

Naming: An Exercise in Identity and Cultural Norms

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Abstract

World of Warcraft is a popular game with more than 10 million players around the world. A previous study has shown that there is no pattern to the way of choosing names in World of Warcraft. However, we are interested in the value of names and how they might reflect our identity. Sometimes, there are special stories behind a name. Through interviews, forum questions, and surveys, we found that most players prefer to choose a name themselves, without any connection to their personal life, or the norms within the game world. Fewer, players choose a name based on a name they heard before, either from fictional or nonfictional sources. Only a few players decided to pick a name based on their personal life, the norms within the game, or to have one chosen randomly.

Introduction

When a player first starts their journey in an online gaming world, they must choose a character through which to portray him or herself. The only limitations are what Blizzard, the developer, has set up, so players have the freedom to represent themselves as a number of fantastical races. However, Yee's "Our Virtual Bodies, Ourselves?" has shown that players prefer to choose characters that are a close representation of their own identity. Charlotte Hagstrom states in "Playing with Names, Gaming, and Naming in World of Warcraft," names often follow specific societal norms, provide an identity for individuals, and are a foundation for societies. Hagstrom found that there was no pattern to the way players create their character's

names, but, the patterns she was looking for are different from our research. Her research question aimed to see if there was a difference in names between race, level and server. However, Hagstrom did not look beyond these surface features to see what players considered when choosing their character's name, beyond a few personal stories. We wanted to find out just what players are thinking when they come up with a character's name.

While we wanted to find if there is a prevalence in internal or external factors that determine player's names, or if people are more likely to just hit the random name button. Our team decided on our research question based off of the valued role names have in our society. As Williams et al found in their study, "There are social rules and the equivalent of laws that govern and impact behaviors in MMO space" (340). Williams focuses on the effect identities and social norms of MMO games and how they compare to norms in 'reality.' Also, they neglect to analyze how names specifically interact in the social scheme and identities in online gaming. We aim to study the relationship between the importance and norms of names in the digital universe of WoW compared to reality's. Therefore, our research question is "How often do WoW players conform with in-universe norms by choosing to follow naming themes?" From there we aim to analyze the following: A) Why are names so highly valued? B) How does this illustrate the importance of societal norms? C) How transversal and important are norms?

Method

The names that we used as data were acquired through surveys posted online, interviews with players inside the game, and obtaining responses from the World of Warcraft forums. Obtaining the names off of forums was simple. We searched for threads containing the phrase "How did you pick your character's name?" and took the responses to those threads whenever a

post included their character's name and reasoning behind that name. Interviews conducted in-game were spontaneous, and only asked the participant how he or she came to pick their character's name. The survey asked slightly different questions, more in tuned with what influenced the player's decision, like "Do most of your character's names reflect their race?" and "How important are your character's names to representing your character's identity?" This survey was posted to over fifteen different web forums and online communities, such as Facebook. Overall, twenty-one people answered the survey.

Our unit of measure was how players choose to name and identify with their characters in online multi-player games. Ultimately, we wanted to find if players follow norms created within the game, and/or if the names are purely for their own persona. We chose an a priori coding scheme to categorize the motivations into five simple categories of how people create their characters names: The names are chosen at random, the players created the names themselves, they are game-related, named after another person or place (either fictional or nonfictional), and finally, their character's name has a personal connection to the player.

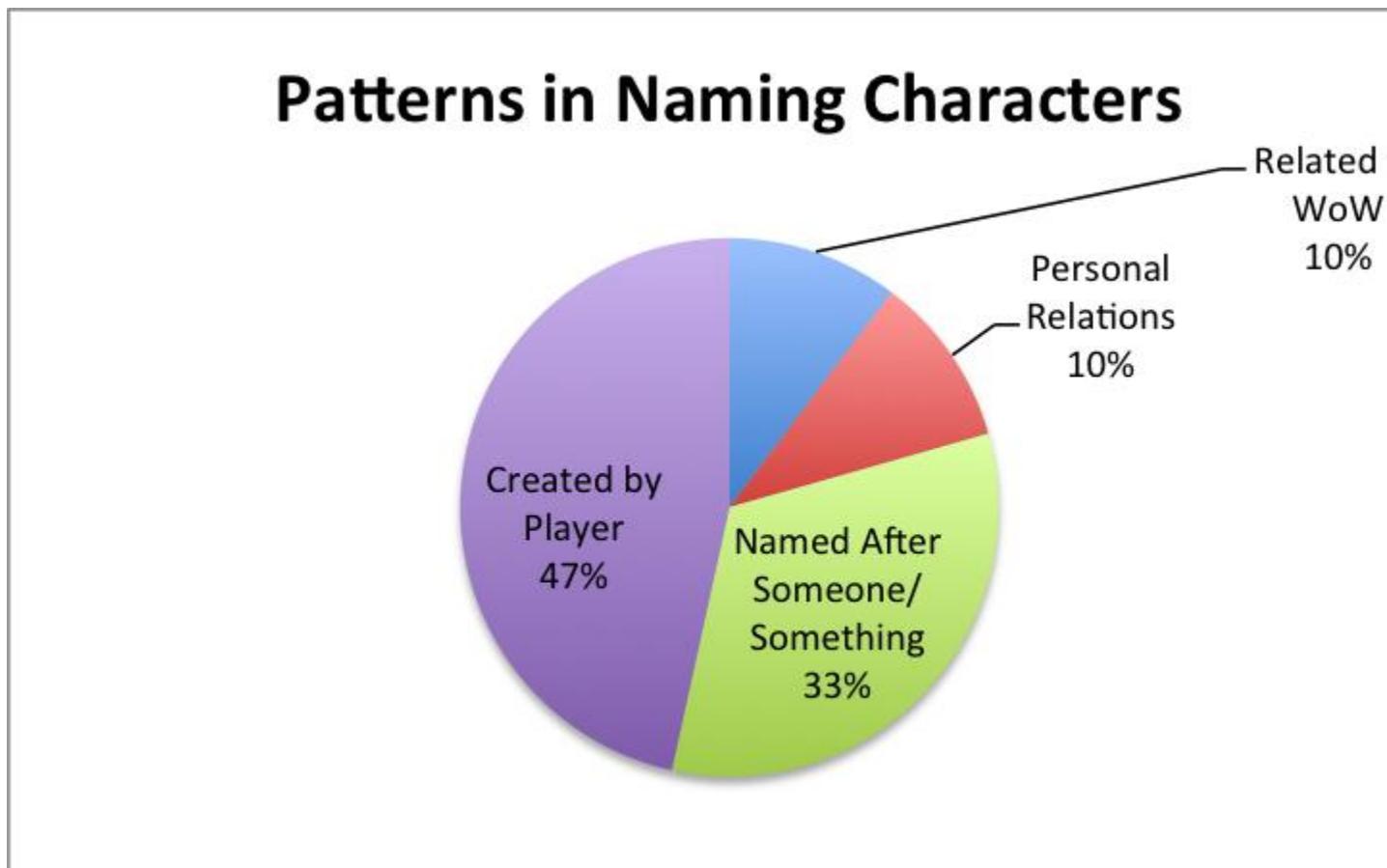
The first category is the most simple; the player simply randomly creates their character's name. The most common way to randomly select a name in an online-multiplayer game, such as World of Warcraft, is a simple button that randomly generates a name. This aspect of naming shows what is most important to these players; the gameplay itself. Most people who choose to randomly name their character want to jump into the virtual world and conquer quests and battle other players with no personal connection to their character. In the second organizational category are names that are created by the player. These names have no personal relations to the player; however, they are not random either. These names express how creative people want to be with their alternate persona. Players want names that they can connect with but create a new

identity with as well. This way, they have the freedom to create an alternate persona that they feel accurately expresses them in some small way without their 'real' identity hanging over them. The third category is names that have a connection to the game. For example, in World of Warcraft, one player chose to look into the history of their character's race, a Night Elf, and pick a name common to the Night Elf culture, Highborne. These are distinctly different from randomly generated names because these players specifically want a connection with the gaming history and culture through picking a normative name that speaks to them or their character. The next category is names that mirror another individual, fiction or nonfiction. This can reference a historical figure, movie character, character found in literature, and other aspects of the player's culture. An important note is that these names have no relation to the online game. This illustrates an important connection between the original character, player, and the player's character. This connection shows that these players want to be identified as the original character and take on a different identity than their own. Lastly, there are the names that have a personal connection with the player, such as another version of their own name. These players are distinctly different than the previous categories because they are embodying their own identity.

Our study has one major term that needs to be specifically defined if one is to understand our research. Even though the definition of a norm may be considered common sense, it is crucial to transparently define the study's own scholarly definition. We constantly refer back to the term 'norm', which is the underlying logic that guide our beliefs, systems, thoughts, and actions which tend to support dominant ideologies and hegemony (Dines, 247). Every culture has its own set of norms, including the Internet, however through our study we wish to reveal whether or not online games have their own specific norms which guide the naming of a character.

The variables in our study could be affected by people playing multiple characters. It is possible that a player who is studied twice could create some swing in the results, as it's possible that a player has a particular naming theme, and thus could count as being double counted. Also, level has to be taken into consideration, as most people who answered on the forums were of high level, and most who answered the interviews were of low level. One could argue that a player is more connected to their character if the character is of a high level, as he or she has spent more time playing as that character.

Results



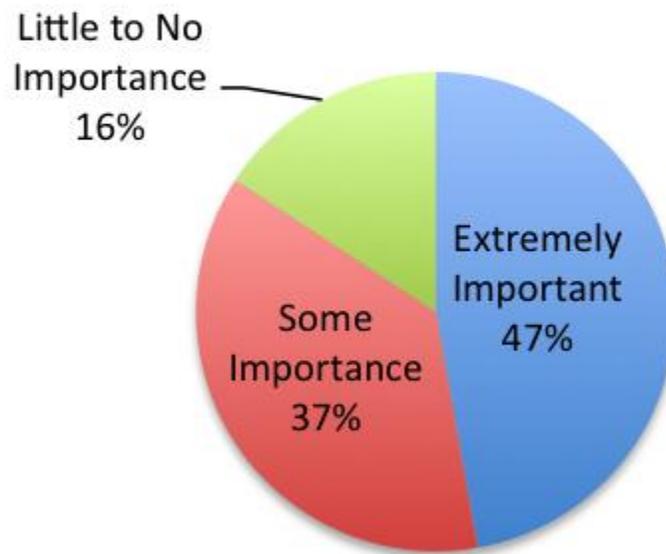
A total of two-hundred-and-twenty-eight names were collected, twenty one of those were from in-game interviews and the rest from responses on the World of Warcraft forum. While

names of all races were collected, there were considerably more names taken from more popular races (Night Elves, Blood Elves, Humans) than less popular races (Goblins, Gnomes, Dwarves). Out of these two-hundred-and-twenty-eight names, twenty four were random, twenty-one were related to World of Warcraft, twenty-one were personal to the player, sixty-seven were named after someone or something, and ninety-five were simply created by the player without any relation to themselves or the game.

Twenty-one people responded to the survey, which was focused more on determining the factors that influence the names rather than the names themselves. Question 1 was a simple acknowledgement of the IRB Survey Statement. Questions 2-4 were yes or no questions. Question 5 was rated on a four point scale and question 6 was a three point scale. The survey showed that 71% of people pick names that reflect their character's gender, while only 35% chose names that reflect their character's race. When asked how important a character's name was to the character's identity, 42% responded with "extremely important," 33% with "some importance," and 14% with "little" or "no importance." However, when asked if a character's name represent the player's identity, the figures were nearly reversed, with 19% responding with "a great representation of me," 38% with "little representation of me" and 42% with "no

representation of me.”

Importance of Character's Name in Relation to Player's Identity



This research shows that players pay little attention to the societal norms internal to the game when choosing their names. Players prefer to have a unique identity, which may clash with the established world setting, than to conform to that setting. There were a number of players who responded by saying they had chosen a name that they had used before, either on previous MMO's or original stories. In addition, in alignment with Hagstrom's study, most names had no correlation to the race of the character being played.

From our research study one can gather digital universe norms are not as influential over the naming process as the player's reality/culturally-based norms. Through our interviews the majority of WoW players named their character based on their own creativity and a small, personal aspect of the name. For example, one player named their character Juedas, after the

biblical figure Judas. This player has a special relationship with the name because of their religious affiliations, and they wished to have the attitude and persona this biblical figure mirrored through their own character. However, this follows the universal system of naming an individual. This player wanted to have the character's identity to be powerful, strong, rebellious, and thus, their name mirrored this.

As our survey results illuminated, character's race has little influence (35%) over their name, which is very similar to our naming patterns in reality. Many names are influenced over a particular culture, which may or may not be connected to their race (but for WoW's case, it is due to the fact that each race has different 'worlds', such as religion and language. Unlike our world, WoW does not allow different races to immediately interact with each other). For example, Native American names are determined by adding his/her clan's name to the individual name. For Chinese naming system all names are created out of words in the language which have an obvious and direct meaning. Obviously, all cultures have different naming norms, and the only norm that influenced characters names within the WoW universe was race, which is basically a culture in the game. Each race has different stereotypical characteristics, for example the Night Elves are known to be peaceful and have a special relationship with nature. In contrast, Orcs are monstrous beasts that are brutish and evil. These aspects of their race/culture are often illustrated in their names. Orcs want tough, masculine names while Night Elves are more tribal and nature based.

Clearly, our reality naming norms have an influence, and are transferred into the digital realm. Players tend to follow universal, reality-based, naming norms that have a small connection (if any) to the MMO game. Even though these two universes have their own set of

norms, MMO games are made within reality's set of cultures and norms. Reality has an upper hand in this relationship, however only regarding names.

From our research study WoW players names are important for the following reasons. First, their names represent the player's identity, and determine how other players will perceive them. The names of players in the game are just like real names in the real world. Secondly, a good or meaningful name can make other players remember them more easily. Other players would be able to recognize them next time and they might play the game with together later. Thirdly, players' names provide a first impression by other players. Sometimes, a good name represents a high skill in WoW, for example, an 85 level player named "Lightgrazer" with lots of achievements in the game. Most of the players like to play with other high skilled players. According to the results we found, most of the players choose their names carefully. For example, a player chose "Nyancat" which is from the Youtube movie Nyan Cat .They had thought for a couple minutes and even some hours before they choose their names. Some of these players would choose some special names to represent their faith. A player named his or her character name as "iamthelightofworld" which is from the bible.

Discussion

There is strong evidence that shows that players prefer to choose their character's name outside of the gaming environment and their personal life. While Yee has said that our characters are an extension of ourselves (Yee, "Our Virtual Body, Ourselves?") the data would suggest that there is still a disconnection between ourselves as players and the characters we choose to portray ourselves as. There may be some similarities to ourselves and our characters, as in height and body type preference (Yee), but our results would show that players are not looking for an

exact representation. This is best seen by responses to the second question of our survey, where players were asked how they choose the names of their characters in a general sense, not about a specific character. Some of the answers given were “I look at the character and let the name come to me,” and “based on their attitude.” While it’s possible that the player could be subconsciously projecting themselves onto their characters, and more research into that subject would be recommended, the important thing is that the player is not consciously thinking of him or elf, but at a separate identity.

Limitations in our research are the sample size. Other researchers have gathered over a thousand names, and we only got a little less than two hundred. Also, some of the names came from the same person, rather than one character per person. As some races were more popular than others, there were far more names from some races than others, possibly throwing off some correlation between naming themes and race.

For anyone looking into further research, we would suggest a larger sample size, and mention the possibility of only collecting one name per player (perhaps their main character) as there’s a possibility that a player with many characters that all have a theme to their names could overshadow a player with one character that falls under a different category. It would be interesting to see in a future research study the relationship between norms in reality and the digital universe, and how they influence or compete with each other. We were concerned mainly with the characters themselves, rather than the focusing on the players, so a different angle may be worth looking into.

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