

The (Un)bearable Lightness of Nuclear Energy in Finland¹

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Introduction

This article offers an ethnographic account of one way in which humor has been enacted to foster a sense of ‘comedic camaraderie’ among young professionals in Finland’s nuclear energy sector. To this end, it details some of the lively, satirical, sometimes-edgy social games played at *Suomen Atomiteknillinen Seura* (‘The Finnish Nuclear Society’) Young Generation Working Group (ATS YG)’s annual Summer Games event held in 2013 in Mikkeli, Finland. The article then examines how young nuclear energy professionals presented, to me as an ethnographer, quasi-functionalist explanations of the festive Summer Games event’s aim to cultivate community spirit, well-networked rapport, and a sense of collegial cohesion among ATS YG members. Building upon these ethnographic informants’ explanations, I unpack how the levity of their ‘nuclear humor’ was enacted as an energizing, refreshing, or rejuvenating ‘comedic counterpoint’ to the gravity of its antithesis: nuclear risk. Such nuclear humor, I suggest, could be seen as emblematic of what many Finns call *tekkarihumori* (‘techie-humor’). This article concludes with a reflection on the potential for ethnography to reveal ways in which deeply human modalities like humor become in part constitutive of what might otherwise be imagined as being a most austere regime of nuclear technoscience.

Nuclear Energy Generations

ATS is a context in which Finland’s nuclear energy sector – despite being entangled in numerous transnational linkages – finds its most cohesive, holistic, unitary manifestation. That is, while Finland’s nuclear energy professionals have countless different roles and are dispersed across a wide range of companies, consultancies, agencies, associations, universities, and institutes, most have in common their affiliations with ATS. Some ATS members work, for instance, at Finland-based power companies *Teollisuuden Voima Oyj* (TVO), Fortum Oyj, or Fennovoima. Others work at Finland’s nuclear waste management company Posiva Oy, at Finland’s nuclear

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regulatory authority *Säteilyturvakeskus* (STUK), or at Finland's energy industry statistics and lobbying association *Energiateollisuus Ry* ('Finnish Energy Industries'). Still others work or study at Finland's Aalto University, at Lappeenranta University of Technology (LUT), or at the Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT). With over 700 members, ATS' 'primary mission is to serve as a connecting link between and as an information exchange channel' to support Finland's wider network of nuclear energy sector professionals (ATS 2011a).

Within ATS are subsections called 'working groups'. One such working group is ATS YG, which organizes activities for 'young people (under 35 years of age) who are interested in [or already members of] the nuclear field' to 'ensure the knowledge transfer between the generations and to promote networking between young people'. The ATS YG working group strives to 'motivate, educate and unite the young professionals and to ensure continuation of the nuclear field in Finland'. ATS YG also aims to facilitate intergenerational knowledge-transfer by co-organizing events with Finland's nuclear energy sector elders' working group, ATS Seniors (ATS 2011b).

I was based in Finland from December 2011 to August 2014, developing an anthropological study of Finland's nuclear energy sector in general and nuclear waste disposal efforts in particular. As my ethnographic journey progressed, it became increasingly evident to me how attuning to informants' relations with ATS could reveal key ways that the expansive, multiplicitous, technoscientific assemblage I studied came to see itself, at least sometimes, as a unitary community of colleagues. Sector-wide bonding was facilitated among ATS YG members, for instance, through social games at their annual Summer Games events. As the ethnographic vignette to follow will show, such games – suffused with lightness, absurdism, and satire – added levity to the Summer Games events' atmospheres and hence to Finland's young nuclear energy professionals' relations with one another. This collective lightness was achieved, as I will demonstrate, in part by toying collectively with imageries of nuclear energy technologies and with imageries of Finnish national culture.

Energizing Finland's Young Nuclear Energy Professionals

In August 2013, ATS YG members convened in Mikkeli, Finland to socialize, unwind, and bond at their annual Summer Games event. There, in one game, players were given backpacks full of expensive equipment lent to them by a Finnish company trying to promote its new line of radiation detection technologies used for special military operations. The players' missions were to playfully but competitively search for a slightly radioactive object that was hidden in a Finnish sauna. They did this by using sensors connected via Bluetooth to apps on Nokia cellphones. The apps helped the players to discern the precise kind of radiation source they were sensing. In another game, a large candle was placed inside a glass container representing a nuclear reactor and a containment building, respectively. Players, standing about five meters away from the

candle, had to 'cool' and then 'shut down' the mock reactor using a large bucket full of water and five spoons provided to them. In a previous year's event, I was told, a team devised a quirky strategy while playing this game: they cooperatively threw the full bucket of water in its entirety at the glass and the candle to make the mock containment building collapse and, hence, to cause the mock reactor to shut down. In yet another game, players had five minutes to frantically write long lists of all songs and movies about nuclear energy they could remember. Whichever team made the most comprehensive list was the winner.

While previous years' Summer Games events were similar in spirit to the 2013 Mikkeli event, some of the details of the games played were slightly different. For example, in one past game, super soaker water guns were instead used to spray and 'cool down' a mock reactor that was imagined to have undergone a meltdown. Note that this game was played not many years after Japan's 2011 nuclear accident at Fukushima. The reactor in this game was represented by a beach ball. In another game in a past year, a slingshot intentionally resembling those found in Finnish tech company Rovio's *Angry Birds* cellphone and mobile device games was used to launch objects at a box with balloons inside. Some told me that participants then playfully imagined themselves to be mock 'terrorist attacking' the box, which had a picture of a reactor painted on it. As with every other ATS YG Summer Games event, the day concluded with heavy drinking, eating, and time in the sauna.

A new scoring system designed to correct an inefficiency that was known to encumber ATS YG Summer Games events in past years was also devised to sustain the 2013 Mikkeli event's atmospheres of camaraderie. The story goes as follows. It had been known that the goal of the annual Summer Games event is to help young nuclear professionals form new networks, new friendships, and acquire new insights in dialogue with *other* young nuclear professionals from *outside* the particular company, agency, or university at which they worked day-to-day. It had also been known that most attendees saw it as simply more fun to compete on behalf of their *own* companies, agencies, or universities *against* those of other attendees. This was because they wanted to playfully see which organization boasted the most talented young sportsmen and sportswomen from year-to-year. Therefore, if the event organizers were to have aimed to accomplish the former goal of facilitating inter-workplace mingling, their incentive would have been to group attendees in teams composed of people who *have not* known one another well before and who hailed from *different* workplaces. But, if the event organizers were to have aimed to accomplish the latter goal of facilitating inter-workplace competition, their incentive would have been to group attendees in teams composed of people from the *same* workplace—to playfully pit teams like 'Team Posiva', 'Team Fortum', 'Team VTT', or 'Team STUK' against one another. How could ATS YG reconcile these seemingly mutually contradictory incentives?

Of course, I was told with warm pride by a chuckling nuclear energy sector youth, ATS YG responded to this inefficiency with a technical fix. At the 2013 Mikkeli event, the organizers

opted to group together young nuclear industry professionals from diverse workplaces across Finland in composite teams. Doing so maximized inter-workplace mingling. When tallying up their final scores, however, a mathematical formula was devised to assess the performance of each individual attendee. Subsequently, the score sheet was re-calculated to rank the workplaces in terms of their relative performance. This allowed them to see which workplace, ultimately, emerged triumphant. This therefore supported inter-workplace competition. It also obviated, in Roy Wagner's sense of the term (1981), the contradiction underlying what in previous years had seemed like the mutual exclusivity of these two incentives. Finally, it also had a less obvious perk: the light-hearted reflexivity with which participants joked about this technical fix too fostered a sense of camaraderie among them. It enabled them to joke together about how they and their colleagues so often (a) search for technical fixes to seemingly *everything* and (b) feel giddy when their quantitative fixes cleverly solve practical problems. Such, as noted, is associated with what Finns call *teekkarihuumori*—a technically literate variety of humor typical of young tech experts, especially during their university years.

Comedic Counterpoints & Comedic Camaraderies

To an outsider, this all this might seem jarring. How could serious occurrences like nuclear meltdowns or serious threats like terrorist attacks be recast, at this ATS YG event, as games of such lightness? How could one use serious technologies designed for special military operations with all the lightness of a hide-and-seek game? How can such engineer-mentalities, frustrating to many humanists yet harbored by many nuclear professionals, be satirized with such self-aware frivolity? Two attendees answered these questions as follows: imageries of nuclear risk were enacted with such non-seriousness at the Summer Games precisely because nuclear risk was engaged with such seriousness at work. Admittedly, these informants' explanation is in some sense plausible to me. After all, in my years of getting to know many nuclear professionals in Finland, I never met one who, in all seriousness, took lightly his or her weighty responsibilities regarding nuclear risk. Nor did I meet one unfazed by the gravity of his or her duty to protect us from nuclear energy technologies' potentially serious hazards. So, if I may extend these informants' explanations a tad further, perhaps the gravity or weightiness of nuclear risk – collectively experienced at work by nearly all Summer Games attendees – provided organizers with apt motifs from which to draw when designing these light-hearted social games. Inverting such gravity to generate such levity, something fun and humorous was invented (See Keisalo-Galván 2011; Wagner 1981) out of something everyone present knew to be sober and serious. In this sense, nuclear humor was enacted as an energizing, refreshing, or rejuvenating *comedic counterpoint* to its antithesis: nuclear risk.

Attendees also explained to me how the Summer Games event's primary aim was to foster moments of bonding, collegiality, and shared identification among a motley array of nuclear energy sector insiders. Put differently, they saw the event as infusing their group relations with

energy and cohesion through what could be called *comedic camaraderie*. Hence, the Summer Games event's nuclear humor was thought to have an instrumental function: it performed an operation on nuclear risk's serious gravity to enable ATS YG members to let off steam, to kick back, or to unwind one day each year—bonding together with fellow nuclear energy sector insiders. Quasi-functionalist explanations like this were presented to me alongside explanations of how various happenings at Summer Games events could be referenced, reminisced about, or recounted by young nuclear professionals – say, in the coffee room at their workplaces – throughout the year. Such retrospection was thought to lighten day-to-day workplace engagements with the seriousness of nuclear risk by recalling memories of the Summer Games' nuclear humorousness.

These enactments of nuclear humor, along with such quasi-functionalist explanations of them, now also serve as useful instruments for me as an ethnographer. For me, they are useful as both tools to think with and as ethnographic materials to reflect upon. This is especially so as I flesh out my fieldwork experiences' potential significances regarding discussions about nuclear energy in the humanities and social sciences. In this vein, I reflect now on how ethnographic engagement with such comedic camaraderies and comedic counterpoints in contexts like ATS YG's Summer Games might unveil, reveal, or make visible oft-unstudied aspects of nuclear energy insider worlds. I thus wonder how such might challenge us to revisit nuclear risk afresh. To this end, I gesture to the potential for ethnography to bring into view ways in which deeply human modalities like humor become in part constitutive of what one might otherwise imagine as being a most austere regime of nuclear technoscience.

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