

Elvia Wilk

# Ask Before You Bite

01/11

Mutual love is often thought of as mutual recognition: I see you for who you are and you see me back. But recognition is inevitably also a naming, a fixing, a pinning down. In order to recognize, you have to categorize, and categories are notoriously inflexible. Recognition, if understood as a projection that disallows the evolution of self and identity, becomes restrictive rather than liberating. However inadvertently, the recognition required for mutual love can easily slip into a form of control.

Jan Verwoert describes the slippage between love-as-recognition and love-as-control in an essay called “Masters and Servants or Lovers: On Love as a Way to Not Recognize the Other.” He writes,

To love the other, we believe, is the most intimate way to recognize the other, to get to know and understand who he or she really is ... But this is what power is about as well, when it manifests itself in structures of domination. Modern regimes of power are built on the intimate knowledge of who the people are they dominate. Surveillance, espionage, and market research are techniques of recognition ... Consequently, radical love would be a love that goes beyond recognition, that is a love in which the lovers would renounce their desire to fully grasp the identity of the other and no longer insist on understanding who the other is.<sup>1</sup>

Allucquère Rosanne Stone expresses similar ideas about the potential violence of singular naming as a form of recognition in an essay called “Identity in Oshkosh.” The essay revolves around a 1990 court case resulting from a woman with multiple personality disorder accusing a man of rape. The judge and jury struggled to account for the presence of multiple personalities, each with their own backstories, genders, names, and identities, all testifying on the stand – much less were they able determine whether it mattered that only one personality had been “present” for the attack. Stone writes,

Retaining the same name throughout life is part of an evolving strategy of producing particular kinds of subjects. In order to stabilize a name in such a way that it becomes a permanent descriptor, its function must either be split off from the self, or else the self must acquire a species of obduracy and permanence to match that of the name. In this manner a permanent name facilitates control; enhances interchangeability ... you become the

e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 [Elvia Wilk](#)  
[Ask Before You Bite](#)



Film still of the movie *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971) by director Jesús Franco.

generic identity that the institutional descriptors allow.<sup>2</sup>

So how might one learn to love another without reducing the other to recognizability, without fixing the other to a single unchangeable name?

Or should it go the other way around: must the lover consent to being forever misrecognized? Is allowing oneself to be transfixed a fundamental part of loving and being loved?

If you're looking for a metaphor for the complexities of naming, recognition, consent, and control within love relationships, look no further than the vampire bite. In this case, not the bite that kills, that bleeds the other dry, but the bite that transforms the bitten into another vampire. Such a transformational bite is an act of extreme intimacy entwined with extreme violence. It is ultimate pain as ultimate pleasure. It is an exchange of fluids leading to eternal life, a master-servant dialectic that negates itself upon completion, an exercise of unequal power that results in mutual empowerment. In some stories, the vampire coerces the unknowing victim to transform. In others, the knowing victim desires and consents to the transformation. But most often, the two are hard to distinguish. After all, who can really understand what such a radical transformation is like before it happens? Is there not always an element of coercion when one side possesses so much more power? Whether there can ever be a truly consensual bite is precisely what is at stake when the skin breaks.

### World of Darkness

In 2017, Berlin hosted the first International World of Darkness Convention. World of Darkness (WoD) is a decades-old gaming franchise that took off in the US in the 1980s and '90s with tabletop role-playing games, the most popular of which was called *Vampire: The Masquerade*. The series included card games and dice games with narratives based on mythical creatures, especially vampires. The games' popularity might be attributed to the flexibility of the storylines and the freedom players had to develop characters and relationships, while still maintaining the win/lose fun of a traditional points-based system.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, *Vampire: The Masquerade* evolved into a video game, as well as a live-action role-playing game, or "larp."

What is larp? There are many answers, none of them complete, because the form has multiple and divergent histories. A shorthand description might be "improvisational theater without an audience." Players take on characters, either assigned or developed by them, and inhabit

those roles within the parameters of a designed world. They collaboratively play out a story that each player contributes to over the course of a set period of time. Plotlines can be sketched out or even heavily planned before gameplay begins, but the fun is in the improvisation in the moment. The absence of an audience is crucial for larp purists; it's what distinguishes role-playing from both theater and performance art. You aren't doing it for someone watching, you're doing it for yourself and your fellow players. While a lot of writing may go into designing a larp – rule books can be a few sentences or a hundred pages – and larpers often document games post facto, the larp itself occurs within the "magic circle," or "the membrane that encloses virtual worlds."<sup>4</sup>

Larp cultures are manifold and have evolved from a variety of practices, including tabletop gaming and video gaming but also historical reenactment, method acting, psychodrama, Gestalt therapy, and war games. If you've heard of larp before, you're probably thinking of geeks in the forest bashing each other with padded swords, and you aren't wrong; that's one branch of larp practice termed "boffering." Bofferfing came partly out of Dungeons-and-Dragons culture decades ago, and a lot of those games are based on fantasy universes from popular culture like *The Lord of the Rings*. They are usually structured around a quest to be won or lost; there are point systems and micro-economies; they tend to be rife with clichés when it comes to sex, gender, and race (with some surprising exceptions).

The traditional game structure of boffering is iterative, that is, the rules are the same each time, and the players can return to play the same characters month after month, year after year. It's a parallel and static universe where an elf is always an elf, a wizard is always a wizard. World of Darkness games began as rather traditional larps, but by the mid-2010s some organizers had begun morphing them to incorporate elements of a different game structure.<sup>5</sup> This structure is often termed "Nordic larp," for its geographical origins, although it's sometimes called "progressive larp" (or in French, "*romanesque*," meaning "novel-esque"). Nordic larp is a kind of play where each game is designed to address a specific set of questions for a specific set of people. While any game can be played repeatedly by different groups, its rules can evolve each time and can be modified to suit the players and the situation. Nordic larps focus on plotlines, relationships, cultures, and experiences rather than necessarily winning and losing. The intention is psychological challenge, creative experimentation, physical boundary testing, and intellectual exchange, as opposed to racking up

03/11

e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 [Elvia Wilk](#)  
Ask Before You Bite

04/11



Still of the American pre-Code vampire-horror film movie *Dracula* (1931), directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi and Helen Chandler.

05/11



Documentation of a nordic live-action vampire role-playing game titled *End of the Line*. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen.

points by hitting someone else on the head – though plenty of that exists too.

The invaluable 2010 *Nordic Larp* anthology presents a range of case studies, documented in stats, photography, and first-hand accounts by participants and organizers (the role of documentation within larp is controversial, given that the magic circle is premised on privacy).<sup>6</sup> The first larp chronicled in the anthology is the massive *Trenne Byar*, subtitled by the authors as “The Woodstock of Nordic larp.” During this week-long event in the Swedish countryside in 1994, a thousand people joined to play medieval villagers, developing a civilization from the ground up. Another historically instantiated, smaller-scale role-playing is the five-day, 120-player *Once Upon A Time*, which first took place near Oslo in 2005 but was set in a fictional Wyoming town in 1887. The kitschy Western saloon-and-brothel backdrop allowed players to both inhabit their favorite stereotypes and bend them; many players were given characters with different gender identities than their own.

Nostalgic tropes are set aside in favor of contemporary satire in the Norwegian larp *PanoptiCorp*, first played in 2003. “PanoptiCorp” is the name of a fictional ad company where the “employees” – twenty-five players, plus eight organizers and fifteen drop-in players (extras) – were stuck in an office together for seventy-two hours and forced to learn a new corporate lingo and constantly rate each other’s performances. The organizers intended for the experience to be mentally harrowing (one player who worked in corporate media said the game “comes back to haunt me”), but found that too many people were able to retain an “ironic distance.” Real-world politics without much ironic distance are the focus of *Europa*, a four-day, forty-player Norwegian larp first played in 2001.<sup>7</sup> A group of players from the Nordic countries and Russia maintained their real-world nationalities and native languages in character; the Russian characters played the “natives” of a country in which the others were seeking asylum through an opaque bureaucratic process.

Other larps extrapolate into future dystopia: a well-known game called *Mad About the Boy*, first run in 2010 and repeated many times since, imagines a global disaster where all the men have died and women are faced with rebuilding society. Some games take place in no time and no place. *Luminescence*, a well-known example from Finland (2004), occupied a room where players could wade through hundreds of kilos of white flour, meant as a metaphor for coping with cancer. Larps like this can be nonverbal, with gestural communication or none at all. In 2018 I played a “blackbox larp” – just a room with no set design or costumes – called *We Are One*,

where players were separated into two groups of prelinguistic beings who could only make one of two vowel sounds. It took two hours for us to learn to communicate.<sup>8</sup>

### The Bite

Berlin’s 2017 WoD convention was a weekend-long affair based in a hotel/convention center, which hosted all-day tabletop games, vampire-tooth fittings, book signings, keynotes, and panel discussions. Larps were held at different venues across the city (one took place across bars and clubs where non-playing partyers were often none the wiser). I requested a comp ticket as a journalist for a larp called *End of the Line*, which I learned was being run by a few well-known Nordic larp designers.<sup>9</sup> By speaking with them before and after the game, I learned that they were finding ways to embed the more traditional vampire play within a progressive framework, forging safer spaces for transgressive experiments through principles of ethical interaction design. I was told that I was welcome to observe, but that to observe I would have to participate.

A few weeks before the larp, I received an email with two PowerPoint presentations attached, one explaining the rules of the game and the details of the world, and another describing the character I was supposed to adopt: Margaret Olivier, real estate entrepreneur, TV personality, and mortal. Margaret had social and familial affiliations. I received links to Facebook groups where Margaret and her acquaintances – and also I and the fellow players – could get to know each other before meeting. We were informed that participation in the six-hour larp was only possible if we attended the mandatory four-hour preparatory workshop and hour-long post-larp debrief.

On the morning of the larp I pulled on pleather pants and a hot-pink club top and took the subway to a disused factory on the periphery of Berlin, which had been decorated to resemble a postindustrial night club in Bristol, UK. In between the workshop and the larp, all seventy players walked along the highway, in full costume, to have lunch at IKEA: planned social time during which we got to know each other and chat about the game over meatballs. (Lunchtime was not incidental; out-of-game relationship building is key to mutual accountability in-game.)

The pregame workshop began with typical warm-up theater exercises and get-to-know-you games, but quickly moved into a rehearsal of consent and safety tactics. These were based on a system of mechanics that have been developed over decades of progressive larping. In WoD, sex, violence, intoxication, and power games are built into the narratives – and negotiating the degree

06/11

e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 Elvia Wilk  
Ask Before You Bite



of reality with which these are simulated is a major part of the safety concern. *End of the Line* was explicitly 18+, because it would be up to us how much “actual” sex and violence to do.<sup>10</sup>

In *End of the Line*, negotiation of consent manifests in the recurring formal element of the vampire bite, which in vampire parlance is called “the embrace.” The vampire locks eyes with the mortal, putting the helpless – or knowing – victim into a kind of trance, before going fangs-deep. There are myriad ways to simulate a bite in-game. One way is to categorically decide before the game starts how the simulation should work. For instance, you can say “all biting happens in mid-air, no skin contact, no exceptions.” But in this run of *End of the Line*, bites were to be negotiated in a meta-space within game play. We were given a script for a planned exchange anytime our characters might be heading toward biting, sex, or violence, at which point we had to halt and enter the meta-realm where we could speak as players until reaching an agreement. The simulation of a bite could be as close to or as far from physical “reality” as the players chose, barring actual puncturing of the skin for legal reasons.

How do you prefer to be bitten? Light skin contact? Lick? Kiss? Hard bite? Fake blood?

Extremely detailed narration? Nod and handshake?

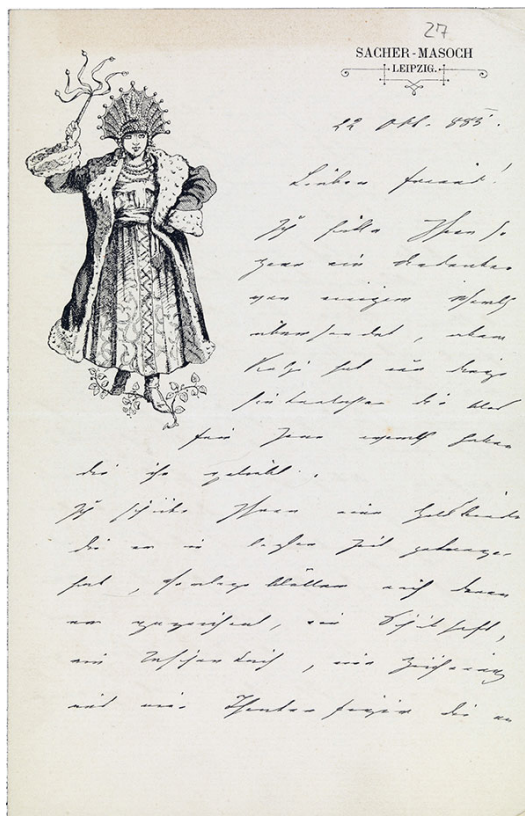
Consent-based negotiation is clearly relevant when it comes to physical boundaries, but it also helps safeguard psychological ones. If a *character* is the unknowing victim of a manipulative vampire, how can you be sure that the *player* is not being manipulated as well? What separates power play from power reality?

### Safe Emergency

A common complaint among American gamers is that Nordic larpers want to make gamer culture more politically correct. On the contrary, I heard one panel discussant at the WoD convention vehemently argue, “We’re making your culture less PC, you just have to ask before you do something now.”

Post-Gamergate, many gaming worlds woke up to the fact that the real-world structures upholding “virtual” gaming were also perpetuating real-world violence and discrimination; simulation and reality could no longer be treated as entirely distinct. This is something Nordic larpers have long understood. As larp designer Johanna Koljonen, who designed the consent mechanics for *End of the Line*, told me: “The minute you’re creating a world

07/11



Letter penned by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 1883. The author is known to have signed himself into slavery for a period of six months in a contract with Baroness Fanny Pistor. The term masochism derives from the authors' name. Photo: Wellcome Library MS. 6909 - L0072452.

08/11



Members of the Boston Direct Action Project dressed as vampires impersonate public relations associates of the World Bank during a protest in Washington, D.C., on April 15 and 16, 2005. Photo: Matt Osborn/CC-by-2.0.



to suit the participant, you have to treat the participants as humans, and there has to be a social contract. I don't know if traditional iterative structures demand a negotiation of social contract ... There's always a social contract [in a game] but in most cases, it's implicit." In relation to WoD, she says that "these more and more complex narrative games, whether digital, analog, or board games ... seem to be extremely suitable for our age, because they are so much about agency and power dynamics and complexity."<sup>11</sup>

Having safety mechanisms in place allows things to enter much more dangerous territory than they would if consent were taken for granted and not addressed. This regulation requires a constant conceptual separation between player and character, between self and performed identity, between reality and simulation, while acknowledging that they can never be fully teased apart. In the *End of the Line* workshop, women were instructed to wait five seconds before consenting to anything risky; it would be our inclination, the organizers said, to immediately say yes.

Scripting regulatory mechanisms for negotiating boundaries is not dissimilar to what happens in BDSM scenarios, where predefined safety constraints allow for greater freedom in the moment. When pleasure and pain are explicitly combined, or when power discrepancy is the source of the pleasure, the membrane around the magic circle has to be firmly drawn in advance: contracts, safe words, aftercare. Power roles can diverge widely from reality – everyone loves the cliché of the CEO crushed beneath the dominatrix's heel – but it's *a better reality*, because you get to choose your role; you get to consent to the dynamic.

Acting out fear or fantasy in a safe space can be cathartic, even therapeutic. For one, Gestalt therapy relies on manufacturing "safe emergencies" where clients might role-play a parent, a younger self, an imagined opponent, inhabiting facets of their subjectivities by adopting others. In a larp, players do this together. Negotiating a simulated experience with another person is a complicated conceptual act of mutual recognition, or maybe *unrecognition*. You are player and you are a character, and you'll be a different player and character next time.

The rather utopian goal of inhabiting multiple invented selves mirrors the hopes of many early internet users, whose creative role-playing in online text-based game worlds was made possible by their relative anonymity.<sup>12</sup> There was no expectation that users of Multiple User Domains (MUDs), Bulletin Board Services (BBSs), or Role-Playing Games (RPGs) would

represent themselves according to real names, ages, genders, races, abilities. In fact, in "Identity in Oshkosh," Stone proposed that the very existence of multiple personality disorder, which became a DSM-recognized disorder in 1980 (renamed as "dissociative identity disorder" in 1994), was due to the fracturing of virtual identity made possible by the early internet era. This new pathologized state could be seen as the posthumanist update of the previous era's favorite theoretical diagnosis, schizophrenia.

Of course, as the internet changed into a corporatized landscape, the fantasy of anonymity disintegrated. In today's internet your face is pinned to your real name, address, buying history. You're recognized for who you "are," and who you are is a particular overlap of consumer categories and market segments. Recognition down to the single pixel. In Stone's words: "You become the generic identity that the institutional descriptors allow." Those structures of recognition-as-domination work via coercion rather than consent. When they work best, you don't even know what you've been coerced into until long after the bite.

Unrecognizing one another in-game tends to change the way players think of themselves and their relationships out-of-game too. If you're in the business of inhabiting multiple identities and multiple social worlds, the conventions of your own identity and society reveal themselves as mutable. Over many decades, larpers have developed a keen understanding of how to engineer out-of-game relationships. As Koljonen describes it, "We realized that designing a fictional culture is the exact same skillset as designing a functioning real-world community."<sup>13</sup> Social engineering is a marketable skill with obvious commercial applications, from massive multiplayer games to interactive virtual reality experiences. Apparently larpers have been brought in to help Disney design an immersive *Star Wars* resort. Militaries, science departments, corporations, and governments have long asked game designers to invent scenarios to test how soldiers might cope with an IED explosion, how scientists might deal with an epidemic, how consumers might react to a product launch, or how prison guards might treat prisoners. Computer simulations can test a range of possible outcomes, but the human element can only be determined by involving humans.

### Bleed

"Bleed" is the name given by larpers to the crossover between player and character. Your real-life experience bleeds into the game, and what happens in the game likewise bleeds back into your real life. Players will inject themselves

into their characters; likewise, the experience of being in character will become part of your sense of self. This is why designated postgame debrief time is important, to ease the transition from one role to another.

Every larper knows that bleed is inevitable. The game happens in life, not outside of life; it starts long before you enter the larp and ends long after you leave it. While game bleed can cause problems when unmanaged, the experience of bleed – the blurring of the line between your self and your performed identity, between the narrative of your life and the narrative of the game, between power play and power reality – is the whole point of the larp. Acknowledging bleed is acknowledging the mutability of infinite possible selves, without fearing loss of the self among them.

“Eros is an issue of boundaries,” writes Anne Carson. “He exists because certain boundaries do ... But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh, and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.” Unrecognition is the acknowledgment of that interval: the gap, the inevitable boundary, the skin, the irreducible difference between. Performing the bite is acting out the desire to annihilate the boundary, while accepting the impossibility of resolution. The bite is one of love’s “tactics of imagination,” tactics that Carson writes are all aimed at resolving the “edge between two images that cannot merge into a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality – one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros.”<sup>14</sup>

Consent-based larp revives the hope of unrecognition, but not the kind premised on anonymity or enabled by technology. It is premised instead on the very old technology of emotional labor. Unrecognition IRL is a lot of work. Work towards an impossible goal – you can’t know every new iteration of self, yours or another’s. You can never dissolve the irreducible difference. You can only acknowledge the fact of constant transformation despite the appearance of constancy. Love is not anonymous, but neither is it fixed to a single name. Whereas a system of control desires to recognize you as a generic entity according to a single name, a system of mutual love recognizes you as wonderfully multiple – as endlessly specific.

x

A version of this essay was first given as a talk at the book launch for the e-flux reader *What’s Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?* in July 2017 at Miss Read fair, Berlin. Another version was given at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, in August 2018. Several similar

ideas were explored in the October 2017 essay “More than a Game” for *Frieze*. Thanks to Susan Ploetz for the introduction to larp, to Kaye Cain-Nielsen for the invitation, and to Brody Condon and Johanna Koljonen for the conversations.

10/11

e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 [Elvia Wilk](#)  
[Ask Before You Bite](#)

1  
Jan Verwoert, "Masters and Servants or Lovers: On Love as a Way to Not Recognize the Other," in *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want*, ed. Vanessa Ohlraun (Sternberg Press, 2010).

2  
Allucqu re Rosanne Stone, "Identity in Oshkosh," in *Posthuman Bodies*, eds. Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Indiana University Press, 1995).

3  
For an in-depth history of WoD, see the 2017 documentary *World of Darkness*  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6177752/>.

4  
This phrase describing the magic circle as a membrane is often circulated without attribution, but I believe its original usage is from Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

5  
The evolution of game worlds is led by players as much as by the official franchise. It's important to note that player communities adopt the rules of a game but develop their own in-game cultures and modes of play. Anyone could theoretically organize a game anywhere, so it's not possible to comprehensively track their individual evolutions.

6  
This is by no means the only larp anthology, but it is one of the most comprehensive regarding a specific time period of experimental but high-production larp design from the mid-90s to the late-2000s in the Nordic countries. *Nordic Larp*, eds. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola (F a Livia, 2010).

7  
*Europa* was the second in a series following *Amerika* (2000), which was designed according to a manifesto with aesthetic and functional rules for larp called "Dogma 99."

8  
See <https://alexandria.dk/en/data?scenarie=5431>.

9  
*End of the Line* was produced by Participation Design Agency for White Wolf Publishing. It was created by Bjarke Pedersen, Juhana Pettersson, and Martin Ericsson, with consent and calibration mechanics by Johanna Koljonen. The larp is based on *Vampire: The Masquerade* by White Wolf Publishing AB.

10  
Another way of thinking of what happens in-game is the diegetic versus the non-diegetic. If you need to take a break from a

scene because it's overwhelming, can your character think of an excuse to do so? Or do you need to "tap out" and exit as a player? Does day become night according to the real circadian rhythm or is it simulated at a different speed through light changes? Is the liquor you're drinking "real" or is it Kool-Aid?

11  
Interview with Johanna Koljonen, May 14, 2019, Berlin.

12  
A user of the popular multiple user domain LambdaMOO described the chat room as a place "where looks don't matter and only the best writers get laid."

13  
Interview with Johanna Koljonen, May 14, 2019, Berlin.

14  
Anne Carson, "What Does the Lover Want from Love?" in *Eros: The Bittersweet* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 30, 69.

11/11

e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 Elvia Wilk  
Ask Before You Bite