often by taking their blood or energy (Dresser 1989, 51). The folklore concept of vampires within Slavic cultural areas is considered to have reached its greatest richness in Southeastern European folk beliefs (Bandić 1980, 81). Yet when most people around the world think of vampires, their image is shaped by the way vampires have been depicted in popular Western culture since the 19th century. The roots of this archetype lie in *Dracula*, the titular character of Bram Stoker's eponymous Gothic horror novel (Baker 2021, 205). *Dracula's* origins are linked to Eastern European folk tales and beliefs, which partly inspired Stoker. Over time, this archetype has evolved. The vampire widely known in Western cultural tradition and media typically feeds on blood or energy, transforms humans, appears pale and peculiar, and can be killed by sunlight, garlic, crucifixes, stakes, and/or holy water. There are many variations on this trope – some vampires in popular culture feed on animal blood; some are inherently evil, while others can control their nature.

An important aspect of the trope was introduced even before Stoker's *Dracula*, in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), the first published modern vampire story. Polidori took inspiration from the writing and characteristics of his former employer, Lord Byron, about whom Mary Y. Hallab writes:

The vampire Lord Ruthven [...] is clearly intended as an indictment of aristocratic arrogance and disregard for others and is a warning to the young against being taken in by charm and sophisticated manners. (Hallab 2009, 37).

These types of characters have become well-known literary tropes and are called Byronic heroes. Vampires in literature and popular media are often the exact embodiment of this character, somewhat of an anti-hero: charming but withdrawn, hedonistic, elegant, isolated from society, prone to revenge, cynicism and moodiness, yet with hidden emotions and affections.

Additionally, the vampire in Western literature and popular culture has served as an important symbol for various topics considered relevant to their times. In the 19th century, vampire characters were used to address issues related to foreigners and immigrants, as well as sexuality, sexual awakening, sexual corruption, and what was then regarded as sexually abnormal behaviour (Žikić 2022, 39; Žikić 2021, 163; Hallab 2009, 55; Łuksza 2015, 439, etc.). A famous example is *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, another Gothic novella that not only features a female vampire but also depicts a friendship that develops into a portrayal of lesbian love, filled with homoerotic imagery and themes. As such, *Carmilla* is one of the very rare examples of “self-accepting homosexuals in Victorian or any literature” (Auerbach 1995, 40–41).

Vampire characters have only grown in popularity. Auerbach analysed the representation of vampires in Western media, starting with 19th-century liter-

ary figures, noting that they were vampires “because they loved” and offered “intimacy, a homoerotic sharing, that threatened the hierarchical distance of sanctioned relationships”. Yet she observed that 20th-century vampires “repudiate the ‘intimacy, or friendship’ of their sentimental predecessors” (Auerbach 1995, 60). Since then, the archetype has continued to evolve. Vampires at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century tend to be more “secularized, metonymic, increasingly contiguous” (Zanger 1997, 26). Their narratives focus more on “seeking more spiritual freedom” (Baker 2021, 216). In the contemporary vampire, “little remains of Stoker’s monstrous Count or the bestial bloodsuckers of East European folklore” (George and Hughes 2013, 5). They have become sympathetic anti-heroes rather than simply evil monsters. With their appearances in various books (*Interview with a Vampire*, *Twilight*), TV shows (*True Blood*, *What We Do in the Shadows*), films (*Nosferatu* and *Dracula* have been remade in 2024 and 2025), and video games (*Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, *V Rising*), they remain as beloved as ever.

Along with other undead creatures and monsters, vampires have appeared in various role-playing games, beginning with the oldest and most popular, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Peterson 2013, 156). While the vampires in this universe draw inspiration from Stoker’s *Dracula*, they also reflect the diverse media that have portrayed vampires since the 19th century, such as the TV show *Dark Shadows*, which aired in the late 1960s, a few years before *Dungeons & Dragons* gained popularity (Peterson 2013, 178–179). In turn, the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* influenced the depiction of vampires in other fantasy genres and media, especially video games.

This version of vampires as creatures includes some expected aspects: they are undead, evil, cast no shadow, and have no reflection in mirrors; they cannot step into the sun; they possess unusual attractiveness, can transform into bats, and drink the blood of the living (Wizards RPG Team 2014, 295). One of the attacks available to vampire characters is charm, which reflects the previously mentioned attractiveness and allure possessed by their predecessors. There are differences from the usual portrayal: these vampires are not allergic to garlic, are not killed by holy water, and do not retain any aspects of their souls. An important aspect that is formalised is the distinction between Vampire Lords and spawns – when someone is transformed into a vampire, the Vampire Lord must allow them to drink their own blood to grant them full power. Otherwise, they become vampire spawns, a lesser form that is always under the control of their Masters and must obey them<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.awesomedice.com/blogs/news/dnd-vampires-lore-stats-role-playing>

### What is *Baldur's Gate 3* and Who is Astarion?

*Baldur's Gate 3* is the third instalment in the cult video game franchise set in the Forgotten Realms, a fictional world (campaign setting) of the Dungeons & Dragons system. The first instalment was developed by BioWare and published in 1998; the third and latest was published in 2023 by Larian Studios. It can be played in both single-player and multiplayer modes, and its mechanics are based on the fifth edition of the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop game, published in 2014. Players can choose to create their own character (by default called Tav) or play as one of the pre-made origin characters<sup>3</sup>. The story and gameplay are divided into three acts, following the main quest, which begins with the abduction of a group of characters (including the player character) by creatures called Mindflayers. The protagonist finds themselves on a spaceship, infected by a tadpole that has settled in their brain. After crashing the spaceship in the wilderness of the fictional continent Faerûn, the player's main quest becomes finding a cure for the tadpole.

The companion characters play a significant role in both the story and gameplay. These characters can be recruited during gameplay to form a party of adventurers who assist with the quest; each has a unique backstory and appearance, which cannot be altered. There are ten companion characters in total, and the player can pursue romantic and sexual relationships with eight of them. Astarion, the focus of this analysis, is one of the main companions and among the first to appear near the crash site at the start of the game. Written by Stephen Rooney and voiced and motion-captured by Neil Newbon, Astarion is introduced as an elf magistrate from the city of Baldur's Gate, from which he was abducted and infested with tadpoles, just like the protagonist. In Act 1, the player learns that Astarion is actually a vampire spawn who has recently escaped his master, Lord Vampire Cazador, and that the tadpole's effects protect him from being manipulated and found by his master. Astarion's personal quest, therefore, involves hunting down and killing his master to gain his freedom.

As the story progresses, Astarion and the player discover many details about his background past. The one to affect the most is the origin of the scars on Astarion's back, which were carved by Cazador. These scars are a part of

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<sup>3</sup> The game allows players to choose Astarion as their character, as he is one of the "origin characters". However, it is interesting and important to note that despite the fact that many players identify, at least to some extent, with Astarion, they rarely choose to play as him, if at all. When asked why, the reason was simple and amusing: the character the player controls is not voiced, but only has written dialogue. Neil Newbon's portrayal of Astarion has been cited as one of the character's best aspects and has added significant depth for fans. Therefore, not hearing Astarion's voice feels strange to players, and they feel as if they are missing a crucial part of the character.

a contract with the archdevil Mephistopheles for the Ascension ritual of Ascension that Cazador intended to perform to gain absolute power. This makes Astarion crucial – he is one of 7,000 spawns Cazador created over the decades to sacrifice and condemn to eternal damnation in hell, in exchange for gaining unlimited power. If the player kills Cazador, he can choose either to sacrifice 7,000 spawns and use the ritual of Ascension on Astarion himself, or to free the spawns, saving them but leaving Astarion as a vampire spawn forever. This decision can alter Astarion’s character and the protagonist’s relationship with him. Ascended Vampire Lord Astarion is notably cruel and evil, showing no remorse. In contrast, vampire spawn Astarion, after the player completes the quest to defeat the final antagonist and remove the tadpoles, will live as a low-tier creature with all the limitations of vampiric existence. However, he confronts much of his trauma and begins a journey of healing. Players in a relationship with him at this point are said to embark on an adventure with him to seek a cure for vampirism.

### Astarion and the Vampire Trope

When Astarion is introduced at the beginning of the game, we are not told that he is a vampire, but those who look closely can probably guess. In the player’s journal, his side quest is called “The Pale Elf,” referring to the pallor typically associated with vampires. Other hints include his theatrical manner, his evasiveness, and observant players may even notice small fangs peeking out.

The vampire’s unique appearance is one of the staples of the trope. The exact look has evolved over time, influenced by trends, media, and audience, but certain features persist – vampires are strikingly beautiful, attractive, elegant, and pale. Demetrakopoulos notes that Bela Lugosi’s portrayal of Dracula in the film was the first to present the vampire as the Other, not only through monstrosity but also through a distinctive appearance. After this, vampires began dressing elegantly and displaying peculiar manners (Demetrakopoulos 1997, 113). This is evident in Astarion’s character, partly due to established expectations and partly because of the approach taken by his actor, Neil Newbon. He describes how his performance of the character changes:

“If you take the initial part of Act 1, when you meet Astarion, he’s very bound and closed up, the voice is lower register, the physicality is more tightened in [...] literally just after that first initial moments he starts becoming more like that, an open and a bit more flamboyant and theatrical, because he’s using that as a cover obviously because he’s completely damaged inside.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSvo6pYpBK8&pp=2AbcBw%3D%3D>

This is clearly evident in the way he plays Astarion, basing his performance on an “amoral harlequin jester character called Arlecchino” from Italian comedy (*commedia dell’arte*)<sup>5</sup> and a stray cat he observed and tried to tame over several years<sup>6</sup>. Newbon did not directly imitate this to portray any vampire, but to bring Astarion’s story and background to life. As he says, Astarion is “completely damaged inside”, and throughout the game, we come to truly see this. The damage is apparent not only in his vampirism, which he despises and feels bad about, but also in the fact that he endured centuries of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse by Cazador before the story begins. Yet this damage suggests a different perspective on the character. While vampires in this universe are certainly seen as monsters, these traits, his history, and his flaws humanise him far more than we might initially expect. His monstrosity, ruthlessness, and snark are actually part of his defence mechanism, a smokescreen he creates to hide his vulnerability.

The analysis of appearance and mannerisms in Astarion’s case is important not only because he is a vampire, but also because his character development is deeply connected to themes of bodily autonomy and sexual consent. If a player develops a romantic relationship with him, Astarion admits in Act 2 that he does not know how to be with someone except in a sexual way: “For as long as I know, I’ve been used by others. Controlled and puppeted for someone else’s pleasure.” Later in the game, there is an option to try to convince him to succumb to the tadpole and turn into a mindflayer, which he firmly refuses, having already regained his self-confidence and bodily autonomy. “I can’t watch my body be taken over,” he protests, explaining that this process reminds him of when he was turned into a vampire: “My body writhed and wrapped while I was utterly helpless.” Vampires are ideal creatures for examining issues concerning the body because they inherently have an ambiguous relationship with it. Zombies, ghouls, ghosts, and other undead do not have bodies that appear human – like and could not be mistaken for humans. However, a vampire, although more striking than average, can sometimes be mistaken for a regular human. The body is also what makes them vulnerable, as they must maintain and feed it, and they are at risk of bodily death (Baker 2021, 213). Regardless of the ending the player chooses for him in the game, Astarion remains some kind of vampire and possesses these typical weaknesses; yet it is possible to complete his story and help him overcome his corporeal traumas in one way or another, making him, in the player’s eyes, less othered.

The flirtatiousness and charm he uses as a façade add another dimension to his connection with the typical vampire trope. If Astarion approves of the player’s actions and expresses appreciation, he quickly begins to sweet-talk

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/baldurs-gate-3s-astarion-reveals-the-inspiration-for-his-character-exclusive/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSvo6pYpBK8>

the protagonist. He frequently calls others “darling”, despite being emotionally distant and inherently untrusting. We learn that his role was to seduce victims for his master, further reinforcing the traditional image of the vampire as an alluring, sexual being. This magnetism is also evident among fans – while he may not be the most popular companion or romance option among players<sup>7</sup>, he certainly has a devoted fan following (especially among female players<sup>8</sup>), dedicated online communities, and is the most written-about *Baldur’s Gate 3* character on the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own. This attractiveness is easily comparable to another aspect of Stoker’s *Dracula*, who possessed “emotional magnetism”, which he uses to “unquestioningly attract human beings to itself, which it intends to use for various purposes” (Žikić 2022, 39).

The concept of unnatural vampiric charm has been explored in various media, but for Astarion, this is not an incidental trait; it is an integral part of his backstory and his experience of sexual violence. In some ways, the narrative of the game subverts this magnetism trope. The more we learn about Astarion, the more we realise that he manipulates, seduces, and lures others – not out of genuine desire or supernatural compulsion, but from a desperate need for self-preservation. While he was expected to use his charms to seduce victims for Cazador, it is strongly implied that he was sexually trafficked and prostituted. When approached romantically, he even admits:

“I had a plan, a nice, simple plan – seduce you, sleep with you, manipulate your feelings so you never turn on me. It was easy – instinctive. The habits of two hundred years of charming people kicked in.”

The topic of male sexual abuse is rarely explored in the media, particularly in the traditionally male-centric medium of video games (Shaw 2014, 63). It is also an uncommon theme within the universe of vampire tropes. Male vampires are almost always depicted as predators who use sexual manipulation to gain power over their generally female victims. The concept of an ultimate predator being sexually abused and vulnerable is seldom, if ever, addressed. This makes Astarion’s story unique in mainstream vampire media and offers a new narrative for vampire fans.

As mentioned, vampires are depicted as figures of otherness in media, representing something foreign, often quite literally. In early British literature, vampires were used to give commentary on immigrants and foreigners, a practice that continues today (Žikić 2022, 42). While the character of Astarion does not serve as a metaphor for ethnic or national foreigners, vampires are still considered abominations in the world of the *Forgotten Realms*. Among all other crea-

<sup>7</sup> <https://x.com/larianstudios/status/1732091568243229159>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/baldurs-gate-3-astarion-internet-crush-babygirl-rcna121687>

tures – ogres, dwarves, halflings, devils, gnolls, and so on – vampires are among the few that are always feared and referred to as “monsters”, marking them as the ultimate Other among Others.

This otherness is further explored through the sexual aspect of his identity. Since Carmilla, one of the first and only representations of lesbian love in Victorian literature, the topics of vampires and queerness have often been intertwined. Astarion is openly queer and can be romanced by both male and female characters. This is not unique to him in *Baldur's Gate 3* – all characters can have relationships with avatars of any gender, and options beyond the binary genders are available in the avatar creator (Kougioumtzoglou, Antonakis and Theodoropoulos 2025, 13). Yet what is specific to Astarion is that he is canonically queer (Kougioumtzoglou, Antonakis and Theodoropoulos 2025, 15); it is mentioned that he has slept with men before (in Act 3, we meet Sebastian, one of his victims, who says Astarion was his first kiss). He is also notably androgynous in appearance and presentation. This aspect of his identity further underlines his vampiric character, as vampire characters have often been used in media to explore different facets of identity (George and Hughes 2013, 4).

All connections to the topics of sexuality are likely not accidental – vampires have always been creatures that must be analysed in relation to sex. In popular culture, vampires attack their victims by sucking their blood, which is certainly their way of having sexual intercourse (Carter 1997, 28), as it involves penetration of the erogenous zone to satisfy a primal need. This image was often used as a metaphor for intercourse at a time when sexual imagery could not be portrayed in the media (Dresser 1989, 151–152). While the sexual connotations of vampires in Victorian culture were associated with something “violent, brutal, intriguingly evil” and as an “escape from many of the sexual and psychic restraints prevalent in Victorian culture” (Demetrakopoulos 1997, 106), Astarion is the opposite. His story is about sexual abuse, but also sexual liberation, and none of it is presented or perceived as shameful. He speaks very openly about all the issues and what he has experienced, and none of the characters judge him for it. Even though, as a vampire, he is a violent predator, he is never presented as such in a sexual sense – on the contrary, his narrative is all about consent, establishing sexual boundaries, and learning how to enjoy sex once again, uncompromisingly and on one’s own terms.

Another aspect in which Astarion perfectly fits the typical conception of a vampire is his personality as a Byronic hero. On the most obvious level, this is evident in his entire act – his aristocratic demeanour, manners, mood swings, sarcasm and dark humour, flirtatious interactions, fussiness, and so on. As with a true Byronic hero, this proves to be a façade for the deeper inner life Astarion possesses. Once the player reaches a certain level of relationship with Astarion, a “confession scene” unfolds in which his vulnerability is clearly revealed; this is the moment when Astarion admits his love for the protagonist and their romantic relationship

can begin<sup>9</sup>. Even though he is one of the most evil-leaning companions, through deeper interaction players begin to see him as a true anti-hero, saving the world and fighting evil, something that even surprises him (“You know, I never pictured myself as a hero. Never thought I’d be the one they toast for saving so many lives”).

When diving deeper into the analysis of the Byronic vampire, Hallab writes:

The vampire, both human and demon, is torn, like Byron’s Manfred, between lofty aspirations undercut by degrading bestial needs, amazing powers constrained by trivial inconveniences and limitations. (Hallab 2009, 77)

This is particularly true for Astarion, as the core of his inner conflict and personal quest lies in his torment between the desire to ascend and wield unimaginable power, and the wish to become a better person, confronting his trauma with the protagonist’s help. Astarion possesses both human and demonic aspects. It is up to the player to guide him either towards fully embracing his humanity, embodying the Byronic anti-hero trope, or becoming a complete vampiric monster, like his predecessors in Gothic literature. While vampires are already seen as Others, the Ascended version of Astarion pushes this trope to the extreme, reaching the full potential of monstrosity and “otherness”. Dichotomies in vampire fiction have been explored through various storylines and characters; in *Dracula*, these binaries are portrayed through the female characters Mina and Lucy, who both have a certain connection to Dracula himself. While Mina longs for normality and represents the choice of life, managing to break free from Dracula and his powers, Lucy finds the count fascinating and romantic, thus representing death and is punished by being turned into a vampire and staked (Baker 2021, 211).

Finally, regarding vampire archetypes in the Dungeons & Dragons universe, Astarion does break new ground: some changes are attributed to the tadpole, so he is no longer controlled by Cazador and can spend time in the sun. However, according to Dungeons & Dragons lore, neither vampires nor vampire spawn are supposed to be capable of feeling emotions (Wizards RPG Team 2014, 295–298), which is clearly not the case for Astarion. Fans have noted that traditional conceptions have been altered specifically for *Baldur’s Gate 3* to make Astarion a more compelling character<sup>10</sup>. This may seem a simple change, yet it is one that could potentially transform the portrayal of vampires for future generations of Dungeons & Dragons players. The tadpole plot has already been used to “tone down” typical aspects of vampirism for gameplay purposes, as the gaming experience would be severely limited if the player could use Astarion only at night.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV2eBX1KH8>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/BaldursGate3/comments/166rukq/question\\_about\\_vampirism\\_and\\_lore\\_re\\_astarion/](https://www.reddit.com/r/BaldursGate3/comments/166rukq/question_about_vampirism_and_lore_re_astarion/) and [https://www.reddit.com/r/BaldursGate3/comments/1anr0r6/can\\_spawn\\_astarion\\_feel\\_experience\\_love/](https://www.reddit.com/r/BaldursGate3/comments/1anr0r6/can_spawn_astarion_feel_experience_love/)

Astarion's fight for bodily autonomy, his desire for freedom from Cazador and vampirism, his vulnerability, and his journey to overcome trauma are all factors that set him apart from early Gothic vampire figures and other Dungeons & Dragons vampires. He represents a new kind of self-aware vampire seeking spiritual freedom, a theme that has only recently become central in vampire narratives (Baker 2021, 216). While recent vampire stories are moving away from traditional patterns, exploring love stories, romantic interactions, and power dynamics in romance (Łuksza 2015, 230), the plot of *Baldur's Gate 3* is not centred on these themes. Players may choose to include romance in Astarion's story, and it can certainly contribute to his character development, but his narrative is primarily about self-development, the pursuit of agency, and healing from personal trauma, while also (inevitably) saving the world with his new-found friends.

Representation in media typically operates through certain stereotypes that must be continually reinforced; these contain inherent tensions, raising questions about the meanings of sexuality, race, gender, and so on (Shaw 2014, 20). Yet, the vampire trope is a well-established stereotype that already carries specific values and expectations for the audience. When we encounter Astarion as a vampire, we already anticipate a particular kind of otherness, charm, attractiveness, dark backstory, and sexual allure. However, this analysis demonstrates that the development of his character goes beyond the previous limitations of the trope, building upon it and becoming essential to the player's experience, as will be shown through informants' responses in further research.

## Research Methodology

### *Video Game Research Methodology*

We are finally reaching the stage where digital anthropology is recognised as a legitimate field of study, but many questions remain regarding its methodological aspects. When the topic of this paper was first considered, the approach to the virtual spaces of video games was to “draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices”, and players were seen as “people within virtual worlds [who] perform and cycle through different roles and identities” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 1). Therefore, the focus is on the intertwining of virtual and analogue (for lack of a better word) representations of the vampire, how the player's experiences shape the game, and how the game, in turn, shapes the player's experience.

The research was conducted qualitatively, following established anthropological methodology of participant observation, adapted to a video game context, as is appropriate when exploring virtual communities (Boellstorff et al.

2012, 72). Emphasis was placed on participation, which has been shown to be the only legitimate research method for studies set in virtual worlds (Gavrilović 2016, 32). This approach was necessary to map the complexity of players' feelings towards the game and its characters (especially Astarion), as highlighted and further explored in the interviews. The researcher's own involvement in this type of fieldwork can be challenging, but participation can greatly help to break down many of the barriers between the researcher and the participants, as Shaw noted when analysing video game topics. By playing the game myself, I was able to identify the key points of the story and Astarion's development, and then ask informants specifically about them. As with Shaw's experience in her research (Shaw 2014, 51), connecting with the fans also proved crucial, as they saw me as a fellow fan who understood their appreciation for the game, rather than as an "outsider" merely observing them.

The timeframe for the research includes playing the game, participating in fan activities, and interviewing players. Overall, the process has lasted for two years; I began playing the game and observing online communities in February 2024. I have spent around 300 hours playing *Baldur's Gate 3*, both in single-player and multiplayer modes. During this time, I started five different play-throughs as five different characters and have fully completed the game. The interviews were conducted in May, June, and July 2024. My participation in online communities began in May 2024 and has continued since then. As *Baldur's Gate 3* is an RPG with many possible pathways to the end, it is important to note that some of my characters engaged in a romance with Astarion. This allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of his storyline and character, as well as the player's involvement in his character development, which is one of the main topics of this work. I have followed both routes of his storyline (Spawn and Ascended) and have frequently reloaded the game to try other options and fully explore the branching scenarios.

The main focus of this work is the fan reception of the character; as mentioned, the research takes into account online spaces where fans share their experiences. For around two years, I have followed a large number of online fan communities, which are significant additions to what fans could previously experience only in physical fan clubs – various ways of actively engaging with their favourite media (Bacon–Smith 1992, 16–17). I have been active on several subreddits focused on the game: the main *Baldur's Gate 3* subreddit (r/BaldursGate3), the meme and joke subreddit (r/okbuddybaldur), the subreddit dedicated to Astarion (r/OnlyFangsbg3), and the subreddit specifically for Ascended Astarion (r/EvilAscendedOnlyFangs). I have also followed relevant Facebook groups and joined two Discord servers that discuss Astarion (one of which focuses on fanfiction about the character). I have not been merely a passive observer (or, as it is called in internet slang, a lurker), but have actively participated by commenting, discussing, and creating memes.

All of this is necessary in this type of research to participate fully, alongside observation, in the anthropological and ethnographic sense. Using these methods, I was able to realise the extent of Astarion's popularity, understand relevant fan theories, and estimate the fan-favourite parts of his story, which later helped me shape the questionnaire. I also managed to learn the fandom language, codes, and themes used by the fans (Bacon-Smith 1992, 300). This concerns not only the terminology of the fantasy world that appears in the game, but also very specific fan ideas and categorisations. For example, to understand the name of the subreddit, OnlyFangs, I had to know it is a wordplay on OnlyFans, an online platform used by (usually adult) performers and creators, which was coined by Larian Studios in one of the promotional videos<sup>11</sup>. This promo features Astarion, who supposedly found fan art featuring himself and decided to launch OnlyFangs, "your number one exclusive unrated vampire spawn content". The platform itself does not exist, but this video has since remained an inside joke for Astarion fans.

### *Interviews and Methodology*

To obtain a clearer and more reliable understanding of Astarion's appeal to players, the research included interviews with informants who have played the game. These were in-depth, semi-structured interviews, based on pre-prepared questions but adapted according to the participants' responses. This included adding sub-questions, exploring certain topics in greater depth, or omitting questions if the informant had already addressed them. Some informants were approached directly if I knew they liked the game and the character, but most were recruited through posts in online communities requesting assistance with the ongoing research.

The posts have received about 70 replies; I have contacted approximately 40 fans, starting with those who responded first. Only some of them replied, and a few have withdrawn due to scheduling conflicts, usually because of time-zone differences. When contacting potential informants, I have tried to consider their cultural and national backgrounds to represent a variety of views, but none of the Asian or African fans have responded to interview requests. In total, 15 interviews have been completed – 13 via video call and 2 via email. At this point, the informants' responses began to repeat previous ones, so I did not contact any more fans.

All interviews were conducted in English; for some informants, it was their second language, but all were reasonably proficient. For research purposes, I decided to interview only female and non-binary players. Twelve informants identify as women, one as a demi-woman, and two as non-binary. All but one

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsBqPX03Vv8>

of the informants are from North America and Europe, with the remaining participant from Chile in South America. Their ages range from 23 to 55.

Regarding educational achievement and employment, eleven informants are employed and have completed higher education – one of whom is also studying for a second degree. One informant both works and studies, and one is a full-time student (PhD candidate). Two are unemployed – one described herself as a “stay-at-home mum” and the other usually works in customer support and is currently seeking a job.

All interviews began with questions about the informants (name, age, occupation, nationality, and gender), as well as their history of playing video games and Dungeons & Dragons. Subsequently, the questions focused on their experience of playing *Baldur's Gate 3*: when they started playing, how many hours of gameplay they have, who their avatar characters are, and which characters they romanced. The interviews then explored the players' relationship with Astarion in particular. The questions on this subject were: “What drew you to him as a character?”, “What are some of the qualities of Astarion as a character that you specifically like?”, “What are your favourite Astarion scenes or lines?”, “How do you prefer to play out his story?”, and “Did you connect to him as a character?”. Particularly important for this research was the question about whether players usually like similar characters – vampires, morally complex characters, Byronic heroes, etc. If they did, we explored further the reasons why and specific instances.

The next part of the interview concerned whether players would ascend Astarion or keep him as a Spawn, their reasons for this choice, and what specifically connected them to this route. At the end, I asked questions about the fandom: how active they are, whether they exchange ideas about Astarion with other fans, and which fandom theories they do not agree with or find surprising. The final question was about their personal view on why Astarion is actually popular, and why they think non-males are in particular are drawn to him.

## Analysis of the Interviews

### *I can fix him*

When asked whether they are usually drawn to vampire characters, several informants responded that they are. Defne (23, female, pharmacy student from Turkey) says, “I always, like, had a thing for vampires,” and mentions various shows and films she enjoyed that feature vampires (*Castlevania*, *Twilight*, *Hellsing*, etc.). Luise (33, female, veterinary nurse from Denmark) said, “I always had a thing for British, bleach-blond, bratty, little bit sarcastic... you know, Spike from *Buffy*,” directly referencing a character from the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, another iconic vampire portrayed as a sympathetic “Byronic

outcast” (Williamson 2005, 295). Sara (55, female, attorney from the USA) did not become interested in Astarion as a character until her first play-through, but she admits he caught her attention precisely because he was a vampire, and she has always been fascinated by them.

These informants are particularly drawn to the aspects of vampirism in Astarion, especially those where he fully embodies the trope. Oni (29, demi-woman, quality analyst for a call centre from the USA) passionately admits, “I have always been weak – and I mean *weak* – when it comes to vampires.” She thought she had moved past her obsession before falling for Astarion and his vampiric qualities. Defne admits she likes vampires because “I am a little bit of an ‘Oh my god, I can fix him’ kind of girlie,” meaning she recognises his “monstrosity” but wants to participate in the game to change him. Eloise (28, operating department practitioner from the UK) similarly says that the love women show for Astarion “is kind of an ‘I can fix him’ kind of thing.” Juri (51, non-binary, freelance writer and editor from Germany) may not have strong feelings towards vampires, but explains that players like Astarion because they “already liked *Twilight* with the whole ‘I can fix him’ trope.”

In the historical overview of vampire characters, we saw that this attraction is not new and has been explored before. As research suggests, the most basic allure arises from the bite metaphor and the sexual connotation of the act, as well as its intimacy – encompassing both the sacred and profane aspects of the ritual (Dresser 1989, 157–8). However, some people attracted to vampire characters also mention the allure of the unattainability of the worldly gentleman (Dresser 1989, 149), as well as power and their own desire for it (Dresser 1989, 155–6). There is also an element of admiration for rebelliousness and defiance of the laws of nature (Hallab 2009, 64). The frequently mentioned “I can fix him” angle is certainly linked to fans sympathising with the unfortunate state of tortured creatures and wishing to comfort and care for them (Dresser 1989, 150) – something informants definitely expressed in interviews regarding Astarion.

Some fans said they do not find this aspect of Astarion’s character crucial. Claire (27, female, health plan coordinator from the USA) is the opposite of Defne and Eloise, saying she has “never been drawn to the bad boy ‘I can fix him’ type” and would usually choose selfless, good characters over anti-heroes as her favourites. For Nepharys (34, female, researcher from France), it even seemed humiliating to like a vampire. “Really? Again? What am I, 15?” she laughed during the interview. Maria (37, female, translator from Chile) says she is usually drawn to other types of characters who are certainly much kinder than Astarion, citing *Baldur’s Gate 3* characters Gale and Karlach as examples. Bees (37, non-binary, unemployed from the USA) is not usually attracted to characters physically similar to Astarion: “My usual type is big, beefy, kind, and also kind of stupid. I like the himbos and the idiots, usually. So me falling for the shorter, slender, traumatised, sarcastic asshole is very different for me”.

*Byronic Vampire*  
– *Mannered, Androgynous and Queer-coded*

Except for Claire, Bees, and Maria, for whom this type of character is not usually attractive, other informants cite various traits associated with the trope of the Byronic hero. As vampires have often been portrayed as such characters, it is clear that players are drawn to traditionally vampiric traits, even when they do not recognise them as such. Kathy (34, female, office worker from the USA) says: “Yea, he’s the vampire and it’s pretty hot, but that’s not what initially drew me to him. What drew me to him was that I love a lovable rogue,” referring to both his character and his class in the game. Elizabeth (44, female, stay-at-home mum from the USA) explicitly cited the Byronic hero trope as her favourite: “I am an absolute sucker for a Byronic hero. I like my men morally grey, leaning toward the dark. I like them broken and tragic as well. It was like Astarion was designed in a lab just to appeal to me.” Nepharys says she has a thing for “seductive, refined, intelligent” characters – all common traits of this trope. Tilde (23, female, IT worker from Sweden) compares him to a few similar characters she likes and describes him as a “morally grey” character who is “trying to be a good guy, but it’s not really working out.”

More importantly, the appeal of the Byronic hero lies in what is beyond the façade – hidden vulnerability, complex emotions, a rich inner world, and the potential for redemption. This is what has attracted even Claire, Bees, and Maria. Bees says, “I adore his growth as a person. If he stays a spawn, it’s honestly beautiful and validating. He matures and embraces himself; he starts setting boundaries.” A similar sentiment is echoed by Maria, who also discusses Astarion’s complexity, how he “grows with the story” and has “multiple layers.” While they may not immediately express the love for the darker aspects of the character, they clearly point to his hidden depths, which are often inscribed in vampiric and Byronic characters. As Claire says, “The writing was so good and it really conveyed a very complex character who was dealing with a lot of issues” – a sentiment also expressed by Nadia (“writing is so great”), Defne (“only when I started playing I realised how deep it is”), Maria (“I actually like how he grows as a character, and multiple layers... he’s complex”), Kathy (“there’s so much depth to each character”), and Bees (“truly one of the greatest performances I’ve ever experienced”). The way fans describe the character’s evolution has truly left a mark on them – the fact that, even though he starts as a “little chaos goblin” (Maria), he is capable of change and there is more to him than meets the eye.

What also makes Astarion especially appealing to players are his mannerisms, androgynous qualities, and queerness – traits associated with both vampires and Byronic heroes. *Baldur’s Gate 3* in general has proved attrac-

tive to players because of the various ways it explores gender, sexuality, and queerness beyond usual norms, starting with avatar customisation options (Mc Grath 2025, 39–40). For informants, this is particularly crucial in relation to Astarion. Claire, Tilde, Maria, Luisa, and Zuzana (28, female graphic designer, Czechia) have all said that Astarion does not conform to what is “normally masculine” and does not display “toxic” or “traditional” masculine characteristics, describing him as “flamboyant”. Androgyny and vampires have been linked before, especially during the 1980s (Auerbach 1995, 190) and in Anne Rice’s famous portrayal of vampires, which she herself described as androgynous (Tomc 1997, 96–97). Queerness, also mentioned as an important topic in relation to vampires, is what interests Juri, who says that Astarion seems the most “queer-coded out of all the characters”. This is precisely why informants like Maria and Tilde, who identify as lesbian, still find him alluring even though he is male-presenting – for them, the attraction is not much of a sexual one, and is not in any way based in reality; his characteristics and the way he acts transgress gender norms, allowing non-male and queer players to identify with him more. Sara explains this further:

“I grew up in the middle of the United States, where, you know, men are men, they don’t have emotions. [...] I still think men are really trapped, at least in the United States, in this ‘men can’t have emotions’ and stuff. [...] How Astarion opens up [...] you just wanna cuddle him, kind of how you wanna cuddle yourself and make it all better.”

This is also where androgyny and Byronic traits intertwine; Byronic heroes are usually described as possessing more within themselves than they reveal. These inner emotions and vulnerabilities are also what informants linked to Astarion’s non-traditional masculinity and androgyny. Explaining why non-men fans like Astarion much more than men do, Elizabeth says, “Most of the straight males who are familiar with the character tend to dismiss him as ‘the gay twink vampire’, even if they are not being unkind. They have a lot of trouble seeing past the façade and take how he presents himself at face value.”

These combinations of vampiric and androgynous aspects on the surface, together with the underlying complexity and non-toxicity, are what make this allure unique to Astarion. As Nadia (34, female, scientist and medical student from Norway) explains, it is not about the vampire aspect but rather “chaotic, morally grey characters”, and that, ultimately, it does not really matter if he is a vampire at all: “The vampire story is a vehicle to represent trauma.” This truly resonates; as explained, there are several ways in which Astarion’s growth and history of abuse differ from Gothic vampires and vampires in the Dungeons & Dragons universe. While he still possesses various similar characteristics, the real depth comes from his backstory of sexual abuse.

*Unpacking the Trauma and Gender*

Vampirism as a “vehicle to represent trauma” is a sound formulation, as Astarion is bound to his trauma and sexual abuse just as vampires are bound to their monstrosity and the limitations of bodily hunger. We discussed how, throughout history, different versions of vampires have been used as vehicles to represent various themes and topics. The creators of *Baldur’s Gate 3* remained within the usual framework of these themes by addressing sexuality, but adopted a contemporary perspective – focusing on the topics of consent and abuse.

These are exactly what all the informants mentioned at some point during the interviews. Claire says the abuse storyline is part of the reason so many women and non-binary people are drawn to Astarion, as many people relate to what he has experienced. When asked if they identify with Astarion, some informants cited humour (Tilde), some queerness (Juri), but out of fifteen, eleven explicitly said they feel connected to the story of sexual abuse and trauma.

For Claire, what plays a significant role is that the story is “told really well in a really, as surprising as it is with vampirism, [it is a] realistic way of processing trauma”. She acknowledges how the story subverts the vampire trope from one about violation into one about being violated, and, in turn, about trauma and consent. Nepharys discusses the same point, explaining how Astarion can actually control his hunger and predatory vampiric urges, which is not typically expected from such a creature. Kathy recounts the story of her male friend, a fan of the game, who said he does not like Astarion exactly because he is a vampire, as they are known not to value consent – “but he does, it’s the important aspect of his character”. Two other informants who admit they have experienced traumatic and abusive situations say “the way they depicted his trauma – a lot of it is true of life and a lot of people identify with that” (Eloise), and that the way the story was told was “very powerful and compelling” (Claire). Tilde also connects with him and the way he processes all of the trauma, saying, “stuff has happened as with all the women”. She explains that while “he’s angry, he wants revenge, and everyone loves a good revenge story [...] at the same time he also tries to figure out how to live, which is nice, it’s not just about revenge.” In online communities, there are also a number of posts that reflect this aspect of the story and players’ connection to it. Some notice only partial identification with the character, but grew to understand their urges for vengeance in the wake of trauma only because of the character. One post, explaining how the story portrays true and complex trauma without a “fairytale ending”, ends with thanks to the creators and the actor, saying, “You’re changing the world for the better and making at least one person feel a little more understood.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/OnlyFangsb3/comments/18m9lhn/appreciation\\_post\\_seriousish/](https://www.reddit.com/r/OnlyFangsb3/comments/18m9lhn/appreciation_post_seriousish/)

Even though Astarion is male, his unique story of sexual trauma enables non-male players to identify with him more easily. This reflects the normal process of fluid gender identification, a topic previously explored in feminist theory of media and video games. Researchers have noted that cross-gender exploration expands the range of experiences available (Westecott 2018, 258) and provides a safe space for gender experimentation (Schleiner 2001, 223). Although the character is male, the way he is written and performed encourages players to look beyond this representation, enhancing the sense of intimacy, as “gender ambiguity offers a wide set of possible readings for the future gamer” (Westecott 2018, 263). As male sexual abuse stories are rarely portrayed in any media, female players may feel even more inclined to connect with it, as it breaks additional taboos – if men can speak about the issue, then others certainly can. The aspect of male identity also provides a sense of strength that comes with challenging typical gender norms. Additionally, as women are usually those who experience sexual abuse, male victims are often emasculated. While this might seem negative, it contributes to Astarion’s acceptance of his androgyny and queerness, which players perceive as making him more understanding of the female perspective. Because of this, fans tend to see him as safe and non-threatening, unlike typical male characters, especially vampires.

It was noted some time ago that, to make games more appealing to girls or, in this case, women, the idea is not only to create games specifically for them, but also to successfully develop traditional boys’ games by adding stronger female characters and complex characters to whom they feel drawn (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 29–31). Astarion exemplifies this, demonstrating that male characters can engage everyone when they are well-written and reflect problems people can relate to. This also shows that, for fans and players, the experience of the character is more important than just their identity (Shaw 2014, 87), and that players form stronger attachments to characters they care about, rather than simply those with whom they identify (Shaw 2014, 88). The informants do not identify with Astarion purely on a surface level by recognising their own traits in him; instead, they feel connected to him and his story, deeply sympathising with it and appreciating the uniqueness offered by the perspective of a male vampiric character, which subverts expectations.

### Ascended Astarion vs The Spawn

The central point of Astarion’s story is when the player must decide whether to let him Ascend or keep him as a spawn. Ten informants said they prefer to keep him as a spawn, mostly because of the reasons mentioned earlier – his complexity, vulnerability, subversion of expectations, and healing. For them,

this is the “healthy” ending. Luise, Eloise, and Nadia, who have all experienced abuse themselves, even find Ascended Astarion “triggering”, preferring to play out his story in a way that mirrors their own experiences after leaving abusive relationships.

The story of Ascended Astarion closely revisits the traditional 19th-century concepts of vampires – he is an evil, manipulative overlord who can no longer feel emotions. Consequently, the relationship between the protagonist and Ascended Astarion follows familiar tropes, where female characters (or male, if the player chooses) become passive victims under the spell and control of a predatory vampire (Łuksza 2015, 439). The game designers made a clear effort to depict this; when a player kisses Ascended Astarion, he may grab their neck or make them kneel before him. He repeatedly asserts that the player is “his” and vows to protect them while ruling with them at his side. This might suggest that those who enjoy this storyline are drawn to its abusive and anti-feminist elements (as most players romancing Astarion are non-male), a criticism echoed by some other players<sup>13</sup>. However, the game mechanics still allow players to make their own choices and create narratives they find appropriate, just as they would in their own lives, regardless of what the creators or other fans consider a “good” or “happy” ending for him (Gavrilović 2016, 41). Thus, some fans choose this option and have explained what they find appealing about it.

Those players who liked this story ending, both in interviews and online posts, say they are drawn to the variety and complexity of the character. For those who suffered abuse and prefer this ending, giving Astarion ultimate power after he kills his abuser feels liberating and therapeutic. It allows them to feel as if they have agency over their own story and are finally getting what Astarion wants – and also what *they* would want. This was Zuzana’s point and why she thinks Ascended Astarion simply “makes more sense”. Similarly, Oni says, “I like going through the story of him getting his life back from this motherfucker who took him literally from his life.” For her, it feels more authentic and as if he is becoming “his true self” once he ascends. Neither of them interpret his behaviour as inherently predatory, but rather as powerful and reclaiming. Eloise also prefers this ending, which she explains as follows:

“Having been in a fairly abusive relationship before, I think I feel a lot of anger towards him [the abuser] and towards myself as well – there was a lot of staying in that situation. There is something very appealing in that character having the opportunity to take all that power and say ‘Fuck you’. It is not necessarily the most morally happy ending, but I do think it’s very interesting and kind of empowering in a way.”

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/OnlyFangsbG3/comments/19e4127/its\\_really\\_triggering\\_when\\_people\\_try\\_to\\_justify/](https://www.reddit.com/r/OnlyFangsbG3/comments/19e4127/its_really_triggering_when_people_try_to_justify/)

Sexual abuse victims are often depicted as passive in the dichotomy – as those experiencing abuse, lacking agency. However, video games inherently place players in an active role, giving them agency over the story (Jennings 2018, 239). In the context of this research, this is significant, as such agency enables women and non-binary people to feel like active participants in Astarion's story and, by extension, in their own stories. By engaging with Astarion's narrative, informants participate in an "inventive process – a process of creating visual texts of the player's own" (Jennings 2018, 240).

While Nadia much preferred the spawn ending to the Ascended one, she has tried this path as well. It reminded her strongly of her abuser and their changes in behaviour, but as someone who was abused, she understood why Astarion would desire this power and wish to express his anger. "As a person, I identify with a character," she said, stating that playing out both endings helped her process her own trauma more than therapy. The Ascended Astarion represents the darkness and the choice of vampirism and monstrosity, but this occurs within the safe space of the game – the players know it is not real, so they can explore the fantasy of choosing an option that is not right, but is cathartic. This relates to the allure of power and control (Dresser 1989, 155–56), as well as the vampiric possibility of defying what seems natural (Hallab 2009, 65).

Fans understand that, in the "real world", it is healthier to heal from trauma and to renounce the idea of revenge. Most of them will not be able to get back at their abuser, and none expressed a need to hurt others. They know the morality in the game is not the same as in real life (Shaw 2014, 120–122), and for them it is more about the context and story than the realism of the representation (Shaw 2014, 188). In this way, fans of Ascended Astarion know this is "the bad ending", but they enjoy it for the context it provides in the story, as well as the release it brings. Critics might feel women romanticise Ascended Astarion just as we often hear that women simply like "bad boys", but it goes deeper than the simple appeal of darkness. It is a safe space where, without actually being hurt, they can experience the reality of darkness. Liking this is taboo – and expressing taboos is something the vampire trope has always excelled at.

Unlike those who feel the need to have an "I can fix him" relationship, those who like Ascended Astarion do not want to fix him – they want to accept that they cannot, and to embrace, from the security of their gaming chairs, the appealing aspects of this. Eloise sums it up perfectly, saying:

"Maybe part of it is because I have been with someone before that wasn't very nice, and I spent years thinking it would get better and that there was something I could do to make it better, and you know, there wasn't anything I could do because it wasn't me, I wasn't the problem. So, I guess maybe I am a little bit more accepting, 'You're a bad guy, maybe that's just how you are'."

## Conclusion

Interviews confirm that vampire characters remain popular – they may be more sympathetic, but they are still as alluring to fans as ever. We have explained that Astarion’s vampiric charm, sexuality, and non-traditional masculinity are all closely linked to the concept of vampires in Western media culture. Thus, Astarion is an excellent embodiment of the Byronic hero: moody, dark, sarcastic, romantic, and affectionate, all at once.

But there is much more to Astarion than simply vampirism. When asked about their favourite scenes or moments from his story, none of the informants mentioned the bite scene, which is the most explicit demonstration of his vampiric side. Instead, they referred to his vulnerability and the confession scene in Act 2, which we have discussed, among other similar examples. This is the beauty of the vampire character: “he is not simplified, mindless destruction like a giant bug or an alien ‘Thing’ or even a vast amorphous Satan so often overcharged with whatever we fear or hate” (Hallab 2009, 133); there is much more complexity to him, so that even fans who do not see the appeal in vampires as creatures can find something attractive in the character.

In the cited responses from informants, we see how the story of sexual abuse has had a significant impact on players. This aspect has not previously been associated with a vampiric narrative, but through this research we can deduce that, for the character of Astarion, it was essential to merge these two elements. If he were only portraying a vampiric character or a character with trauma from abuse, his appeal would not be as great. Instead, as cited, we have “vampirism as a vehicle” – a familiar and powerful cultural icon from which we expect a Byronic hero, but which also carries the compelling narrative of sexuality. In Victorian times, the main topic may have been female sexuality and its perceived perversity, but in the contemporary era, discussions focus on sexual abuse, boundaries, and consent. As such, a vampire is the perfect canvas. While the Gothic literary character Carmilla may have shocked Victorians with her lesbian openness, Astarion surprises players with his story of male sexual abuse, a subject largely unaddressed until now. This not only helps women and non-binary people who have experienced sexual abuse feel seen and comforted, but also allows them to feel safe hearing a male character speak about this issue.

Astarion is neither a saint nor a perfect victim; his trickster nature and vampirism remind players that everyone, including themselves, deserves healing, redemption, and safety. This is a major part of his appeal as a character and explains why the vampire endures: “He is more like us than the sinless Jesus ever could be. For he is a complex personality in conflict with his own divided condition and his place in a confusing cosmos” (Hallab 2009, 133). In a sense, his vampirism represents the story of all humans who are not, and never will be, perfect.

Finally, video games as a medium allow for narrative choices that are not possible in other media. Fans can choose how to end Astarion's story as they see fit – they can help him heal and grow, or can vicariously live a revenge fantasy through him. Agency in this narrative goes deeper than most games as it fully changes Astarion's story and life. It gives power to those who are usually oppressed, “reminds those who are marginalised how to act” (Chess 2020, 102), and empowers them (Chess 2020, 105). The way the character is written, as well as his vampire trope, influences players and encourages them to learn through his experience while simultaneously creating their own meanings (Jennings 2018, 245). This makes female players feel like heroes (or heroines) who have a real impact on someone's story and development. Identification with Astarion or his vampire characteristics (such as moodiness, morally grey choices, or androgyny) does occur, but it is not as crucial as the actions the informants feel they can take and the influence they have over how the story unfolds. This is one of the main aspects that distinguishes video games as a medium (Shaw 2014, 99–100), and that “immersion rather than identification is a more fruitful focus” (Shaw 2014, 101).

Vampire media has often been criticised for being anti-feminist, featuring passive female characters, but some of it also “promotes female independence and discourages women from building not only their professional, but also personal and sexual lives on traditional gender roles” (Łuksza 2015, 133). It is not simply about fixing a man (as we see with Ascended Astarion, where some players choose to make him worse); it is about having agency in the story of healing, about discussing survival after abuse, and about experiencing the story not only alongside Astarion, but also through him and his vampiric nature, which allows for imperfection and power.

#### **Author Declaration of Originality and AI Use**

I confirm that the submitted article is the result of the author's original and independent academic work, based on my own intellectual effort, analysis, and interpretation.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used the AI tool Insta-Text to assist with editing for improved grammar and readability. The author has reviewed and revised all outputs generated by this tool and assumes full responsibility for the final content of the work.

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*Žene koje vole vampire:*

*Analiza popularnosti lika Astariona iz video-igara  
Baldur's Gate 3 među igračima koji nisu muškarci*

Iako je evidentno da danas sve više žena igra video igre svih žanrova, video igre se u javnom diskursu često tretiraju kao medij isključivo za muškarce. U skladu sa ovim stereotipom, likovi iz video igrara su najčešće napravljeni upravo po ukusu muškaraca. Međutim, kada je 2023. izašla video igra *Baldur's Gate 3* (treći deo sada već legendarne franšize) bilo je evidentno da je lik pod imenom Astarion postao izuzetno popularan među ženskim igračima – brojni fanovii u online zajednicama su izražavali koliko im se lik dopada, kreirajući značajan broj fan-medija o njemu. Interesantan aspekt je to da je Astarion predstavljen kao vampir, biće koje je izuzetno bitno u popularnoj kulturi još od 19. veka. Igranjem igrice se može uvideti da je Astarionova priča vrlo razrađena i povezana sa bitnim temama seksualnog nasilja i telesne autonomije. S obzirom da su priče o muškom seksualnom nasilju retke, a još ređe kad je reč o likovima vampira (koji su neretko prikazani kao monstumi i predatori koji vrše zlostavljanje), istraživanje ulazi u analizu toga na koji način je ovaj narativ povezo sa arhetipom, te kako se oni uklapaju jedan u drugog kroz utvrđene teme seksualnosti. Na osnovu toga dalje se ulazi u pregled toga zašto se upravo ovakav lik sviđa fanovima, koliko ulogu u tome igra sam vampir, a koliko je reč o narrative koji u obzir uzima ženska iskustva traume. Analizirajući intervju sa ženskim i ne-binarnim fanovima igrice, rad nudi odgovor šta to lik Astariona čini takvim da se on uklapa u žensku perspektivu, kao i to zbog čega to ima veze sa njegovim vampirskim odlikama. Konačna ideja je da arhetip vampira sa sobom nosi poznate i već popularne metafore seksualnosti koje igrice dalje prilagođava relevantnim temama, dok medijum video igre i sama kompleksnost narativa nude ne-muškim igračima sredstvo i agens pomoću kojeg oni/r mogu da se povežu sa likom i osete aktivnim delom narativa o seksualnom zlostavljanju, odnosno nečemu što je često deo njihovog iskustva.

**Ključne reči:** video igre, vampiri, ženska perspektiva, popularna kultura, digitalna antropologija, *Baldur's Gate 3*

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