

# Entrepreneurial and social significance of larps: A case study of the Kuńkowce Fantasy Village

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**Abstract:** **Background:** The author's personal scientific interests and the existing research gap motivated him to pursue the topic. The article discusses the impact of larps on entrepreneurship and local communities. **Research objectives:** To analyse larp as a component of social and entrepreneurial engagement, with a special focus on its origins, definitions, and development paths based on a case study of the Kuńkowce Fantasy Village. **Research design and methods:** The research technique included a review of existing data, relevant literature, and a direct interview conducted in February 2023 with a purposively selected group of people involved in organising larps. **Results:** The research questions were intended to evaluate the impact of larps on local entrepreneurship and social initiatives. **Conclusions:** The findings permitted the author to identify the entrepreneurial and social dimensions of the Kuńkowce Fantasy Village as well as other larp projects pursued worldwide and in Poland.

**Keywords:** activity, economy, role-playing games, society  
**JEL Codes:** O10, O35

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## 1. Introduction

The market economy is widely regarded as an allocative system that is particularly conducive to entrepreneurship by promoting new and original initiatives. Live action role-playing games, or larps, are examples of social activities that stimulate entrepreneurship and can be organised in both metropolitan and structurally challenged rural areas.

The topic of larps is relevant because of their growing popularity; nonetheless, it is important to demonstrate their full significance, which is not limited to entertainment or a way of spending free time. Larps can now serve a variety of educational, therapeutic, sociological, and economic functions.

The aim of this paper is to discuss larps as a factor that stimulates social and entrepreneurial development. It explores the origins, definitions, and evolution paths of larps worldwide and in Poland. The Kuńkowce Fantasy Village receives special attention, since it has significantly contributed to the promotion of larps in rural areas surrounding Przemyśl, a city in south-eastern Poland.

The author opted to address the topic in question because of his personal scientific interests and the existing research gap. His main contribution is the identification of larps' impacts on entrepreneurship and local communities in Poland and worldwide based on the most recent publications and an interview with a group of individuals actively involved in organising these events.

## 2. Literature review

Larps have been discussed extensively in international literature. The educational aspect of the activity in question was addressed by S. L. Bowman (2014, pp. 112–131), and recognised as important by C. Brom et al. (2019, pp. 64–90), as well as by A. Vanek and A. Peterson (2016, pp. 219–240) and D. Simkins (2011; 2014). The value of fostering relationships, alliances, and communication among larp participants was emphasised by B. O. Kamm and J. Becker (2016, pp. 35–51), as well as J. T. Harviainen et al. (2018, pp. 87–106) and A. Tychsen et al. (2006, pp. 252–275). Among Polish authors, M. Mochocki (2009) attempted to clarify their definition. The existing research gap reflects the lack of up-to-date studies on the development and achievements of Polish larp organisations. A broader examination of the impact of larps on the development of national entrepreneurship, as well as a discussion of their social dimensions are also lacking.

## 3. The concept and origins of larps

The English acronym spelled LARP, Larp, or larp (live action role-playing) refers to a distinctive form of entertainment. In the literature, the terms 'improvised theatre' and 'live role-playing games' are used interchangeably (Mochocki, 2009). In a very broad sense, larp is a form of role-playing game in which participants dress up in unique costumes and collaborate to enact and experience a story. Their roles might be compared to improvised theatre, and the plot can be set in the actual or fictional world. The entire game is overseen by the so-called game master or larp master (Ciechański & Domański, 2021).

In the literature, larp is defined in a variety of ways. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, it is "a type of game in which players pretend to be imaginary characters in a story, usually using special clothes and objects to make the story appear more real" (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, n.d.). Dogma99 defines it as "a meeting of players who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world" ("Dogma99", 2019). Larpbase, on the other hand, describes a larp as an event where participants take on roles with the assumption of the identity of the player body and the character, having a set of rules and a beginning, and thus not having a rigid script. Furthermore, Larpbase underlines the importance of the following conditions:

- the event has a beginning,
- the event has a set of rules,
- for at least one character there is a set of features that distinguish the player from the character,
- for at least one player there is a physical body identical to the character's body,
- at least one character lacks a predetermined storyline,
- at least one character meets the three above-mentioned criteria at the same time (Kulis, 2012).

The purposes of larps are strictly defined. Players pursue goals in a fictional setting represented by real-world environments, while interacting with each other as characters. The out-

come of a player's actions may be mediated by the rules of the game or determined by consensus between players. The organisers of the events (the game masters) decide on the setting and the rules to be applied and facilitate the game (*Czym są larpy?*, n.d.).

Larps are unique in that they combine interests and passions associated with playing computer games, specifically their characters, history, legends, as well as theatre and art. Larp participants can immediately try out their skills, but most importantly, get away from home entertainment, mingle and meet new people who share their passion (Nordic Larp Talks, 2012).

In the early 1970s, the first larps were conceived and performed independently in Europe, North America, and Australia. They were originally inspired by board role-playing games and genre fiction, but were also influenced by children's make-believe, play, fighting, costume parties, roleplay simulations, commedia dell'arte, improvisational theatre, psychodrama, military simulations, and historical re-enactment groups such as the Society for Creative Anachronism (Cramer, 2010).

Since the early 1980s, the activity has spread internationally and undergone a perceptible evolution. It can take the shape of a game or be more focused on dramatic or artistic expression, but it can also be used to promote educational or political objectives. The fictional genres used range from realistic present or historical settings to fantastic or futuristic times. Production values can be low at times, yet tend to feature lavish locales and costumes. Larps can vary in size from brief, intimate activities lasting a few hours to large, public events involving hundreds of participants and spanning several days ("Larp", n.d.).

The widespread appeal of larps, particularly in Europe, has led in the formation of a number of distinct varieties that reflect their character and location (Smolański, n.d.). The best-known types of larps are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. The most common types of contemporary larps**

Larp type	Characteristics
Anglo-Saxon	Involve entertainment and combat using safe, i.e. padded or foam mock weapons. Most are set in fantasy worlds.
Nordic	Focused on message and artistic value. Most are set in contemporary or historical realities.
Chamber larp (stationary, in small enclosed spaces, such as rooms)	Organised in enclosed spaces, with a limited number of players, frequently with characters created entirely by the game author according to his/her creative vision, and usually with very few props. The major criteria are the author's choice and the available space.
Field larp (open-space larp)	Takes place exclusively outdoors and usually involves a larger number of players. Characters are usually developed in collaboration between the author and the players, and realistic props are used. Field larp players often use safe weapons.
Action larp	An action-oriented genre. The game's design features numerous events and techniques that induce players to act.
Parlour larp	Focuses on conversation. Game design encourages conspiracy and broadly-conceived political games.
Jeepform (Freeform)	Scandinavian live-action role-playing games that take place in front of and with the participation of an audience.
Urban games	Classified by some sources as a genre of larp. They are characterised by a minimal distance between the player and the character (usually, the only difference between the player and the character is their motivation for playing the game) and an open game space.

Source: (Tabisz, 2010).

Depending on their design, larps may have one or several objectives, but what matters more than winning is the shared experience of the game. Their primary functions are:

- ludic,
- educational,
- therapeutic,
- creative (Karwowski, 2013).

The ludic component of larps is their most important participant-related function. However, developing, coordinating, and managing a larp demands a greater level of participation from businesspeople and the general public, involving:

- the emergence of a growing number of new entities involved in the organisation of larps,
- increasing participation of entities producing costumes, props, preparing stage design, etc.,
- an increasing number of entities that offer accommodation and catering services.

The social aspect of larps allows a wide variety of people to participate, including those who share an interest and fascination with fantasy themes, or a proclivity to integrate (Karwowski, 2013). Larp participants may include:

- school and university students,
- employees of companies, corporations,
- professionals,
- local residents.

Many contemporary larps have given rise to a new tourism segment, they may include an educational component, whereas their so-called Nordic version inspires a truly spiritual reflection. Larps may also serve as a tool for social change or even a form of psychotherapy. Many people look forward to a break from everyday life – taking on new roles allows them to experience positive character changes. Participation in war larps provides an entirely new experience complete with a rush of excitement, while those focused on disabilities teach respect and understanding for the disabled.

Since the 1990s, larp theorists and scholars have been studying the phenomenon in question. Originally, the Scandinavian countries were the most active centres of dedicated research, but since the turn of the century, the study of larps has grown in popularity in other countries, including Poland. Larps are particularly appealing to game academics, sociologists, psychologists, and theatre experts.

Knutepunkt (Norwegian for ‘meeting place’) is a Nordic academic conference on larp that has been held annually in Scandinavia since 1997. It is the world’s largest larp-only conference, distinguished by its international nature (English is the working language). Since 2001, at least one publication containing articles on larp and its philosophy written in English by authors from all over the world has been released on the occasion of the conference. All publications are available free of charge (“Knutepunkt”, 2023). Denmark has the greatest proportion of larp participants in Europe, with over 100,000 regular players. In some schools, the technique is used to teach history, literature, and social studies. Larps are very important commercially in nations such as Germany and China, where the number of participants may range from 10,000 to 20,000 at any given moment. This level of interest significantly contributes to the social dimension and stimulates local entrepreneurship.

## 4. Research methodology

The literature review was followed by a face-to-face interview with a carefully chosen group of people involved in the organisation of larps. The former was designed to both summarise and address the available information on larps, whereas the latter served to provide the most recent direct information via an interview performed in February 2023 with a carefully selected group of ca. ten persons. The group included people from all over Poland who professionally organise larp events or lead larp associations. The goal of this qualitative survey was to gather the most important information on the specifics of national larps through a casual conversation. Respondents' answers were extensive rather than limited as would have been the case when using a traditional questionnaire. The questions were based on an assessment of the impact of larps on local entrepreneurship and community initiatives.

## 5. Research findings

In Poland, larps have flourished since the early 1990s, after the period of political transformation. Local larps derive their popularity from scouting field games, such as treasure hunts, which are typically played in woodlands and may include earning scout ranks (Maracewicz, 2020; Śliwerski, 1990). Questing, whose origins stretch back to the middle of the 19th century, has a comparable, outdoor aspect, as do historical reconstructions (Bogacki, 2006, pp. 34–36).

In 1991, as part of the Kontur convention in Supraśl, north-eastern Poland, participants played one of the country's first outdoor games called Space Academy, which involved walking around a park with wooden weapon replicas. The novelty of the game combined with original costumes caused quite a stir in the local community (Franczak, 2018). The Cieszyn Drama known as Urban Tribes, which began in 1998 and continues to this day, is also one of the earliest and longest-running larps in Poland. It involves young individuals who belong to specific tribes or are tasked with finding them (Rogers, 2018).

Larps typically develop in Poland as part of gaming and fantasy festivals (such as Pyrkon, Falkon, and Grojkon) and larp-related events (such as Hardkon, New Age, Orkon, Flamberg, Fantazjada, Limes Mundi, Sorontar, and Teomachia). At festivals, primarily chamber larps and jeepforms are played, whereas at dedicated events, one huge game or a number of larger and smaller games of various sorts are played, depending on the chosen formula. Larp-related events are also prepared throughout Poland by small groups of players and specialised organisations. The most important of these are as follows:

- Stowarzyszenie Fantazjada (Wrocław),
- Stowarzyszenie Larpownia (Kraków),
- BlackBox 3City, Larpventure, Zardzewiały Topór (Gdańsk),
- Lublarp (Lublin),
- Żywia (Białystok),
- Sabat Team (Człuchów),
- Bractwo Ofensywa, Warszawskie stowarzyszenie larpowe Wawa larp, Terra Fantastica (Warszawa),
- 5 Żywiołów (Prudnik),
- Turbolarp (Katowice),
- Liveform (Ustroń).

## *The interview*

Representatives and leaders of larp organisations were asked (personal communication) about the effect of larps on business and society. The aim of the interview was to obtain as detailed information as possible about the issues studied. Katarzyna Jankiewicz of Stowarzyszenie Fantazjada emphasised that “the commercial side of larps is associated with the need to pay fees and cover additional costs”.

Piotr Milewski of BlackBox 3City claims that “the phenomenon of larps, as opposed to other games, consists in engaging all the senses. Additionally, the interest in larps contributes to their increasing commercialisation”.

Lublarp’s Marcin Słowikowski emphasises the “educational nature of larps combined with the broad participation of enthusiasts from different social backgrounds. Social media are used to spread event information and get in touch with potential participants”.

Bartosz Bruski of Terra Fantastica believes that “the social role of larps lies in their popularity among all interested people regardless of where they live. Larp organisers choose venues that are often far from the headquarters of a given organisation, but theme-appropriate”. He adds that while too few Poles are aware of larps, he feels that, apart from involving their creators, larps frequently boost local entrepreneurship (e.g. restaurants, volunteer fire service, local companies).

Mikołaj Wicher from Turbolarp believes that “larps contribute directly to the creation of new jobs. Furthermore society”, many members of the local community volunteer to help organise them, thus becoming a civil.

Apart from the organisations mentioned above, larps are promoted by the largest Facebook group of this kind, LARP Poland (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/larp.poland>). Since 2012, larps have been promoted in domestically through a series of scientific conferences known as The Larp Conferences, hosted in various cities. The first two (2012, 2013) took place in Wrocław, followed by Gdynia (2014), Katowice (2015), and Warsaw (2016). As with Knutepunkt, a publication featuring papers on larps and Larp theory is released each year and is available free of charge in the Larpbase library (<http://larpbase.pl/>).

According to estimates, several hundred larps are held annually in Poland, with several thousand people participating. More and more of these are professionally produced events for hundreds of participants. The organisers rent a castle, provide the players with costumes, lodging, and meals, whereas players cover the costs of costumes, props, travel, accommodation, and other expenses (Rutkowska, 2018).

The largest larp-based educational project in Poland took place in 2012. Over 1,100 lower secondary school students participated in 64 larps as part of the DEMOkracja Project, which was organised by Stowarzyszenie Pospolite Ruszenie Szlachty Ziemi Krakowskiej. The plot revolved around the Zebrzydowski Rebellion of 1606, and attendees played the parts of politically active nobles representing various factions (Projekt Demokracja, n.d.).

According to Dr Michał Mochocki of Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, “the lecture is a form of delivery that engages people cognitively. But a larp, on top of that, stimulates the affective, emotional, and behavioural layers. It enables one to experience situations, conflicts and successes on the fly”. He added that larps can develop qualities such as empathy, creativity, and teamwork, otherwise known as 21st-century skills.

Dastin Wawrzyniak of 5 Żywiołów believes that “in Poland, there is still a widespread misconception that larps are only for children. The situation, though, is dynamic. With the emer-

gence of high-budget commercial events, this kind of entertainment started to enter the mainstream. Setting a game in an interesting, popular world and, naturally, perfect preparation is what counts in achieving commercial success. For example, the Witcher School is an investment of tens of thousands of zloty. Not to mention several months of work on each successive event. To make a greater impression, all the lighting on the castles is changed from electric to candles and torches". Wawrzyniak underscores the impact of larps on local entrepreneurship (crafts, catering, and accommodation), as well as attracting a large number of people to take part in a shared activity in an area.

Dominik Dębiński of Liveform believes that "larps are a form of entertainment geared at a wide spectrum of people, from pupils going on school trips to adults. The main advantage of a larp is the opportunity to become someone else or step into a new role, as well as the thrill associated with doing so. Their impact on entrepreneurship stems from increased demand for the services required to organise such events. Participation can cost up to PLN 1,000". Dębiński also believes that the settings of larps should be strongly tied to their topic.

As fantasy, history, and art enthusiasts with excellent social and organisational skills, larp masters play an important part in the events. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, their importance has grown due to the need to resume or expand larp activities across the country. Current information is available on topic-related websites (*Polskie larpy*, n.d.).

Larps have also been addressed in academic writing and teaching. In 2013, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz devised a major called Humanities 2.0. Its Gamedec specialty instructs students in, among other things, larp design and introduces them to larp theory (<https://gamedec-humanities.pl/>).

### ***The case study***

The Fantasy Village in Kuńkowce near Przemyśl in south-eastern Poland is a recreational theme park featuring a replica of a fortified medieval settlement. The village offers educational and outdoor activities, as well as medieval-themed events. It is an example of an enterprise similar to theme parks and villages that have long been popular in Poland and all over the world (Sala, 2016, pp. 117–126; 2018).

The village's origins can be traced back to the establishment in 2008 of Przemyska Gildia Fantasyki, a non-profit organisation of about ten young fantasy, history, theatre, and computer gaming aficionados. From the very start, the organisation set itself the goal of raising funds for a historical investment.

The village was built as part of the project Kuńkowce Fantasy Village, which was supported by the EU's Youth in Action initiative and carried out in collaboration with the Przemyśl Regional Development Agency (Ziętał, 2010). The municipality provided the land, and the Development Association became a partner in the project's completion. Remigiusz Maciupa, a local activist, was the primary creator and initiator of the Fantasy Village. He believes that "at the time of its establishment, it was the first and largest village of its kind in Poland".

The organisers set out to create a replica of a mediaeval walled settlement in a virtually unknown village with no tourist attractions. Its value as an investment location was, however, enhanced by the presence in its vicinity of one of the fortifications of the Przemyśl Fortress, the San River, and the city of Przemyśl.

The Fantasy Village began to take shape in 2010, but even though the necessary portion of the work had been completed, much more effort and time were still required for the location to take on the desired appearance. It is challenging to predict the completion date accurately,

because there are so many ideas for improving and expanding the village, and every year, more and more features are added (luks, 2018).

The Village currently boasts:

- a defensive fort with a watchtower,
- ten huts,
- a functioning inn and a smithy,
- a bathhouse,
- gazebos with fireplaces,
- a stable,
- a network of fortifications with a palisade, towers, and ramparts.

So far, several hundred thousand zlotys have been spent. During the tourist season, the enthusiasts reside permanently in the village, which is designed to be self-sufficient. Its goal is to attract both larp enthusiasts and tourism in general. To generate long-term revenue, the village, which is largely a seasonal business, advertises itself not only to larpers but also to schools, private clients, and specialised larp planners (e.g. the company Larp Adventures). On site, visitors can learn archery (PLN 5 per arrow) or rent a medieval warrior's outfit for a day for PLN 100. The village also serves as a backdrop for music videos and film footage, which provides extra revenue.

The village offers paid accommodation in huts, catering services, baths in its medieval bathhouse (Wawrzyn, 2012), as well as a wide range of regular and occasional events:

- unforgettable field games full of adventure,
- the May Festival,
- the annual winter game in the world of George Martin's "Song of Ice and Fire,"
- educational, training and integration games,
- games for children,
- workshops, demonstrations, living history lessons,
- special events.

According to Maciupa, "The Fantasy Village is intended to familiarise the public, especially young people, with everyday life, rituals, and culture in the Middle Ages". Participants in the Slavic picnic learn about old crafts, antique clothing, food, or participate in mock battles and archery competitions. They find out about the Kupala Night, Jare Gody, and Slavic mythology figures like Marzanna and Dziewanna on site. This can be a fascinating and innovative alternative to standard education classes. Winter activities urge participants to read fantasy literature and try their hand at performing. For many, this may be their first encounter with such attractions. Moreover, the village hosts music events and meetings with writers (Solski, 2022). Organised larps are attended by an average of 20 to 300 people from home and abroad, but especially from southern parts of Poland. Maciupa claims that "most participants are primary and secondary school students, but occasionally older people also participate".

The activities offered by the village have resonated with the local community. Due to their popularity with tourists, accommodation, catering, but notably trades and crafts involved in making costumes and props have become increasingly busy. Another effect of the village's operations is the development of new attractions in the nearby Kukowice area. The 2200 m long Ogodziska ecological and cultural trail deserves special mention. During the 45-minute walk, which begins at the Fantasy Village, hikers pass through eight sites that showcase the area's natural and historical treasures.



Plans for the future are even more interesting: there will be farmland, orchards, farm animals, a field hospital, and dugouts to be used as hiding places. The settlement can now house 70 people, but will soon house more.

Two noteworthy events are scheduled for 2023: a global LARP Host, set on a Nordic theme and intended for an adult community from around the world, and The Sky Goes Dark at Night, a LARP geared towards younger people.

The study's conclusions have both theoretical and practical implications. New larp organisations emerge primarily by imitating and learning from the existing ones, with leaders playing a critical role. Larps are also created in collaboration with a number of subcontractors from across the country as well as local firms; as a result, their growing popularity has a noticeable effect on the local economy. However, some larp organisations suspend or cease their operations over time, which can be attributed to economic and organisational challenges. For this reason, their dynamically changing environment needs more in-depth research. Constraints may include difficulties in reaching a sufficiently large sample of organisational leaders and the volatility of their immediate environment, particularly its economic dimension.

## 5. Conclusions

Due to their increasing popularity, larps, such as the Kuńkowce Fantasy Village, undeniably contribute to the development of entrepreneurship not only on a local level. Larps are organised by specialised enterprises that continually attract new committed participants. Over time, many members of the original organisations create offspring ventures tasked with devising new larps. Revenues are generated not only by paid events but also by collaboration with costume, prop, and scenery manufacturers as well as emerging businesses that offer typical services for tourists, such as catering and accommodation.

The social dimension of larps is associated with the involvement of people of various ages and occupations in playing new roles, moving around, and spending their leisure time together. A part of the larp programme is aimed at corporate clients as part of team-building activities. Apart from visitors, local citizens and their leaders (community centres, farmers' clubs) play an important role in larps.

The theoretical component of this paper consists in obtaining significant information on the entrepreneurial and social impacts of larps from directly involved individuals, while its practical component concerns the potential application of the findings to future larp initiatives.

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The author declares that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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