

The Larp Domino Effect

Sarah Lynne Bowman



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Abstract

This article discusses some of the pros and cons of this larp domino effect, in which content from one area of the game spreads throughout the fiction like a wildfire as the result of emergent play. In larps where the content is “seeded” by game masters through the character sheets or delivered via non-player characters throughout the larp, such a result may be desirable. But, in larps where a particular tone or theme is central, such emergent play can derail the emphasis of the design. In extreme cases, the larp domino effect can potentially upset or even trigger other players, if “surprise” content spreads throughout the larp without their consent.

The larp domino effect is neither positive nor negative at its core. I discuss the ways in which organizers and players might either use it to their advantage in order to stimulate play, or work to contain it as needed. In addition, understanding and discussing the domino effect can help us strategize ways for larps to accommodate multiple styles of play, such as participants who enjoy “hardcore” violence versus those who prefer more philosophical, social play. The article advocates the use of zoning in these latter cases, in order to help contain sensitive scenes to specific locations and players when necessary.

Introduction

Many of us have seen it unfold before us in larps: a seemingly insignificant piece of information suddenly becomes the central topic of every conversation; one character’s personal business somehow becomes a topic for public debate; a rumor spreads across the larp, somehow becoming accepted Truth; a plot point intended for a small group of characters sweeps through the group, becoming the Big Plot of the weekend. Whether players or organizers, we may have even orchestrated such effects, catalyzing the larp in a certain direction.

This article will discuss some of the pros and cons of this *larp domino effect*, in which content from one area of the game spreads throughout the fiction like a wildfire as the result of emergent play. In larps where the content is “seeded” by game masters through the character sheets or delivered via non-player characters throughout the larp, such a result may be desirable. But, in larps where a particular tone or theme is central, such emergent play can derail the emphasis of the design. In extreme cases, the larp domino effect can potentially upset or even trigger other players, if “surprise” content spreads throughout the larp without their consent.

The goal of this article is not to criticize this domino effect, but rather to explore its pros and cons. The larp domino effect is neither positive nor negative at its core. Instead, I plan to discuss the ways in which organizers and players might either use it to their advantage in order to stimulate play, or work to contain it as needed. In addition, understanding and discussing the domino effect can help us strategize ways for larps to accommodate multiple styles of play, such as participants who enjoy “hardcore” violence versus those who prefer more philosophical, social play. The article will advocate for the use of *zoning* in these latter cases in order to help contain sensitive scenes to specific locations and players when necessary.

Some games and larp situations may benefit from the domino effect, whereas others may suffer from it. This article uses examples from a variety of play cultures and formats, including one-shots, campaigns, boffer, theatre style, etc. Regardless of style, greater awareness of how the introduction of certain content might affect emergent play can help designers and players steer toward their optimal larp experiences. Note that all of the below examples are hypothetical and not specific to my own larp experiences.

Organizer-Driven Dominos

In some cases, the entire design of a larp event is intended to produce some degree of the domino effect. Some examples:

- Organizers seed a particular piece of information to various characters through character sheets or rumors, hoping to spur some sort of group reaction, e.g. whispers of political corruption for a beloved ruler or intelligence that a ticking time bomb somewhere in the town requires defusing.
- Organizers send out specific non-player characters meant to catalyze action, either as sympathetic or antagonistic agents, e.g. a crying mother hoping to find her lost child or a villain wanting to kidnap characters for ransom.
- Organizers embed certain types of emotionally provocative content into the larp, e.g. explosive relationship dynamics between two characters or backgrounds with domestic violence, systemic abuse, or grief from the loss of a loved one.
- Organizers create a setting that encourages a certain degree of volatility, e.g. a lawless state where “anything goes” or a political environment filled with characters with questionable ethics.
- Organizers establish a “common enemy” in the setting in the hopes that the characters will mobilize against it, e.g. a warring state threatening to take over the town or a disease that the town doctors need to contain before it becomes an epidemic.
- Depending on the design style, this type of content is typically deployed in one of three ways: 1) through the history of the setting itself, with various social practices that reinforce it; 2) through pre-written character sheets and other fictional briefs given to the players in preparation for the larp; or 3) through run-time delivery as physical messages, props, or embodied characters.

In some cases, this embedded content ends up falling flat, failing to topple the rest of the dominos. Perhaps the players find the “plot” uninteresting, become

distracted, or fail to pass on the information. Perhaps they steer their characters in a different direction. Organizers sometimes express frustration when their carefully orchestrated plots “go nowhere” with the player base.

However, the best case scenario for some organizers is for such content to “go viral,” in the sense that it spreads throughout the larp, generating interest and engagement. In these cases, the organizers hope the larp domino effect will occur, because they want the players to feel immersed and captivated.

Such plots can backfire, however, when a significant number of the players feel overtaken by them. Some players bemoan *railroading*, a practice in which the organizers have set up a *plot train* that everyone must jump upon in order to engage (Bowman 2013). The domino effect of a plot can also reduce a player’s sense of agency; if a player enjoys quiet, romantic play, but their kid brother has been kidnapped by the moustache-twirling villain, they may find it unrealistic to pursue their personal goals of play by ignoring this overarching plot. This domino effect is especially potent in larps that feature factions to which players belong; if a faction must mobilize to address a certain conflict, the individual player-character may feel pressured to engage with it, abandoning their personal character goals.

Player-Driven Dominos

In other cases, individual players introduce content that may cascade throughout the larp in unforeseen ways, such as:

- Player-written backstories that feature difficult content, e.g. sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, or the death of close family members.
- Player-requested scenes, where the staff produces content by request in order to incite dramatic conflict, e.g. a character confronting their abusive parent or a violent encounter leading to that character’s planned death.
- Players improvising scenes that unfold in unpredictable directions, e.g. a beloved couple’s dramatic confrontations leading to their breakup or a character’s unethical actions becoming common knowledge, forcing everyone in town to take sides.
- Players introducing new content into the larp that does not match the design goals of the organizers or the setting, with the other players adopting it as fact, e.g. spreading rumors about a villain hiding in the town, causing everyone to become hypervigilant.

Some larps thrive on player-driven content, with very little “plot” dispensed by the organizers themselves. In these larps, the introduction of player creativity through interactions, stories, rituals, events, or other spontaneous improvisations can become the lifeblood of the larp. In these cases, player-driven content can be deeply moving and personal for the players involved — even more so than generic plots designed by the organizers to keep players engaged.

Other larps rely heavily on the players following along with the design of the game or on characters responding to organizer-driven content. In these cases, player-driven content may enhance the larp to some degree, but can sometimes overpower the design. For example, if players show up to a murder mystery dinner refusing to discover who committed the crime, but instead throwing a raucous in-game party, they may still find the experience enjoyable, but the organizers are likely to become frustrated. Similarly, other participants may grow frustrated if they were still invested in solving the mystery, but their co-players have decided to “derail” the larp. The common phrase, “No plot survives contact with the players,” often applies in these circumstances. To read more about the creative tensions inherent to emergent play, see Evan Torner’s “Emergence, Iteration, and Reincorporation in Larp” in this volume.

Some larps feature a “sandbox” style, where both player-driven and organizer-driven content exist alongside one another. In these types of larps, characters often feel free to choose their own adventure, so to speak — to engage with the metanarrative or to focus upon their personal goals and stories. However, sandbox style larps can also domino. For example, if a beloved character dies — even if the player chooses it — the shock can ripple through the entire sandbox, affecting the narrative for many of the characters. That shock may be experienced as cathartic and powerful for some players, but others may find it frustrating or overwhelming, as they feel forced to respond to it authentically. As Eirik Fatland and Markus Montola describe in their article on brute force design in blockbuster larps (2015), *plot trains* disrupt the flow of play when “the emergent narrative of one group can easily disable the play of another group; crisis and conflict in particular trump subtler themes.” In such situations, some players do not feel free to steer (Montola et al 2015) toward their desired stories, whether due to conformity, peer pressure, or the fear of judgment for “playing incorrectly.” Indeed, in some play communities, intentional steering might be considered a form of cheating or poor role-play. However, character immersion advocate Mike Pohjola has explained how character fidelity and steering are not incompatible (Pohjola 2015).

Complications with the Larp Domino Effect

The larp ecosystem is delicate and chaotic. What one player might experience as the most epic moment ever, another might view as deeply upsetting on an out-of-character level. What one group might think to be an amusing or engaging plot to introduce, another might find boring or challenging. The smallest of actions can sometimes have dramatic effects throughout the larp.

In extreme cases, this domino effect can impact players in a profoundly negative way. The content of certain plots or the ways in which they unfold may make certain players extremely uncomfortable. A common example of this sort of content is sexual assault. Some larps feature an “open world” setting, in which anything can happen as long as those actions are not expressly forbidden by the rules. Thus, a person can discuss sexual assault in their backstory, a character can threaten rape, or an actual assault can occur within the framework of the fiction. Other larps feature sexual assault as a central part of the setting in order to illustrate brutal power dynamics. In my view, such content is acceptable as long as everyone in the scene expressly consents to its inclusion and the parameters of enactment.

Problems occur, however, when such content spreads via domino effect elsewhere to the larp to others who have not consented. For example, if a beloved character in the larp is assaulted and word spreads, the vengeance of righteous townspeople seeking justice for that character may become a central theme through emergent play. Such play may be extremely gratifying for those who consent to enacting it. However, some players may not wish to engage with sexual assault at all for personal reasons or due to past trauma. While the content did not technically happen to their character, they may still get triggered, feel alienated, or disengage if the content spills over into their play emergently. Thus, a scene that a player may not have even witnessed can still deeply negatively impact them as a result of the domino effect.

On the other hand, such unintended ripple effects can also occur with positive experiences, such as an impromptu wedding raising the spirits of the group; feelings of relief if the local town guards fight off assailants; or feelings of pride if one’s faction is victorious in a competition. Perhaps the entire group celebrates their success in the streets as a result. Even if a character is not personally involved in those victories, they may experience vicarious pleasure via the domino effect. Ultimately, a great deal depends on the circumstances at hand and the comfort levels of the players involved.

Another unintended consequence of emergent play involves *larp muscle memory*. Certain players may have learned how to larp in a particular style, such as boffer combat, secrets and powers, play-to-lose high drama, etc. Thus, even if the organizers work hard to set a certain tone, in some situations, the larp muscle memory from past play experiences may kick in — and all of a sudden, players are reacting in a manner common to their previous style. A light-hearted fantasy game may become a survival horror game if the players react to an external threat based on their larp muscle memory, particularly if players in leadership positions model that behavior. This muscle memory is not entirely conscious and relies on previous models of understanding how to problem solve or deal with conflict in larps. Issues arise when those models spread to other areas of the game, accounting for a dramatic shift in tone or playstyle against the intentions of the design. Such instances require conscientious steering and recalibration among the organizers and players in order to get everyone back on track.

Zoning as Boundary Enforcement

As mentioned above, the larp domino effect is neither negative nor positive as a force. Just as a crowd may take up the same chant started by one person at a music concert, the impact of one player's strong role-play might ripple through the rest of the larp. Such effects can be powerful and profound. However, when the larp domino effect unfolds in an unchecked manner, some players and organizers alike may feel frustrated or upset by this emergent play. The question remains: how do we set boundaries around emergent play in order to contain these unintended consequences?

One approach that some designers have found successful is *zoning*. With zoning, certain types of play are confined to specific areas of the larp space. Some examples:

- In *Convention of Thorns* (2016) by Dziobak Studios, the castle was zoned according to the degree of “hardcore” play, with the lower floor designated mainly for social interaction and dancing; the middle floor allocated to political meetings and rituals; and the upper floor reserved for more graphic forms of violence, feeding, and/or sexual play (Bowman 2016).
- *Dystopia Rising* chapters sometimes zone specific locations of the play space as “splatter mods” or “hardcore scenes,” with organizers standing guard to warn unsuspecting players about the content.
- *Conscience* (2018) by NotOnlyLarp features specific areas of the town

where sexuality, nudity, and sexual violence are permitted if off-game consent is negotiated among all parties.

- In the United States run of *Just a Little Lovin'* (2017), the organizers encouraged players to use the black box if they wished to play out planned scenes involving brutal marginalization due to the character's gender, sexuality, race, and/or ethnicity.

While zones do not ensure that everyone entering the space is comfortable, they do allow players to more consciously steer toward their desired intensity of play or type of content by physically marking off areas of the playspace for those specific experiences. Zoning makes it more difficult for sensitive players to wander into a scene that might trigger or upset them off-game, especially if the organizers are explicit about what sorts of activities take place in those areas. Zones also make it much easier for players to obtain consent in small groups or one-on-one, rather than playing out such content in public or easily accessible locations where others might accidentally witness it. Again, witnessing might create powerful play for some participants, but feel intrusive to others.

However, the larp domino effect can still impact players, even if they are not present. As mentioned above, sometimes other characters may learn about events occurring within a zoned location, causing a chain reaction. In the example of a sexual assault in a "sandbox style larp," while both players in the scene may have consented, the rest of the larp may not have made that social contract and may feel ambushed by that content. Alternatively, in a larp like *Conscience*, in which that theme is explicitly stated up front, the players are not necessarily consenting to experience sexual violence, but are agreeing to play in a fictional reality where such acts routinely take place.

Thus, *content advisories* are also useful, both for specific scenes and for larps in general. Stating the sorts of content a player may potentially experience can help set expectations about whether or not that larp is right for the player in question. Many of the example larps mentioned above feature content advisories connected to particular zones. On a meta-level, a larp's website may feature a content advisory that effectively zones the whole game as a space for those potential themes.

Reality Hacking

As players, organizers, and designers, larpers intentionally hack reality, adopting new identities and social conditions. This reality hacking is temporary and flexible, in that we can alter these conditions in order to optimize the experience

for multiple types of players. While the larp domino effect is not always a negative condition for a larp, it can have unintended consequences. As larpers, we can develop tools to redirect the tide of play to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

Upon reflection, our Western social reality is already zoned in certain ways. Acceptable behaviors in a bar may be unacceptable in a corporate boardroom. Just as we wear different social masks and adopt specific roles based on the demands of our default lives, so too are our social spaces coded in particular ways, affording certain behaviors while discouraging others. With awareness of the ways in which we operate on social stages, we can construct our larp spaces to create certain bounded experiences, redirecting the flow of the dominos as they fall.

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