The Think Tank: The Best MMORPG Character Naming Systems

My first MMO was Ultima Online, where character naming rules were so unrestricted that it wasn't uncommon for people to copy names from others to pass themselves off as other players, usually for espionage and infiltration purposes. My guild even lost a guild base that way once to a particularly savvy spy with the same name as one of our officers! Subsequent MMOs, all the way into the present day, usually curtail such exploits with harsh naming conventions, including WildStar, which made recently headlines with a botched reservation system for its unique names (in fact, the registration ends tomorrow!). But players don't seem any happier with unique names than with copycat names.

I polled the Massively writers about their opinions on the best naming systems in MMOs and how they'd like to see naming systems improved in general.

@ceruleangrey: My favorite naming system was in Phantasy Star Universe: You could name a character anything you wanted to, and the actual identifier was a unique ID number. Wondering if Bob is really Bob? Tap a key and the display switches from names to numbers. The only thing I couldn't stand about it was that IDs were account-wide instead of character-specific. I probably still would have been okay with that if friends weren't able to see which character you were on (but at least friend list additions had to be mutual).

Guild Wars 2 actually has one of my least favorite naming systems. I'm not sure why names need to be unique across the entire game when everyone has an account name and unique number that anybody can see, and the only thing it has going for it aside from the ability to use spaces in names is the "appear offline" feature. I'm 100% with MJ on the importance of privacy in MMOs, and I really hate it when games privilege being able to contact and track anyone at any time over the individual player's comfort and control.

@nbrianna: I still consider Champions Online to have the best currently functioning naming system: a unique global handle and non-unique character names. But most games that use global handles also tank my privacy and force-link all my characters together, which annoys me no end (as it does MJ and Toli!). In an ideal world, I'd much prefer to see an MMO like the one Larry and Jef describe here, one where character names aren't unique and aren't automatically learned by magic when you walk into a room.

@Eliot_Lefebvre: There is no ideal system. First and last names has issues, handles have issues, every naming system has issues. The lesson here is that it was really, really dumb to have a single global name reservation rather than reserving it per-server.

@jefreahard: My ideal naming system is player/client-specific. If https://gservers.org/ 've just got to have floating name tags above everyone's head, I'd rather a game allow me to assign names to players I come across until I actually talk to them and ask their name, at which point I could adjust my name list to reflect that or I could keep referring to them with tags like

Girl in the Red Dress or Crappy Tank or whatever. It will probably never happen, though, because it would be perceived as cumbersome by the go-go-go crowd.

@Sypster: I think it's silly to have unique names at all because I manage just fine in the real world when I encounter another Justin. I don't get confused or infuriated. If people want to pick a popular name that others might pick, then they'll have to be cool with the fact that they might bump into others with the same name.

Cryptic's handle system works just fine, although I think this solution is even easier: Allow first and last names. Your chances of creating conflicting names goes down at that point, and personally I come up with better names when I can choose two of them. Not everyone can or wants to pull off what Prince, Madonna, and Sting did, after all. We can be known for more than one name.

@Shaddoe: When I was roleplay senator for Star Wars Galaxies, I proposed a naming system that was similar to the one Jef described. Characters would be assigned a name or perhaps they could assign themselves a name. However, other players could assign them a different name on their personal client. For a roleplayer, this could mean that I could introduce myself as John to one player and Jim to another. The first player would flag me as John and always call me John, and the second player would flag me as Jim and always call me Jim. Of course, it could get a bit taxing on the client-side, but given the number of calls the client already makes, it doesn't even stack up.

If I were to choose one in an existing game, I would have to go with Champions Online's system. All the names are attached to the account name and not beholden to existing names. That means that if I'm Captain Hammer, players can send me a message as Captain Hammer, but if there is more than one Captain Hammer, they would have to specify with the account name (i.e., Captain Hammer@shaddoe).

I'm not a huge fan of account names, either. But in existing systems that need a unique modifier, I'd rather use account names than have the name that I want taken by someone who would sit on for seven years and never use it. That totally happened to me in Galaxies. I know this because if you sent credits to someone, you would receive notification when that person would received them. But they couldn't actually received them until the other player logged in. So I periodically sent a single credit to the person who had the name I wanted. In seven years, I never received a notification that he received my credits.

(Can you imagine a game that assigned players phone numbers instead of names? Then your friends list would work like a contact list on a cell phone. I'd buy into that.)

@MJ_Guthrie: I don't know that there is a best naming procedure, but I certainly have some pet peeves that are in my opinion the worst. And the first three entries on that list are account-wide names, account-wide names, and account-wide names. I literally loathe when a game forces me to be universally identified no matter what character I play on. In fact, I

have ditched games that have required that for that reason alone. As a roleplayer (and someone with a public and a private life), when I am on different characters I am doing so for a reason. Maybe I want to play with my kids without people who know me from work interrupting. Maybe I have two characters with distinct personalities for roleplay and I get tired of people mixing the two because they identify with me the player instead of the character. I rarely let anyone know all my characters; only those closest to me in my life are afforded that privilege. So yes, I am beyond annoyed when a game forces me to be public no matter what. Some might say it helps boost accountability? Poppycock. I don't think it does because people can just get another account for their more jerky behaviors. Or in my case, get a second account just to afford some privacy. I can also understand the frustration of losing a treasured name to someone else. I've been on the receiving end of someone purposefully taking my name in a game specifically to try to impersonate me. Let me tell you -- that was quite an adventure. And by adventure, I mean headache. I've seen it happen to others as well.

If I had to choose a naming convention, I would go with The Secret World's because you can have whatever first and last name for your character that you want. All that needs to be unique is the nickname. Because the world's dimensions can be traversed by everyone, I can understand that the nicknames there must be unique game-wide, but for any game with servers, server-wide is plenty fine! The only way I would accept an account-wide identification is if it is one that the players can never, ever see! So if you want that person on your friend's list, you have to physically see the character and tag him, at which point the system notes which character you are referring to and tacks that on the back end invisibly. Then, if you ever meet a second one with that name, it tags him/her/it and prompts you to add an appendix note on your friends list so you can tell them apart (because the system can already tell them apart).

I wish I could remember the game a while back that was proposing using the naming convention where there was no name over anyone's head until you assigned a name personally. I think it may have been Heroes Journey. What I remember most was how much I loved that idea! True, sending tells and stuff would be difficult, but the game was focusing on more realistic communication anyway, like proximity, so tells weren't even an issue. Add the in-person tagging to this and you've solved the tells and mail problem!