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Gay Naming in Online Gaming

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This essay analyzes the naming strategies of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) gamers and their allies in massively multiplayer online games. The name choices for their characters and for the groups to which their characters belong are informed by game developers' policies on acceptable and unacceptable language, symbols, and phrases commonly associated with LGBT cultures, and commonplace online hostility toward sexual minorities. These factors often result in creative naming strategies to negotiate the conflicting desire for both openness and protective concealment within the public spaces of online gaming.

KEYWORDS game studies, sexuality, censorship, Internet, coded language

In three instances involving gay or gay-friendly gamers in different online multiplayer games, the name of a character was forcibly changed by an administrator because of a "Naming Policy Violation." In the game Champions Online, the offending character's name was "Qweer Cop," in City of Heroes "The GayHealer," and in World of Warcraft "Geighdayr" ("Champions Online," 2009; "Gay Player," 2006; "Gay Gamers," 2009). These names show a strategy of modifying the spelling or spacing of a name in order to bypass the language filter within a game. This filter systematically replaces specific words deemed inappropriate with a series of asterisks corresponding to the length of the disallowed word. The filter may appear inconsistent or arbitrary; in City of Heroes, as in a number of other games, the words "fag," "queer," and "gay" are filtered, but "dyke," "lesbian," and "homosexual" are not. Purposeful misspellings — such as "phag" or, more frequently, "ghey" — can circumvent the language filter, but, in the case of the three character names cited above, such changes were not enough to evade the rules that govern naming in many online games.

Game companies have detailed and often similar policies about acceptable practice in the naming of characters and guilds, the cooperative social groups that gamers regularly create in online multiplayer games. Among the "Rules Related to Usernames and Guild Designations" ("World of Warcraft Terms of Use," 2010), Blizzard lists a number of unacceptable naming practices, including names that incorporate titles or trademarks, reference well-known figures (e.g. "Britneyspears"), use computer slang (e.g. "xxnewbxx"), or consist of gibberish (e.g. "Asdfasdf"). The rules conclude:

"You may not use a misspelling or an alternative spelling to circumvent the name restrictions listed above, nor can you have a 'first' 'last' name that, when combined, violate the above name restrictions." The rule most regularly cited in instances of explicit gay naming is the one forbidding any names "that incorporate vulgar language or which are otherwise offensive, defamatory, obscene, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable."

This essay uses simplified grounded theory to explore strategies of gay naming in online gaming. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) is a qualitative research method used to identify patterns across multiple items and to arrive at generalizations through a systematic, comparison-driven analysis. Experts in grounded theory advocate a slow, thoughtful approach to the material. Robert C. Bogdan and Sari K. Biklen (2007) believe the researcher develops intimacy with the data through reading and re-reading: "take long, undisturbed periods and carefully read your data at least twice," "get a sense of the totality of your data," and only then begin to explore possible "coding categories," the terms under which items in the full data set can be meaningfully grouped (185). To develop these coding categories, Bogdan and Biklen explain, "you search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics [that] your data cover, and then you write down words or phrases to represent these topics or patterns" (173). Throughout the analysis, the researcher continuously collects new information and compares it against the old, stopping only once the research question has been answered.

What LGBT gamers have to say about their own naming practices at one Internet site, The GayGamer.net Forums, is not all that revealing. The posts in two threads — "How did you come up with your Character's name?" (2010) and "In Game Names/Forum Names" (2011) — merely hint at possible patterns. In choosing or creating their online names, these gamers explain, they variously draw from popular fictional works, employ words from languages other than English, or use online random name generators. They explain that they tend to use the same names for years across multiple games and discussion forums. While any conclusions drawn from these brief discussions must be tentative, the statements suggest that once gamers (gay or otherwise) decide on a name, however they decide on it, they are likely to use it repeatedly to preserve a sense of identity and continuity from one virtual world or discussion forum to the next.

A more promising but labor-intensive strategy for exploring gay naming strategies in online gaming is to analyze the names that LGBT gamers assign their guilds. Already in 2005, Michael Harang reported on the formation of gay guilds as a response to the "homophobic comments and open hostility toward any gay players who mention their sexuality" (38). LGBT gamers continue to form these in-game social organizations in response to hostility encountered online. For example, one poster writes of recent experiences in a popular online game: "I heard the (other) f-bomb one too many times in my old guild and decided to start one of my own" ("New guild," 2011).

Multiple online sources — including five online lists of guilds, discussion threads at Gaymer.org and GayGamer.net, and general Internet search engine results for "gay guild," "lgbt supergroup," and related word strings — yielded 157 names for guilds across no fewer than ten online multiplayer games that present themselves as safe

spaces for LGBT gamers. This list includes only the names of guilds that were actually created, not the much larger list of names that were proposed as possibilities. I made no distinctions based on guild size, history, or level of activity: some guilds are small, others huge; some are defunct, others just recently created or well established and highly active. This list is necessarily incomplete; guilds are constantly being created, occasionally merge or change their names, or become inactive or disappear altogether, and some no doubt have not been advertised widely enough to be located using my search methods.

My approach to these 157 guild names builds on Robert B. Marks Ridinger's 1995 analysis of the titles of several thousand English-language lesbian and gay publications, most of which were published after 1969. Ridinger sets out "to determine what patterns (if any) were present in the corpus of titles chosen by lesbians and gay men for their newspapers and other publications" (60). Ridinger identifies eleven categories; the category of "Geography" (exemplified in the title *Seattle Gay News*) has no relevance to online gaming, but the others are useful for talking about naming patterns of LGBT guilds.

The category of "Feminism," which Ridinger identifies as accounting for "the second largest clustering of titles" (66), has only one clear representative among the LGBT guild names: *Labryssinia*. Whereas the origin of many names in the assembled list must be guessed at, the blending of "labrys" and "Abyssinia" is explained in detail at the guild's website:

> Abyssinia is believed to be the "cradle of life" and first home to human beings on Earth
> [...]. As to the labrys, it is a double-headed axe which Minoan priestesses used in
> religious ceremonies — thus the association with female empowerment, and in modern
> times, lesbianism and feminism. Labryssinia celebrates this empowerment by hosting and
> participating in server friendly LGBT events as well as offering a supportive atmosphere
> for lesbians, straight women and their friends. ("Labryssinia," n.d.)

Similarly, Ridinger's category of "Science and Medicine" — into which he groups "titles utilizing numbers drawn from well-publicized research on homosexuality," such as *Ten Percent* (70), or mathematical terms that "carry the connotation of deviance from the norm (*Vector*, *Tangents*, and *Angles*)" (71) — is represented by only one name, *Kinsey Six*, a reference to the rating "exclusively homosexual" on Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale.

Ridinger's category of "Politics and Law" (exemplified in the titles *Gay Liberator* and *The Advocate*) is slightly better represented. The many uses of "guardians," "order," "council," "defenders," and related terms in the list are not unique to LGBT guilds; in the world of online gaming, such names have become highly formulaic, even clichéd. Other names seem more clearly to reflect LGBT identities and histories, including references to gay activism: *Act Out Be Yourself* (echoing the confrontational strategies of ACT UP and countering the social pressures to "act straight"), *Glitter Storm* (evoking the strategy of "glitter bombing" conservative political and cultural leaders), *Radikal Faeries* (referencing a loosely knit counterculture of gay men), and, most notably, *Stonewall Riot* (commemorating the 1969 riots following a police raid at a New York City bar, now enshrined as the founding moment of the modern LGBT rights movement). Two names on the list parody groups who oppose

equality for LGBT people: *Immoral Majority* (critiquing a now-defunct conservative and evangelical Christian lobby) and *The Agenda* (echoing the phrase "the gay agenda" or "the homosexual agenda," commonly used by conservative Christian groups opposing LGBT rights initiatives).

Whereas Ridinger describes the titles in the related category of "Mythology and History" as "almost exclusively feminine in nature" and cites references to Lilith and to female figures from Greek and Roman mythology (68), the identified guild names tend to be gender neutral or to focus on male subjects. They also tend to cluster around twentieth-century topics rather than earlier ones. Only two draw from classical Greece: *Hand of Aphrodite* and *The Sacred Band* (referencing an army of male lovers and beloveds). The name *Two Spirits* draws from a Native American understanding of gender as determined not by biological sex but rather by behavior and sense of self. A pair of names — *Mattachine* and *Mattachine Knights* — refers to a gay male organization founded in the 1950s; there are no corresponding references to the lesbian homophile organization, the Daughters of Bilitis. By contrast, among the guild names are no fewer than twelve variations on the name Stonewall, including *The Stonewall Family* (earlier known as *La Familia de Stonewall* or simply as *LFDS*).

In his discussion of the category of "Color and Light," Ridinger identifies a recurrence of the colors purple, lavender, and pink as well as treatment of the "theme of enlightenment through such titles as *Radiance*" (61). Among the guild names, however, only *The Pink Posse* uses any of the three colors. A second major point of difference centers on rainbow imagery. Ridinger is surprised to find very little use of the rainbow in the titles of lesbian and gay publications:

> The multihued glory of a rainbow as metaphor for the joining of many distinct yet disparate strands into a coherent whole has been widely adopted within the gay and lesbian community, marking everything from bumper stickers to the now-ubiquitous rainbow flag. Surprisingly, this image has not been very influential in the publishing world, with only one title in the sample, *Rainbow Report*, choosing to weave the image into its masthead. (63)

Among the guild names, by contrast, there are no fewer than twenty-eight references to rainbows (e.g. *Rainbow Alpha Force* and *Rainbow Mafia*), the spectrum of visible light (e.g. *Spectrum* and *Shattered Light*), and prisms (e.g. *Prismatic Order* and *P.R.I.S.M.A.*).

This contrast between the titles of publications and the names of LGBT guilds continues across two other categories. In the category of "Nature," Ridinger notes that plant names are more common than animal names. Among the guild names, the trend is reversed, with only one plant reference and 10 references to furry animals, including three references to wolves and four references to bears. Similarly, in his discussion of the category of "Symbols," Ridinger notes that the pink triangle and the Greek letter lambda are widely used in publishing titles. Among the LGBT guild names, neither symbol appears even once.

Two of Ridinger's remaining categories — "Religion, Mysticism, and Abstract Qualities" and "Community and Self-Acceptance" — seem well represented among the guild names. Belonging to the first are names such as *Diversity*, *Equality United*,

and *JETS Inc.*, an acronym for "Justice.Equality.Tolerance.Style." Belonging to the second are names such as *Out and Proud* and *Praetorian Pride* as well as names that focus on family or close friendship (e.g. "brotherhood," "family," and "society").

Into his final category, "Language and Literature," Ridinger groups the publication titles alluding to literary works and/or employing puns, camp humor, and gay slang. In adapting this category to fit the naming strategies of LGBT guilds, the term "literature" needs to be replaced with "media." Among these guilds are a handful of literary references: *Nameless Love* derives from the final line of Lord Alfred Douglass' poem "Two Loves," *Slitherin* comes from the Harry Potter series, and *Knights of the White Lady* takes its name from the character of Eowen in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. However, film, television, musicals, music, and other video games are more influential sources for these guild names. Names inspired by films include *Brokeback Rangers*, *Mean Girls*, and *Raiders of da Lost Taint* as well as two names (*Oz* and *Lions, Tigers, and Bears*) deriving from *The Wizard of Oz*. Names from television series include *Torchwood* and *The Pink Posse* (a reference to a *Queer as Folk* story-line, in which a group of young gay men decide to bash back). Two names likely originate in musicals: *Wicked* and *Friends of Dorothy*. No fewer than three guild names have their source in contemporary music, including *Cherry Chapstick* (drawing from a line in Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl"), *True Colors* (referencing the Cindy Lauper song that has become an anthem for many supporters of LGBT equality), and *Born This Way* (named after a Lady Gaga song with inclusive statements about marginalized populations). Other video games serve occasionally as sources: *Talons of the Morrigan* references a succubus-like character in the Dark Stalkers video games, and *Kupo Knights* references a fantastical creature in the Final Fantasy series.

"Puns were one of the largest clusters of titles in the sample," Ridinger notes (63), and his observation holds true of the LGBT guild names. Examples of camp humor, gay slang, and playful language include *Cirque de Sogay*, *City of Gaymers*, *Flaming Gaze*, *Raging Spears*, *Rough Trade*, and *The Spreading Taint*. Puns serve to express something indirectly rather than openly, and the multiple meanings in the name *The Spreading Taint*, which has developed into one of the largest and most active LGBT guilds across multiple online multiplayer games, continue to create controversy because of the possible implication that homosexuality is a blight or the veiled reference to the perineum. In his contribution to GLAAD's Panel on Homophobia & Virtual Communities on July 28 2009, even the founder of *The Spreading Taint* seems to express discomfort in saying the name aloud in a formal setting. He pauses after naming the guild, takes the microphone from his mouth, glances down and away, and then uncomfortably provides a cue for the audience: "Laugh now" ("VIDEO," 2009).

One might speculate about reasons for these different naming trends; for example, generally abandoning "pink" and sometimes embracing "bear" in the names of LGBT guilds might point to a weakening of the link between gay male sexuality and effeminacy. Writing at the beginning of the 1980s, Leonard R. N. Ashley argues that the "masculinization of the 'gay' image" over a couple of decades is reflected in the names of bars for gay men: "Hangouts are named *The Mineshaft*, *The Ramrod*, *The Anvil*, *The Barracks*, *The Brig*, *Man's Country*; any strong butch image will do: the *tulle box* of the fifties is the *Tool Box* of the seventies" (225). A more "grounded"

approach, by contrast, seeks confirmation in discussion forums in which LGBT gamers brainstorm new guilds. As these discussions again and again illustrate, the decision to accept or reject a potential guild name is driven by a desire for something both subtle and yet somehow recognizably gay.

In a brief exchange about the game Age of Conan ("Age of Conan," 2009), one poster considers creating a guild named *The Bath House* but is not sure if the name is subtle enough: "sounds kind of the right era, and kind of homoerotic too [. . .] but I'm not sure [. . .] maybe something less in your face." Another gamer suggests naming the guild after a character in the game itself who is likely gay as a way to conceal the guild's very nature: "That way only the players who know about him being gay also know the guild name's hidden meaning."

In a more developed World of Warcraft thread ("Gay Gamer guild in WoW:TBC," 2006), fifteen guild names are proposed. The most sexually explicit of these names, *Cock Riders*, plays on the large bird mounts used by one race in the game. The name receives positive comments but is rejected as too explicit (one poster doubts "if the admins would let us keep it"), and another name is adopted, *Raging Spears*, because, as one poster writes, "it's naughty, but only if you realize what it's referring to, which a large amount of people will not."

The brief disagreement between two gay gamers in yet another thread on a third game centers on this same question of explicitness ("One Big Aion Discussion," 2009). One poster favors the names *Sacred Band* and *Raging Spears* over *Rainbow Mafia*, preferring a guild that is not "named with neon letters" nor "so visibly gay." This poster writes: "I don't want the whole MMO world to see that I am gay from my guild name tag." The other gamer argues that a thinly veiled phallic reference is less inclusive and less easily recognizable than a rainbow, but concedes that the obvious gayness in the name *Rainbow Mafia* is "a double edged sword": it is "easily recognizable" but, "unfortunately, it does connect you with LGBT people."

As a final example, a pair of Final Fantasy threads includes extensive brainstorming and even two polls in which forum members could select their favorite guild names from two lists ("FFXIV Guild name," 2009; "FFXIV GG Guild," 2009). Here, the proposed guild names using the Greek letter lambda receive almost no support. One poster is puzzled by the meaning of the once widely used gay symbol: "And maybe I've just been away from the forums too long to understand the lambda thing, but could anyone maybe explain?" More notably, poster after poster in these threads expresses desire for a guild name that is subtle enough to avoid unwanted scrutiny yet recognizable enough to draw the attention of outside LGBT gamers who might be interested in joining.

Taken as a whole, these and other online discussions show little familiarity with or fondness for what may now seem as the dated symbols of gay liberation (the pink triangle and the Greek letter lambda) and a split over the currently dominant and widely recognized symbol (the rainbow). There are conflicting desires to be open but not too open, to be recognizably gay but not to invite abuse from other gamers, and to walk the line of sexual suggestiveness without raising the ire of game administrators.

Some scholars argue that gaming should be understood as part of rather than apart from culture. Adrienne Shaw (2010) challenges our tendency to view "video game

culture as separate from a constructed mainstream culture, as something new, different, and more importantly definable" and urges us to "look at video games in culture rather than games as culture" (404, 416). An earlier study cited in Shaw advocates more specifically that games be viewed as a media practice: "[c]onsidering video games as a media practice [...] would imply not only attending to video game consumption (or the practice of playing games), but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices and how it is socially organized" (Roig et al., 2009: 91).

In the final analysis, gay naming in online gaming may not be all that different from gay naming in the so-called real world, where one finds a similar tendency for organizational names to conceal nearly as much as they reveal. After all, an echo of the strategically obscure names of early homophile movements — the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society — may be heard in the name of arguably the most important LGBT lobby group today, The Human Rights Campaign, and student organizations across the United States adopt names that often sound much like the LGBT guilds found in online games: Spectrum, Ten Percent Society, Prism, Pride, and Light.

Notes

[1] In the thread "Guild Name Violation: Sexually Explicit Adjective" (2008), a poster complains that his new guild name, *Throb*, has been found unacceptable and laments that the name will "be reverted back to its boring self (Knights of THIS, Champions of THAT [...] it's one of those ones)." In a different thread at the same site ("Your favorite guild names [...]" 2006), another poster identifies the dominant naming formula of guilds as following the pattern of "Plural Noun of Intangible Noun." These clichéd naming conventions are occasionally present in the LGBT guilds names reviewed for this essay (e.g. *Defenders of Stonewall* and *Paladins of Pride*).

[2] A flurry of posts in response to *The Stonewall Family*'s receipt of the October 2009 guild of the month award in World of Warcraft includes significant comments on the guild's name ("The Stonewall Family," 2009). At least two posters note that the name carries "a proud tradition of fight back" and references "a turning point in LGBT history," whereas a critic argues that the word "family" is unsuitable in the name of a LGBT guild: "It is not a family. It is unity based upon a lifestyle that ultimately is barren."

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