Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming's
Literary-Musical Larp Adaptations

Abstract: This article addresses the question of analog role-playing game authorship through an analysis of three music-based blackbox larps by Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming: *Sarabande* (2013), *Deranged* (2015), and *Encore* (2022). The Bergmann Hammings' work over time bears their unique signature, using aesthetic idealism and high culture to explore issues of character decadence and downfall. With the increasing use of role-playing games to convey history and heritage, the Bergmann Hammings' design patterns both evince a particular interpretation of that history and also demonstrate how future designers might generally adapt such material into role-playable forms.

Keywords: high art, classical music, opera, popular culture, role-playing games, larp, freeform, Fastaval, Denmark

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1. INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs) do, indeed, have authors (Nephew 2003). Correspondingly, these authors' body of design work can be analyzed for stylistic patterns (Kirk 2005; Li and Morningstar 2016). Play cultures (Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006; Bowman 2017) and meta-play (Boluk and LeMieux 2017) drive most game design patterns (Björk & Holopainen 2005), particularly in the realm of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs; White 2020) and live-action role-play (larps) (Montola and Stenros 2010; Koljonen et al. eds. 2019).

Games emerge from community practices, never from lone actors. Nevertheless, as Elaine Fiandra (2019) articulates with respect to video games, tracing a single author's or studio's work is "still a commonly accepted way to analyze [media]" and, in particular, a valid method for games "made by an extremely low number of people." James Morrison (2018) describes the project of the *auteur* as dedicated "to the overturning the critical establishment's general preferences for refined, tasteful, polished, respectably packaged cinema" (49). Academic usage of the *auteur* can, in other words, *rescue* certain works from obscurity. More typically, it launches them into "high art" status, meaning that the *auteur*'s work can then accrue significant financial power as subjects with "taste" attach cultural value to it for purposes of class distinction (Bourdieu 1979). Fiandra uses Andrew Sarris' (1962) pivotal work on *auteur* theory to look at "patterns and expressions of a personal style in the games directed by the director in question" (Fiandra 2019), as well as thematic outcomes from actual play of their games. A game analysis method attentive to both *authorial style* and *play culture* is warranted, too, in the analysis of larp design, especially as larpwrights borrow much from each other and make more of their materials and creation process publicly available (Pettersson 2021). But we should never lose sight of the potential material and social benefits involved when a creator is labeled an "author."

Authors are not just creators, but also nodal points in social and cultural networks, channeling and being moved by various influences and cultures (Latour 2005, Bienia 2016). But despite the polyvocal nature of the final play "text" itself as well as version updates and new editions, RPG rules and scripts usually have a static team of authors whom we can point to and say: "They designed this game." Of course, that thought can also lead us to some stranger questions. Are RPG designers like puppet-masters, "mind-controlling" us with the rules? Or are they simply creating an open playground and disavowing any notion of control over it? These questions are, in my opinion, merely polemical starting points of inquiry, rather than ending points of discussion.

After all, RPGs are a "scavenger medium," in that authors are pulling different scraps of culture together to co-create a work of art with their participants (Schallegger 2018; Torner 2020). A decidedly pop-cultural space, RPG design draws on disparate material from one's own specific social and material context, game design patterns, existing local and global cultures of play, and the indescribable messiness of actual play itself. Having "authors," however, permits this cultural scavenging to achieve legitimacy as art, by which I mean: attaining legibility to the curators, critics, artists, and academics who balance between art being a creative act and it being a commodity.

Within the art world, where a piece's origins and meanings are both fluid, legitimacy is everything. As Niklas Luhmann (2000) argues, the notion of an "artist" and artistic intention "bundles expectations" (51) for effective communication with an audience expecting a particular sensory experience or *abstraction* from experience. Audiences will expand their range of possible feelings towards something that the social system of art considers to be "art." Even if RPGs still struggle in achieving that label (Novitz 1996), the rewards for artistic achievement are of significant social consequence. Bjarke Pedersen and Brody Condon's participatory performance piece *Level Five,* a larp about cultish behavior that strategically removed the term "larp" from its advertising, was exhibited at the Hammer Museum (2010) and the Berlin Biennale (2016). Anna Westerling's *A Nice Evening With The Family* (2007, 2018), a larp mash-up of numerous Swedish *bourgeois* tragedies by Vinterberg, Ibsen, and Strindberg, used its high-cultural material to secure public arts grants and even a century-old mansion as a play site. There are institutional, infrastructural, and even social-capital rewards for having these scavengers – RPGs – engage with high-culture "art" as well as become classified as "art" themselves.

This short essay focuses on the literary-musical larps by the Bergmann Hammings, specifically *Sarabande* (2013), *Deranged* (2015), and *Encore* (2022) to expand on scholarly conversations regarding RPG authorship, art adaptation, and aesthetic idealism. *Sarabande* is about a group of Parisian artists in the early 20th century desperately communicating with each other through art. *Deranged* concerns the life of German composer Robert Schumann as narrated through the perspectives of different important figures to him as well as his own musical pieces. *Encore* smashes together 11 different operas, reduced to their barest of components across 50 different characters, into a single space with live opera-punk music by Ras Bolding serving as interludes. These games have all run at an annual Danish convention called Fastaval, where many bespoke role-playing scenarios see their premiere.

The Bergmann Hammings' remarkable, Fastaval-fueled artistic signature becomes clear in these 3 games: simplifying and emphasizing the emotional weight of the original material for a lay audience while also activating game-appropriate player agency over narrative methods and story outcomes. Their work leans hard on the idea that art can be used to express personal truths and, moreover, that normally-high-art-averse geeks can trust themselves and discover the transcendental meaning in high art through larps. Larp, seen through the specific lens of the Bergmann Hammings, makes high art *embodied*, *visceral*, and *sincere*. Retreat into artistic worlds, their work seems to claim, can be productively tragic and fatal. With all the discussion of making cultural heritage "immersive" and/or "playable," (Mochocki 2021; Pearce and Fortugno 2021), the Bergmann Hammings succeed at making the whole fine arts apparatus playable using the tools of the Nordic larp design community (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019). *Sarabande*, *Deranged*, and *Encore* all deploy lights, sound, space, time, paper, bodies, and the most important game-design currency of all, player agency, in service of exploring characters' moral and artistic downfall, all with the enthusiastic consent and participation of sometimes 5, sometimes 50 players. Their musical blackbox larp work is, itself, undeniably art.

2. THE BERGMANN HAMMINGS, AESTHETIC IDEALISM, AND BLACKBOX LARPS

What is a blackbox larp? The shared medium of *Sarabande*, *Deranged*, and *Encore* emerged at the intersection between blackbox theatre and, interestingly enough, specific trends in freeform larp design

within the Danish scene in 2012-2013. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola (2019) define a blackbox larp as such:

> Larps that are played in a minimalistic set, with precise control over light, sound, and props, are called blackbox larps. The term comes from theatre black boxes which are one place where staging blackbox larps is handy. This is very much an aestheticized form, where clarity and elegance are often design goals and everything that is incidental is removed (20).

Blackbox theatre was created by Adolphe Appia in the 1920s. Blackbox became popular in the 1960s, as theatre artists everywhere liberated themselves from the theatre proscenium and expanded, by orders of magnitude, the number of spaces where theatre could theoretically happen. Rather than relying on sets and costumes, blackbox theatre shapes the action through lighting, projections, sound, and movement (Izenour 1977). As an "aestheticized form" of larp, to use Stenros and Montola's description, blackbox larp dutifully connects itself with the affordances and spaces of the post-1960s performing arts. The Bergmann Hammings' work in blackboxes mirror their artistic intent: stripping high art works down to their essences, especially via the bodies and movements of their participants.

Blackbox larping historically came from a collective Danish (and American) reaction to Swedish jeepform, an avant-garde RPG writing movement in the late 2000s that merged the strict rules and gamemastering of tabletop with the embodiment of larp. "Jeepform role-play," as Tobias Wrigstad (2008) writes, "is not about simulating, but about collaborative creation of tight, dramatic and story-focused role-play" (125). Jeepform scenarios are usually kitchen-sink dramas, with socialist-realist and sometimes-cruel design intentions. Games such as *The Upgrade!* (2004) subject players to the toxicity of reality shows; Fredrik Axelzon's *The Journey* (2010) puts them in a stark, depressing post-apocalypse drama. These designs often debuted at the Danish convention and competition Fastaval, granting writers such as Wrigstad and Axelzon a quasi-*auteur* status when they won awards there. I myself ran *The Journey* at Fastaval 2010 and used my experiences with its railroaded structure to write *Metropolis* (2012). The Bergmann Hammings, Essendrop, Hansen, and future blackbox larp organizer Charles Bo Nielsen all played *Metropolis* and took their inspiration in many different artistic directions.

Metropolis and later blackbox larps, including *Sarabande*, *Deranged*, and *Encore*, combined rigid act structures with scene-based role-play that greatly hinged on the movements and gestures of the players. Music, lighting, movement, and props replaced the strong jeepform gamemaster role, and the last 10 years have seen great innovation in blackbox festivals throughout Europe. It is the platonic-ideal form for research on larp authorship, thanks to its constrained conditions of production and intensive implementation of the designers' vision over the course of several hours of play.

Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming are both creators in their own right, while also having backgrounds that straddle between the rarefied Fastaval scene and unpretentious boffer fantasy. I choose here not to focus on their biographies, but their artistic output. Maria's first Fastaval scenario, *Skyggernes spil* (1998) with Maiken "Malle" Nielsen, reflects on the nature of "role-play" itself through a 1990s gothic horror game, later adapted for the blackbox context as *A Play of Shadows* (Bergmann Hamming and Bergmann Hamming 2017). Jeppe's own Fastaval debut was in 2008 with *Stormen*, a late-1990s family drama set in a winter storm. *Sarabande* in 2013 marked an undeniable turning point in their design paths, winning the Otto (Fastaval Award) for Best Game Experience. *Deranged* swept the Ottos for Best Scenario, Best Game Mechanics, and the Audience Award, and *Encore* clinched the Audience Award as well. While their fae dancing larp *Spellbound* (Bergman Hamming and Bergman Hamming 2019) was pivotal to *Encore*'s dance mechanics as well, I am bracketing it out due to space concerns.

The Bergmann Hammings' blackbox larps are concerned with *aesthetic idealism*, or the conflation of art with philosophy and an artists' willingness to make sacrifices to achieve artistic expression. F.W.

Joseph von Schelling advanced this worldview during the height of German romanticism, responding to earlier positions held by Kant and Schiller on the aesthetic sublime (Seidel 1976). However, the Bergmann Hammings are concerned with fundamentals: art's capacity to communicate, as well as its connection to decadence and death. This material is by no means original, having been well-trodden by the Romantics in the early 19th century as well as many European *fin-de-siècle* artists in the early 20th. Yet the Bergmann Hammings distinguish themselves by *directly* citing these periods and their artists in their work, with the admonishment that the embodied nature of blackbox larp will yield yet a different interpretation of artistic and moral downfall.

3. *SARABANDE*

The typical Fastaval RPG scenario consists of 4 players and 1 gamemaster, with minimal props, costumes, or other requirements. The first clue that *Sarabande* was intended for the nascent blackbox larp movement, and not necessarily Fastaval, is its defiance of all these norms: 12 players; nearly 20 props required including "a top hat, a sixpence hat … a monocle, a palette…"; neutral clothing choices to match the lighting; wine glasses with different-colored juices; and some rudimentary set dressing to mimic an 1890s café in Montmartre, Paris. One can already pour on the *Moulin Rouge* comparisons, but then again, that's the design intention. In fact, the Bergmann Hammings make these goals explicit in the text:

> In this scenario, the focus is on music and the body as the basis of character generation. The participants are guided to use a piece of music for building the external characteristics of the role and the inner emotional life of the character. . . [This scenario] lets the scenes play out through the use of aesthetic means of expression. This way of playing focuses the dramatic intensity of the scenario (3).

For a scenario about free artists, *Sarabande* is surprisingly structured. Players are trained to form silent vignettes in the café that are then set to appropriate contemporary music, "La valse d'Amélie." The song evokes a quirky, creative life in Paris, and players demonstrate their daily Routines reflecting the song's mood through movement. This extremely direct mirroring of emotion can be found in the Bergmann Hammings' other games. Players use music to lend interiority to their nascent characters, to let emotions flow directly from the character sheet through the player and into the social situation at hand. This musical channeling is also present in *Deranged* and *Encore*. Also important in *Sarabande* is these characters' connections to *art*: the *only* way these characters communicate outside of the café routine, a sort of palette cleanser, is through *artworks*. There is no time for small talk, only grand, aesthetic gestures of Freedom, Beauty, Truth, and Love, the direct themes of the game. No feelings are trivial, all feelings can only be expressed silently or through art, and the game's archetypes and social groups are absolutely primed for drama. The Bergmann Hammings consign ambient play to the café Routine sequences, so that every scene has a dramatic spotlight and an incentive for a player to over-act, over-dramatize, and over-commit. These patterns can be observed in their later works over the next decade.

4. *DERANGED*

It might have been hard to guess that the best blackbox larp of the 2010s would take us back to the 1850s and revolve around the peculiar topic of Robert Schumann's sanity. In *Deranged*, Schumann's last day is narrated through scenes with other major composers at the time: Clara Wieck (Schumann),

Felix Mendelssohn, and Johannes Brahms. *Deranged* is exemplary in giving new life and meaning to Schumann's *Lieder*, as his life story is told through them, albeit out of order. *Sarabande's* themes of Freedom, Beauty, Truth, and Love are swapped out for "recognition, artistic integrity, love, lust, and family" (3). Players put the *Lieder* up on the wall, and then choose scenes by way of the songs. "*Deranged* is a scenario about a group of people who created wonderful music," the Bergmann Hammings (2015) write. "This music is the very core of this scenario. When you run this game, you are the scenographer and conductor of the piece, and your most important tool and effect is music." Music cognition is a social act of interpretation layered between the mind and body, revolving around a constant reassessment of state changes (Leman 2017). Narrative itself, as enacted through gameplay, is a simple state change, and the primary agency exercised by the players in *Deranged* is in (A) which scenes get told in what order, and (B) what small decisions the characters make as a result of their scene play. As with *Sarabande*, the characters' artworks speak louder than themselves, and as with *Sarabande*, the binary between periods of musical interlude and acted-out scenes helps structure the overall piece. Unlike the huge prop demands of *Sarabande*, *Deranged* only requires one to print out many sheets of paper as game tools, placing them on the wall like notes on a musical score.

        Deranged explicitly reaches back to the German-Romantic origins of the arts crisis found in *Sarabande*. The Romantic era, roughly spanning from the 1780s - 1840s, was characterized by a turn away from the rationalized, capitalistic Enlightenment toward the mysterious powers of art and nature. Characters such as Blond Eckbert in Ludwig Tieck's eponymous 1797 novella or Nathanael in ETA Hoffmann's 1816 story *The Sandman* are themselves aesthetic idealists, moved very much by the powers of art and nature until they are, to their astonishment, consumed by madness. To make a game about Robert Schumann's final day in 1856, looking in retrospect at the 1830s and 1840s that carved his name into musical history books, is itself a Romantic act: the Bergmann Hammings anchor their design in the power of music, in the embodied-agentic rhythms of larp, and the mobilization of high culture to reveal decadence and downfall among the characters. Player-character story arcs lead not to progression, but to tragedy and dissolution. High-cultural art in *Deranged*, in this case so-called "classical music," is not to be subsumed in fan culture, but rather is elevated to the status of game-pivotal mechanic. *Which* song a player chooses determines which painful scene of Schumann's life with Wieck, Mendelssohn, and Brahms to re-live, and that sense of choice sutures the story and music to the player's bodies. This award-winning blackbox larp solidified what players around the world could identify as the Bergmann Hamming authorial style: a vivid experience of character-driven *fictional failure* (Juul 2013) via a sincere deployment of high culture and music as game mechanics. It then only makes sense that, during the real-lived *decadence* of the COVID-19 pandemic, they would come up with an ambitious opera blackbox larp.

5. *ENCORE*

Encore is an "opera punk" blackbox larp that explores the question: What would happen if the characters and plotlines of 11 different operas were compressed into a 4-hour play experience? Prospero, the magician from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, has invited characters from different operas for a one-night, three-Act magical party in which they may live out their passions. The 11 canonical operas include *Aida*, *Die Walküre*, *Nabucco*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Carmen*, *Il Trovatore*, *Tosca*, *Turandot*, *La Traviata*, *Don Giovanni*, and, as an outlier, the Mozart comedy *Così fan tutte*. Its adaptation of all this material is, itself, a monumental feat. Few have sat down and provided a detailed, character-by-character story breakdown of nearly a dozen operas. A collaboration with working synth rocker Ras Bolding, the larp escalates many of the Bergmann Hammings' favored design patterns — along with borrowed ones from Nordic larp *Inside Hamlet* (Torner 2021) — while also cranking up the scale to a 50-player maximum.

It is intensely structured, with both musical interludes in which the players are silent, but can express themselves through dance, and periods of intense interpersonal conflict, in which players loudly shout their characters' feelings at each other.

Aesthetic idealism in this particular larp comes in 3 different forms: fashion, musical acts, and operatic distillation. In terms of fashion, characters express themselves through "opera punk" costumes improvised from pieces the Bergmann Hammings themselves provide. Racks of hoop dresses, ostentatious wigs, studded coats, and other accessories allow players, who are clad all in white, to distinguish their characters from each other in the low-light blackbox conditions of the larp. In terms of musical acts, Bolding and his band put on a *real* live synth concert, which is both in homage to synth-operatic acts such as Klaus Nomi as well as the indulgences of punk culture. Bolding's performance chides the player-characters, goading them into feeling *something* so that they might translate their dancing into character motivations and dramatic action. The musical acts, as with *Sarabande* and *Deranged*, force players to directly engage with music as an actor in the game (Bienia 2016).

In terms of operatic distillation, *Encore* offers a brilliant literary analysis of 11 different operas' plotlines in the 50 individual playbooks. Players divide up into opera sub-groups, and they then intensely study together the playbooks of their opera's characters. These playbooks quickly summarize the operas, their core tensions, and the activities the player should engage in during *Encore*. They make opera immediately *playable* (Fortugno and Pearce 2021; Murphy 2022), granting total agency to the players over their characters while also gating key character decisions in specific Acts. For example: Will Zaccaria, the protective Jewish priest in *Nabucco*, "cast Ismaele aside if he chooses Fenena over the Jews?" (Bergmann Hammings 2022). Will he "surrender to temptation and seduce Abigail?" Will he grant the others forgiveness at the end of Act 3? These decisions are paced by the game, but made by the players. Drawing on *Inside Hamlet*, players are also not allowed to kill each other until the end of Act 3, when weapons are suddenly strewn about the playspace. Whereas in *Sarabande* and *Deranged*, characters have recourse to creating art to express their feelings, *Encore* uses dance and loud, over-the-top declarations of feelings to cultivate the necessary *exteriority* to drive plotlines. Once one is caught up in the spell of both one's opera and Prospero's party, the only way out is through re-writing one's fate, based on the gameplay and dancing.

6. CONCLUSION

The Bergmann Hammings' work is a case of RPG authorship *par excellence*, since the team works with clear continuity in themes and design patterns, and I am confident no larper would arrive at their final experience or intensified relationship with the source material without their specific, conscious design choices.

Their work pulls together a European *fin-de-siècle* sentiment about the fine arts with modern techniques of larp design, using humanity's natural relationship with music as a linchpin. In *Sarabande*, the players are silenced through music as they go about their "Routine," itself a form of improvised theatrical performance that places their characters in relation with others. Music communicates an inner world that cannot be expressed in words, and that complements both their characters' artistic practice as well as their story arcs. In *Deranged*, music expands its role to become *the* vehicle for accessing not only the characters' inner worlds, but the very plotline of the game itself. Schumann's *Lieder* become a rearrangeable road map of the characters' shared memories, ordered and co-created by the players. Music is directly connected to player agency and the primary themes of the larp, madness and genius.

In *Encore*, music is a necessary interlude to be used to work through the intense, stage-y emotions of opera through equally intense, story-relevant dancing. Whereas opera merges plotline

exposition, character interiority, and song, *Encore* separates the sung word from the individual operas themselves, instead allowing the players to work through their tragic character arcs by alternatively yelling at each other or simply dancing it out. Bolding's musical performances cut through the self-righteous seriousness of opera and encourage an "everyone is invited" playful attitude matching the Bergmann Hammings' masterful larp scripts. All three larps follow an aesthetic-idealistic approach to music: paraphrasing Aldous Huxley (1931), music lets the inexpressible achieve expression, even beyond what the already-highly-physical medium of larp allows.

RPG authors have readily identifiable patterns in their work and, should anyone hope to secure the artistic legitimacy of ludic role-play, we have to start *somewhere* in describing and analyzing them. The acclaim that the Bergmann Hammings' blackbox larps have received is well and truly deserved, and they as RPG authors have a strong emphasis in their design work on the power of high culture and the decadence of ever devoting one's life to it. In this spirit, a kind of white-Northern-European melancholy reigns; a positing of life's problems in such a way that high art — free-spirited Parisian paintings, moody German *Lieder*, bombastic European operas – becomes both the solution and the poison one takes to speed one's demise. Certainly no one in these Nordic larp circles has devoted themselves to a Bohemian art lifestyle or a tragic downfall – everyone has kids, day jobs, and reams of email like the rest of us. The Bergmann Hammings offer a straightforward escapist experience, only with negative emotion and artistic community.

Larp here does not co-opt the artforms, but rather enhances the players' connections to the raw material that made these works of art compelling in the first place. This is a modern response to the essence of the material, rather than its capitalistic cannibalization. These larps are work-intensive and expensive to produce, with no expectation of the players beyond their play itself, and no expectation of profit either. In this respect, as we global citizens collectively careen into dangerously uncertain times, the Bergmann Hammings offer us a means of aesthetically controlling our own descent and, at the very least, enjoying the ride.

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