

Farting on the Front Lines – Playing with Flatulence during World War II

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In his study of the history of gambling, game historian Jukka Ahonen (2018) explored previously overlooked resources from the Finnish Literature Society Archive. From our research perspective, one particular aspect of Ahonen’s archival inquiry seems especially interesting. The “Dugout Tradition” materials, collected in 1973, comprise over 12,000 pages of oral histories and memories from Finnish WW2 veterans. The materials include stories about competitions, betting, and other wartime leisure activities from the period of 1939–1944, some of which were rather surprising:

“the most popular form of competition in dugouts was farting games in countless variations. Most likely the awareness of survival dependent on one’s brothers in arms might form a dugout’s group dynamics as such that completely self-organized leisure activities were much more popular than officer--organized ‘civilized’ events and hobbies.” (Ahonen 2018. Translation JS)

In this paper we focus on the farting games described in the “Dugout Tradition” archives, and ask the following research questions: what sort of variations did farting games and competitions have on the front lines? How common were they? How can farting games be connected to a hundreds-years-long performative and playable history of breaking wind?

The act of farting consists of both sounds and smells, and investigating this multi-sensory activity is not easy. In the cultural history of the senses, research on smell has remained rather marginal. One reason might be that smell has been considered as a less important sense, or even of lower status, comparing to, for example, sight. On the other hand, the lack of suitable research material is an evident problem, as we can use reproductions with other senses (e.g. sound recordings or photos). Smells, however,

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have been mainly studied on the basis of written descriptions. (Corbin 1986; Chian 2008; Suominen et al. 2018)

Farting as a cultural and historical activity has been examined while studying situations where social norms or roles (e.g. conceptions of gender) have been transgressed, violated, or offended (e.g. Korhonen 1999; Moore 2013; Blackman 1998). In game research, there are not that many studies on farting games, although they have been mentioned, especially in studies of children's games (e.g. Hughes 1981; Warming 2011; Bhana 2005). From a research perspective, one can compare farting games to drinking games, as they both are often overlooked, even though they clearly have long been practiced. In addition, the common element between drinking and farting games is their dual simultaneous nature as social and bodily games (on drinking games, see Sotamaa & Stenros 2016).

When talking about recollection, smells have been in many cases markers of pleasurable aesthetic or nostalgic reminiscence, but smells can also remind us of something unwanted (Suominen et al. 2018). In a society where odorlessness has been a measure of civilized life, smells are present when civilized behavior is under threat or society is in a state of emergency. Consequently, farting games played by soldiers at war, can be explained as an unruly exception, an extension of folly, or as an activity that occurs in a grotesque circle. Breaking civilized norms has always belonged to masculine military culture, together with its performative and competition-oriented nature. These ludic activities were often catalyzed by cramped living conditions and an enabling war-time diet. All these factors together, provided a favorable place, time, and means for playing with breaking wind. A more detailed study of these games can, on the one hand, give us more information on social life during wartimes, while on the other hand, they might provide us an approach to performative masculinity that could also be applied to the study of some other forms of bodily and social play.

The references to farting games in the archival material can be divided into at least three categories. Firstly, informants recalled the Thursday custom of eating pea soup. This tradition came to Finland from Sweden and is assumed to be partially inherited from the Catholics who ate heavily before Friday's fasting. During WW2, pea soup was a common meal because peas were easy to obtain, preserve, and prepare in large quantities. In relation to the Thursday routine, one informant writes: "During the pea soup days we pulled out the big guns with farting loudly. This caused bad blood and fighting. Sometimes, other guys' farts were set on fire with matches."(translations JS) In such cases, farting was a fun shared activity and a tongue-in-cheek type of harassment among brothers in arms, that can be interpreted as a masculine ritual (Provine 2012, 194).

Setting wind afire was the second activity recalled. One informant tells the tale of fart master Pipe-Nokelainen who could not only fart longer and louder than anybody else but also do "fart flames". A passage describes how Pipe-Nokelainen once faced a challenger who vowed to fart a bigger flame, but the underdog had to retreat and defecate outside. There were even rumors of a person being blown to pieces due to flame farting without trousers.

The third type of game mentioned focuses on farting competitions which, while far from sporting events, still had a clear goal and a potential winner. One informant remembered a farting competition that a second lieutenant won. During the contest, it was observed how many farts one could fart in a minute. Another form of competition

was aimed at mimicking machine gunfire. Achieving a certain rate was one of the objectives but in the end, it was the longevity of “gunfire” that determined the winner.

Fart contests and communal farting were part of the “fart culture” featured in the material, in which “silent farts” were highly disapproved of and the best performers were remembered long after the war was over. According to many informants, fart humor was a way of dealing with the harshness of war. Everyday life was challenging enough and breaking away often meant exploring extreme behaviors. In farting competitions, this meant ruined pants, but other extreme activities also included heavy drinking, eating inedible foods, and running races in the freezing cold.

To conclude, although Ahonen notes in his study that farting games were popular, and other researchers (Nyman et al. 1974; Pilke & Kleemola 2015) have made similar observations, this is not very well represented in the archival material. In spite of this inconsistency, we maintain that farting competitions and other similar activities were widespread but probably embarrassing to mention or not considered important to recall. This notion would give an opportunity for further investigations of play from the oral historical perspective: what forms of play would be such that we are not able to obtain oral historical – or other information – on them?

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