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It's the Naughties, Baby!
Not Quite — But Regardless,
the Decade Without a Name Rolls On

A surge of British and Australian votes pushed the Austin Powers-sounding "naughties" over the top in an Internet poll to name the decade. But it hasn't caught on.

By Michael S. James

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— There were the aughts, the naughts, the ohs, the double-ohs, the two-Ks, the M&Ms, the zeroes, the 2000s, the tweens, the pre-teens, the milleni-os, the millie-nillies and others too silly to mention.

More than two years ago, *The Washington Post*, Voice of America and other media outlets held contests to name our decade. A Website, namethedecade.com, claimed more than 100,000 hits and named a winner — the Austin Powers-worthy, though impractical, "naughties."

Let's see: "It's time for another sexual revolution, baby. Get with it. It's the *naughties*. Yeah, baby! Yeah!" ... Or not. Or naught.

But it's mid-2002, and it — you know, the thingamajig, this decade, right now, whatchamacallit — still hasn't picked up a popular name. Shouldn't we have solved this by now?

Instead, we just have, "The first decade of the 21st century."

"You would have thought it would have been impossible for us to live without this, but it looks like we're going to," says Robert Thompson, a professor of media and popular culture at Syracuse University.

"I started using the ohs, and it just didn't work," he added. "And the cute ones, you knew those couldn't stand. ... Are you going to hear Peter Jennings say something like, 'In the worst day of fighting so far in the M&Ms...?' There's no way that's going to work."

Doomed to Be Nameless?

But now that the flurry of naming ideas have subsided with no final resolution, we may have missed our chance, says Allan Metcalf, author of the forthcoming book, *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of Their Success*, and an English professor at MacMurray College in Illinois.

"As each decade approaches, you get lots of articles summing up the decade just ending and predicting the next decade," he says, noting that already happened in the late 1990s. "If we're not saying it now, we won't be saying it later. It all boils down to that."

Others suggest there's still time, and the Sept. 11 attacks may even shape the name.

"Saying 'the '60s' had no meaning in 1961, although we all [think we] know what it means today," says Lee Clarke, a linguist at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "Same thing with 'the Reagan years,' the 'me generation,' and so on. In 2009, I predict, we will start naming this decade."

But Claude S. Fischer, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, is not surprised naming

the decade fell off people's radar, and doesn't think it ever ranked high on most people's list of concerns.

"You're talking about a relatively few people writing in the papers," he says. "I doubt Joe Blow coming off his work shift was worried about what he was going to call the years between 2000 and 2009."

The Need for a Name

Thompson cares about it, though. As a pop culture authority, it's his job to compare decades and spot trends in the current one. He finds it annoying not having a name — and likens the problem to having to resort to "he or she," rather than a single, gender-neutral pronoun, decades after the women's rights movement.

"Once a day in a conversation, I will find myself awkwardly talking around an inability to describe where we are temporally right now in terms of the decade," he says. "There is a sense that until you really name something, you can't really get your hands around it or your teeth sunk into it."

That's how Ali Partovi and Alan Shusterman felt, and partly why the two former dot-com workers and aspiring screenwriters were part of the team behind the namethedecade.com Web site of a few years back.

The naughties narrowly edged out several choices bunched at the top of their survey, winning thanks to a surge of British and Australian votes. But, Partovi concedes, "You're probably never going to be seeing anybody saying that in a casual conversation."

The same holds true for the zeroes, which "just sounds stupid," and the aughts or naughts, derived from 1900-era or Anglophile terms for zero, he adds.

"English has changed since then, and people don't go around saying 'aught' anymore," Partovi says.

Still, they are not giving up hope.

"The way I believe it will probably gain a name is that some organization or a group or a movie will sort of refer to the decade and it will happen by osmosis," Shusterman says. "Every other decade has a name. Why not this one?"

Is Namelessness Normal?

Why not? Because every other decade does not necessarily have a name.

"What do we say for 1900 to 1910?" asks Walt Wolfram, a North Carolina State University professor who is past president of the Linguistic Society of America. "The 1900s doesn't work, because people use that for the entire century. So when you think about it, maybe [having nameless decades] is not peculiar. Maybe there is this sort of gap, where the first decade ... simply doesn't get labeled."

The problem may even carry over to the second decade of the century, many say. Will we call it the teens — or the tens?

Some linguists have theorized that leaving a gap in the language by not naming something implies the culture does not value it. But Metcalf calls a chapter in his book, "The Myth of Gaps," and has come to believe a paraphrase, such as "the first decade of the 21st century," can work fine.

"Baseball hats come in a variety of colors and sizes," he says. "Would we be better off if we had a different word for each different color and size of baseball cap? Right there we would have hundreds of words we'd have to learn."

"It does not benefit a language to have a word for everything," he says. "There's no question that if there ever was a need for a word, there is a need for a word to describe this decade ... [but] marketers still will be able to refer to the first decade of the 21st century."

Greatest Hits of the First Decade of the 21st Century? That First-Decade-of-the-21st-Century Show? Sounds kind of silly.

"Twenty years from now, you're going to have to have something to call it," Thompson says. "It's the greatest hits of the what? And my guess is it's going to be the ohs. I've always thought would be what kicks in."

Stuff like the naughties and the millie-nillies? That's so '90s. If a name emerges, the ohs have the inside track, most observers agree, because people already refer to the individual years as oh-one, oh-two, oh-three and oh-four.

"It's not too cute," Thompson says. "It doesn't reek of, it's some clever little thing that's going to get old. And it does the job. And it works both verbally and in print. And it's simple. One syllable. It doesn't depend upon translation. I mean, some of these cute, clever ideas, it took 10 minutes to explain why it was a good idea." □

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