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How to Name a Baby



The first time a friend of mine had a child, it was intensely jarring.

I'd be living my normal day, and then the thought would hit me—"Matt has a *son*"—and my whole world would get turned upside down.

Three years and six friend babies later, I'm 32 and have numbed to the whole thing considerably. It's still weird. But not *jarring*.

This new phenomenon in my life has introduced several new experiences—things like "having your feelings hurt and losing self-confidence because your friend's toddler doesn't like you" and "learning that talking about the baby as a 'toy' or a 'pod' and commenting on 'it not having a brain yet' is less funny to the baby's parents than it is to you." But perhaps the most frequent new experience is finding myself in discussions about baby names, both in the form of talking to the impending parents and pressuring them to reveal the candidates, and talking to other friends about the eventual name choices behind the new parents' back.

(Note: definitely best to keep the name candidates a secret until after the baby's born—no name will please everyone and other peoples' opinions really shouldn't be part of the process for something so personal. And when you announce the name after the baby is born, everyone has to pretend they like it to your face no matter what they think, so you'll end up feeling like everyone likes it.)



You'd assume that thinking about baby names is a new thing in my life, but I've actually had a lifelong fascination with the topic.

My curiosity rose to a whole new level the day I discovered an amazing website called [The Baby Name](#)

<http://waitbutwhy.com/2013/12/how-to-name-baby.html>



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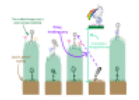
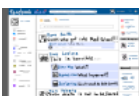
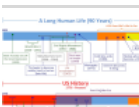


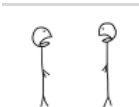



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12 Types Of People You'll Find In Every

Wizard, and especially their Voyager tool, which lets you plug in a few letters or a whole name and see a visual depiction of its corresponding popularity trends over time. The Voyager is delicious and rents permanent space in my Dark Playground. (Of course, as soon as it was the topic of this post, putting Voyager play time in the Dark Woods for the first time ever, the monkey suddenly wanted to do other things and kept clicking away from the page. But that's a whole other topic.)

So, for all these reasons, it seemed like the right time for a post about names, trends, and the things expecting parents need to think about as they make this decision.

After many hours on The Baby Name Wizard (and the government's official name database), here are my thoughts (focusing on the US unless otherwise stated)—

Parents choosing a name have a few options:

1) Go Timeless

Examples: John, James, William, David, Mary, Sarah, Elizabeth

Benefits: You won't embarrass yourself; You won't pigeonhole the kid in any way, including generationally; It's classy; There's something cool about a common bond with centuries of previous humans

Drawbacks: It's kind of boring.

These names are often biblical, or sometimes those of famous royalty, and they're bigger than any one generation—William is not a typical old man's name or young guy's name—it's just William. And they're always popular.

But they're less popular than they used to be. The Top 10 boys names in the 1880's share six members with the Top 10 boys names in the 1950's: John, William, James, Robert, Charles, and Thomas. But the Top 10 in 2012 only includes one name from that list—William.

2) Go Super Weird


Examples: Winter, Namaste, Jameliah, Stormy, Cameo, Grudzel


Benefits: No one will ever question your balls; If the kid is awesome, then it's awesome.


Drawbacks: They'll have to spell their name on the phone 2 trillion times throughout their life; They'll have to watch people figuring out how to react every time they introduce themselves; They'll get made fun of at school; It might hurt their chances of getting job interviews; If the kid isn't awesome, the whole thing is awkward; If you were just in a phase and made a compulsive decision, that's shitty cause the kid has to live with it forever.


Despite several drawbacks, it's a nice chance to say, "P.S. We don't give a shit about what other people think." And again, if the kid's awesome, a weird name just makes them even more awesome.


For what it's worth, a lot more people are going weird now than they used to. People used to be almost uniformly conformist. In 1950, only 5% of parents strayed out of the Top 1,000 names when naming their child. In 2012, 27% of parents went weird and left the Top 1,000.


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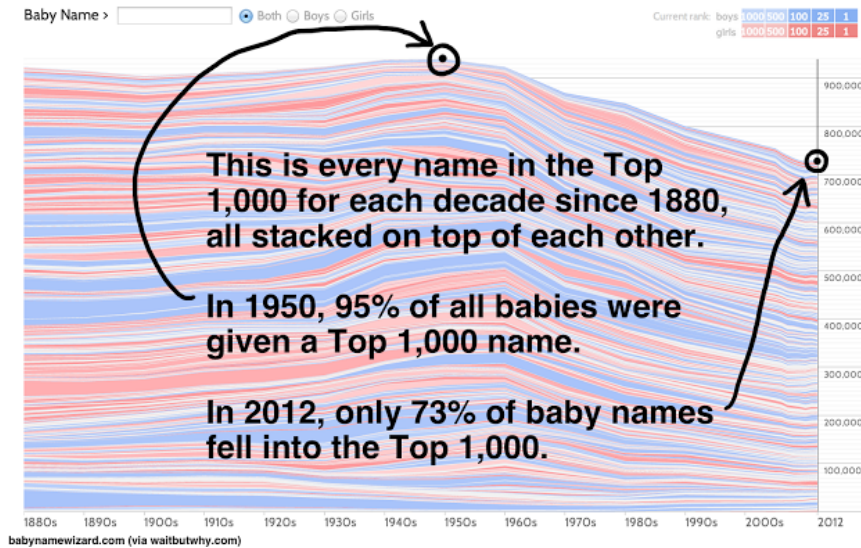


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This is part of a broader trend away from conformity: In 1880, the Top 4 boys names (John, William, James, George) covered one in every *four* boys. In 2012, the Top 4 boys names (Jacob, Mason, Ethan, Noah) cover only one in every 26 boys.

3) Go a Little Weird But Not Too Weird

Examples: Ashton, Wyatt, Luca, Brooklyn, Delaney, Alexia

Benefits: You're being nonconformist but without most of the drawbacks in Category 2; If it's a really good name people will be jealous and you'll be all thrilled with yourself; It says "My parents are cool but not *too* annoying."

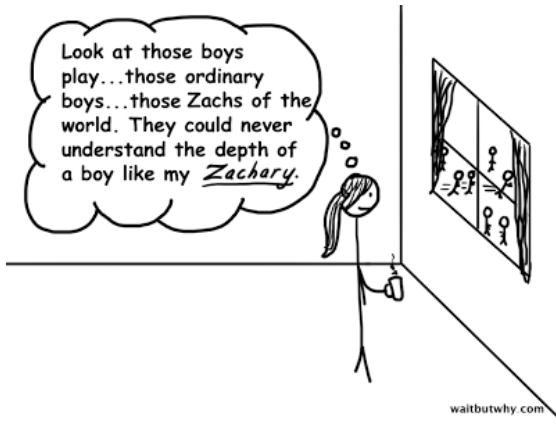
Drawbacks: You might be a little too pleased with yourself for someone who still let the Top 200 names dictate their choice; There's a chance a lot of other people feel the same way about that "unconventional" name and you inadvertently find yourself as part of a Name Fad.

This category is perfect for parents who are far too thrilled with themselves and are having far too special a child for a Timeless or Top 10 Name, but who also look down upon those who go for a Super Weird Name as annoying or unclassy. (In case you're wondering, most of my friends went with Category 3.)

But let's focus on something I mentioned in the drawbacks: *The Name Fad*. It turns out that sometimes you're not the only one who loves that fresh, oh-so-pretty name, and a Name Fad happens when millions of Category 3 couples all start to say "Wait I like that" when they hear about someone else making a great Category 3 choice (it can also be started by a famous person—e.g. the surge in Miley's in the last decade).

Suddenly, that name so perfectly placed at #137 on the list of popular names is #86. Then the next year it's #41. Then #18. Then #5. All to the horror of the Category 3 couple.

You know when everyone calls a guy by his nickname except his parents, who use his full three-syllable name? I think part of that is trying to wrench individuality from a fad name.



The fad is heightened by another large category of parent choice—

4) Just Dive Into the Current Honeymoon, Knowing You're Picking a Popular Name

Examples: Anything from the current Top 20.

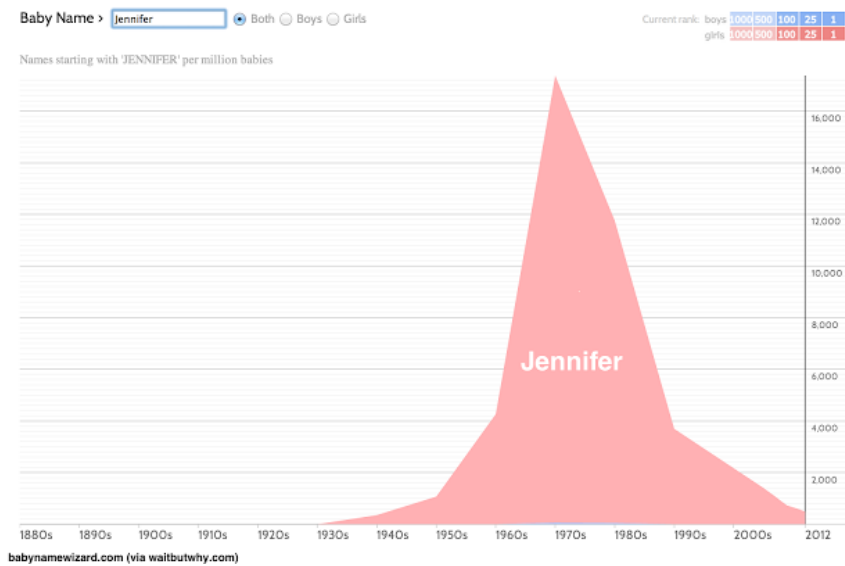
Benefits: Safe; Hip; Bonds your child with his/her whole generation in a broad sense.

Drawbacks: There will be three other kids in the class with the same name and they'll be referred to along with their last name initial; Your child will one day have a Middle-Aged Name, and one later day, an Old Person Name.

To me, studying Name Fads throughout time yields the most interesting information because it speaks about something society is doing as a whole at a given time. Let's spend the rest of the post digging into Name Fads and how they work—

Name Fads

Here's what a Name Fad looks like:



Between 1965 and 1985, everyone named their daughter Jennifer, and now, no one does. So Jennifer was officially a Name Fad. What this means for all the Jennifers of the world is that while they've enjoyed spending most of their life so far with a cute, hip, young girl name, they are on their way to having a Your Mom's Friend's Name. A Your Mom's Friend's Name happens when lots of middle-aged people have a name that no young or old people have.

A few decades after that, Jennifer can look forward to having an Old Lady Name, which happens when a name belongs to lots of old ladies, but no one under 75.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's a fact that Jennifer is irreparably branded with her generation forever. Of course, Jennifer is just one of many such names.

In 30 years, the names Natalie, Chelsea, Samantha, and Lindsay will sound how Nancy, Cheryl, Susan, and Linda do today. And in 60 years, the names Ethan, Cody, Brandon, and Matthew will be Earl, Chester, Bernard, and Melvin. These are all just Name Fads—only difference is when they happened.



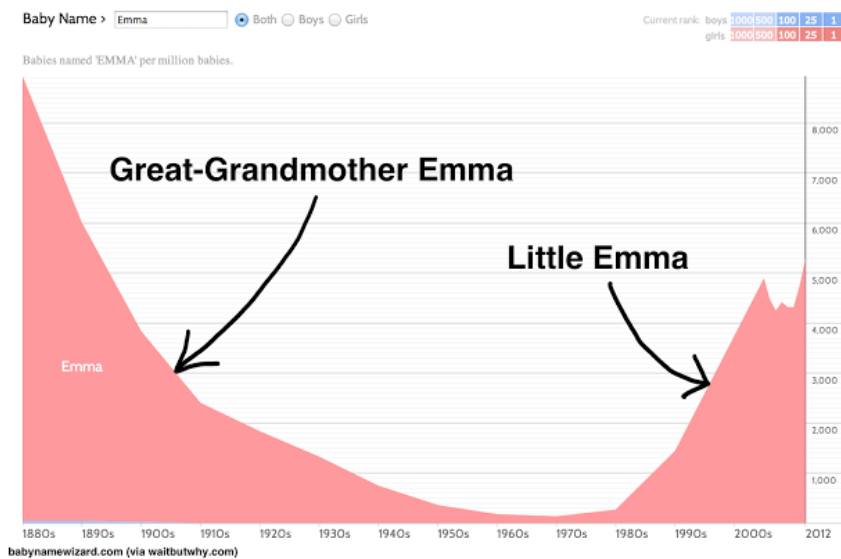
If you want to know if your name is a fad, type it into the [Voyager](#). If it looks like a witch's hat, it's a fad.

So what's hot right now?

Rank	Girls	Births	(2011 Rank)	2012 Rank	Boys	Births	(2011 Rank)
1	Sophia	22158	1	1	Jacob	18899	1
2	Emma	20791	3	2	Mason	18856	2
3	Isabella	18931	2	3	Ethan	17547	7
4	Olivia	17147	4	4	Noah	17201	5
5	Ava	15418	5	5	William	16726	3
6	Emily	13550	6	6	Liam	16687	15
7	Abigail	12583	7	7	Jayden	16013	4
8	Mia	11940	9	8	Michael	15996	6
9	Madison	11319	8	9	Alexander	15105	8
10	Elizabeth	9596	11	10	Aiden	14779	9
11	Chloe	9595	10	11	Daniel	14143	10
12	Ella	9115	12	12	Matthew	13834	12
13	Avery	8272	18	13	Elijah	13719	13
14	Addison	8122	13	14	James	13271	17
15	Aubrey	8006	20	15	Anthony	13105	11
16	Lily	7889	15	16	Benjamin	12695	19
17	Natalie	7852	14	17	Joshua	12522	14
18	Sofia	7767	19	18	Andrew	12501	16
19	Charlotte	7418	27	19	David	12422	18
20	Zoey	7411	28	20	Joseph	12404	22

Sophia and Emma in particular are not just sweeping the US, but the whole Western world.

Sophia (or Sofia) is in the Top 6 baby names in Italy, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Argentina, and Chile. Emma is Top 6 in Ireland, Finland, Norway, Canada, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. Emma's popularity is also clearly caused by a wave of naming after great-grandmothers, another way people sometimes name a child:



To stress how much more popular the biggest names used to be, Mary was *six times* as popular in 1880

as either Sophia or Emma is now.

And looking at the other top names of 2012 emphasizes **just how dead fads are once they're over:**

From the 2012 Top 1,000 US Names List

All green names are higher on the list than all red names

BOYS		GIRLS	
Easton	Phillip	Yaretzi	Lindsay
Weston	Keith	Lyric	Caitlin
Ryder	Scott	Luna	Erica
Declan	Brett	Teagan	Dana
Axel	Mitchell	Eden	Brittany
Ryker	Marc	Brooklynn	Tiffany
Iker	Dustin	Paisley	Kelly
Kyler	Larry	London	Bethany
Gunner	Terry	Autumn	Tara
Maximiliano	Douglas	Genesis	Whitney
Gael	Randall	Serenity	Heather
Brantley	Corey	Aria	Shannon
Jase	Curtis	Harper	Courtney

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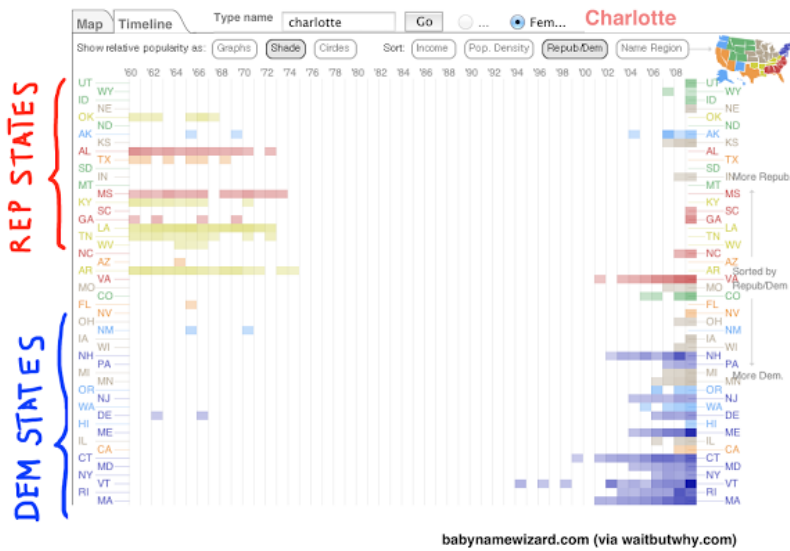
So to be clear, Gunner and Gael are currently more common baby names than Phillip or Scott. And Lyric, Paisley, and Brooklynn with two n's are all more common than Lindsay, Caitlin, and Erica. We're still close enough in time to the red name fads that they seem really common, but they're actually just fads. And they're over.

Some other odd fads I observed while researching:

Demographic-related fads

Charlotte has a weird history.

After dying out as a popular name for Southern women a few decades ago, Charlotte has returned as a popular name in the most liberal states. This graph shows popularity in each state over time, with the states going from most conservative on the top to most liberal on the bottom.

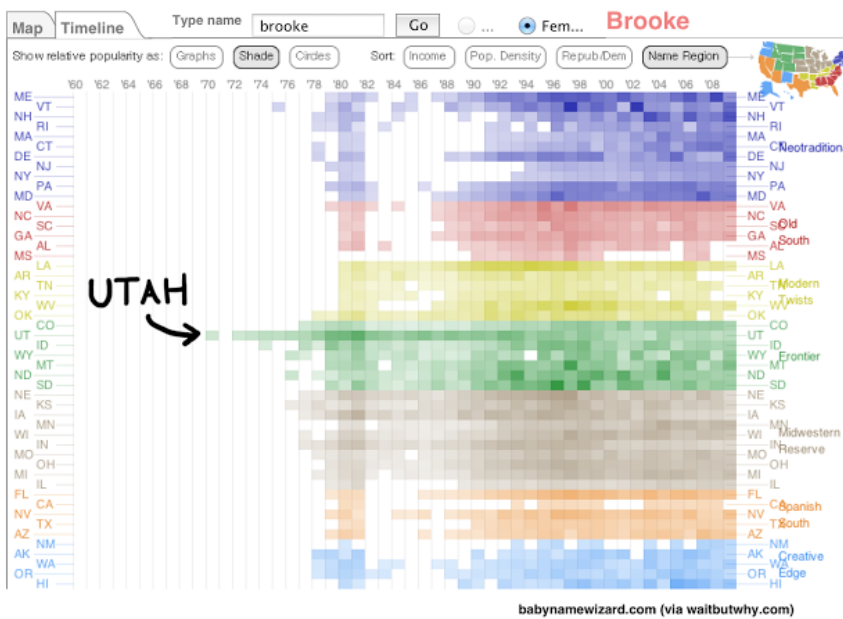


So there are a bunch of middle-aged conservative women and liberal toddlers out there named Charlotte.

The only time I ever saw a dead name return in fewer than 80 years is when it caught on with a totally different demographic (Jeremiah is another one of these, which after losing steam in the early nineties in the Northwest, has now gotten hot in the Deep South).

We stole a lot of the hottest current names from Utah.

Here's the history of the name Brooke:

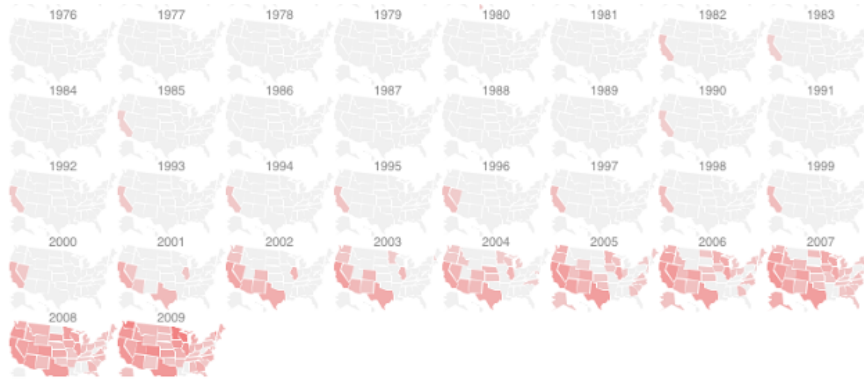


Utah got into the name in the early 70s by itself, and then suddenly in 1980, everyone else decided to jump on board. The same phenomenon goes for Natalie, Aubrey, Riley (m), Jaxon, Paisley, Braxton, and Lacey. (Yes, those are all popular names right now.) Not sure who made Utah the name prophecy state,

but that's what it apparently is.

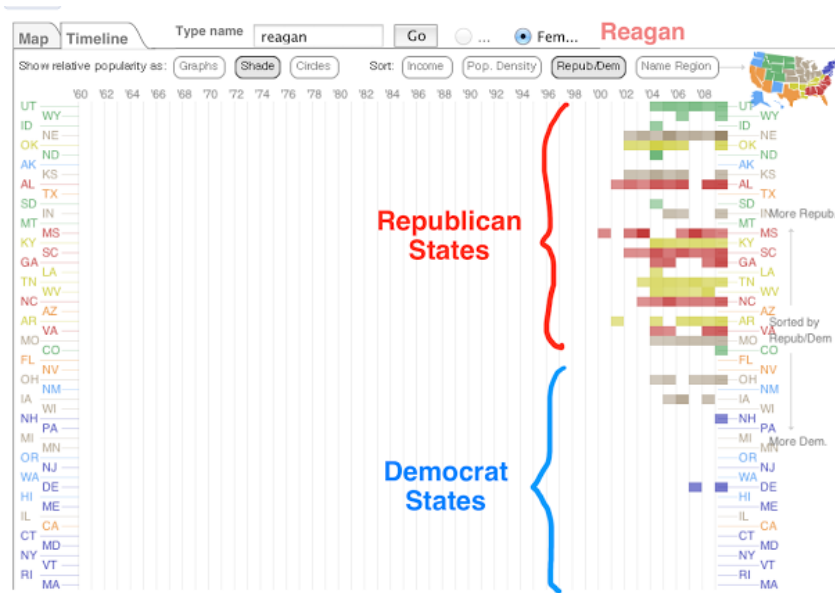
We also stole Evelyn from California.

Evelyn's Popularity Over Time



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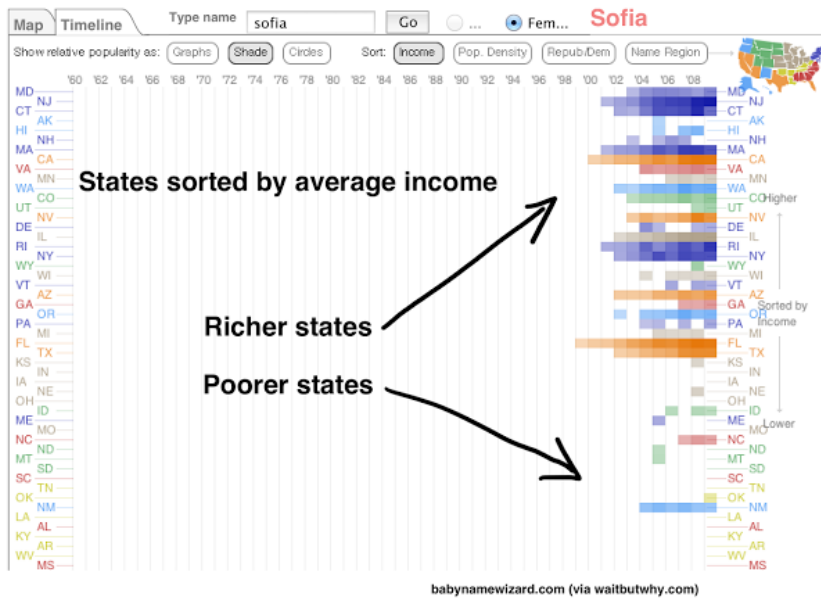
The popular girl name Reagan is for Republicans.



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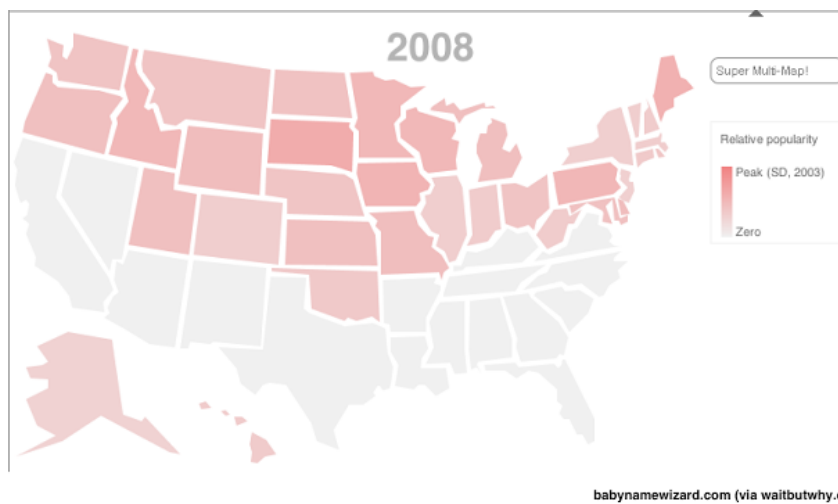
Same goes for Braxton, Brooklyn, and Jaxon.

Sophia was originally for the richest states, before it got so popular everyone got into it. **Sofia is still for rich states though:**



Paige is only for Northerners.

Here's a map showing where Paige was popular in 2008.



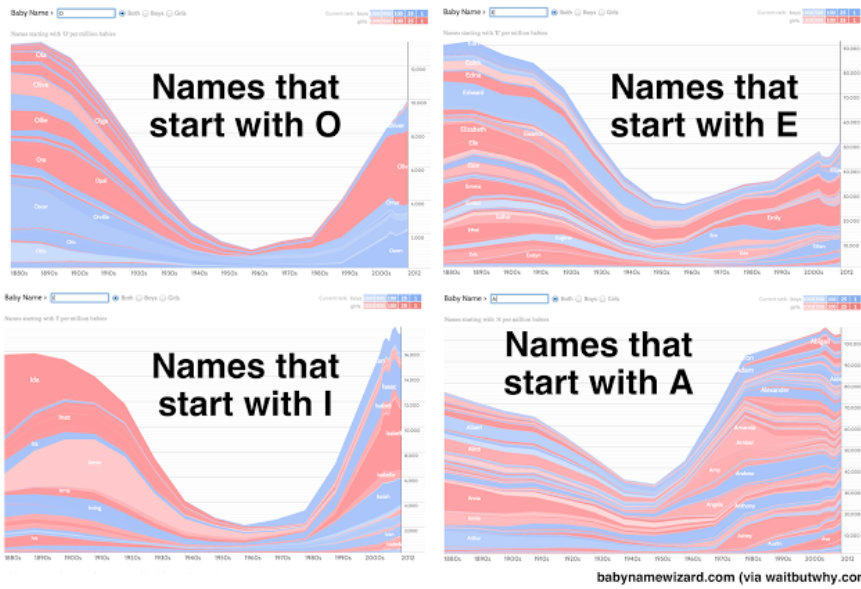
Same goes for Alexa, Kathleen, and Nicole.

Meanwhile, Victor is mainly found in the Southwest, Colton in the middle of the country, Caroline in the East, and both Adrianna and Dominic are mostly contained to New Mexico.

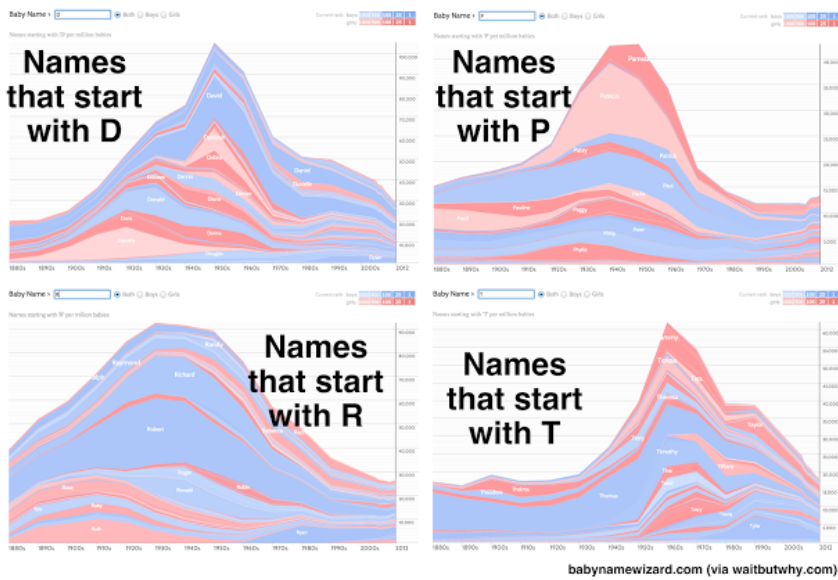
Fads around specific letters or sounds

Names starting with a vowel were hottest now and 100 years ago, while many names starting with consonants were biggest in the middle of the century.

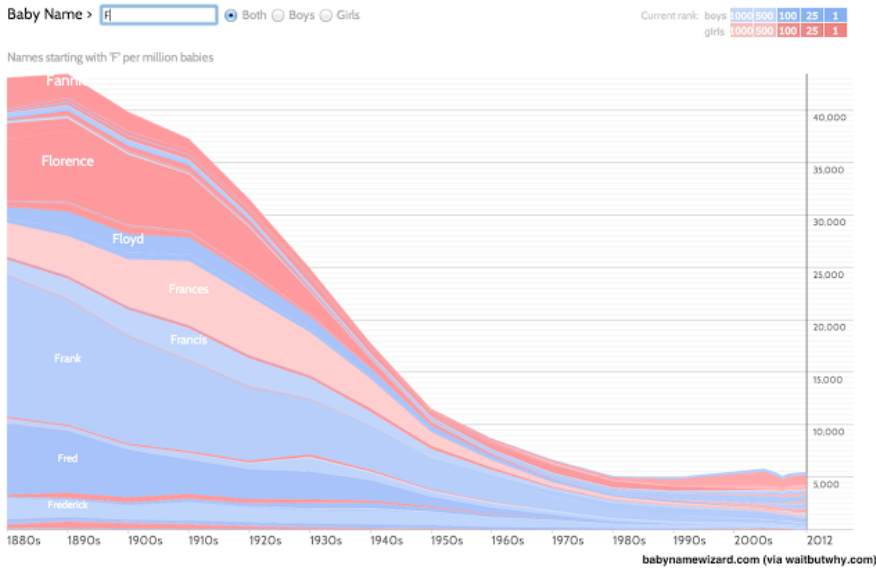
Vowel Names



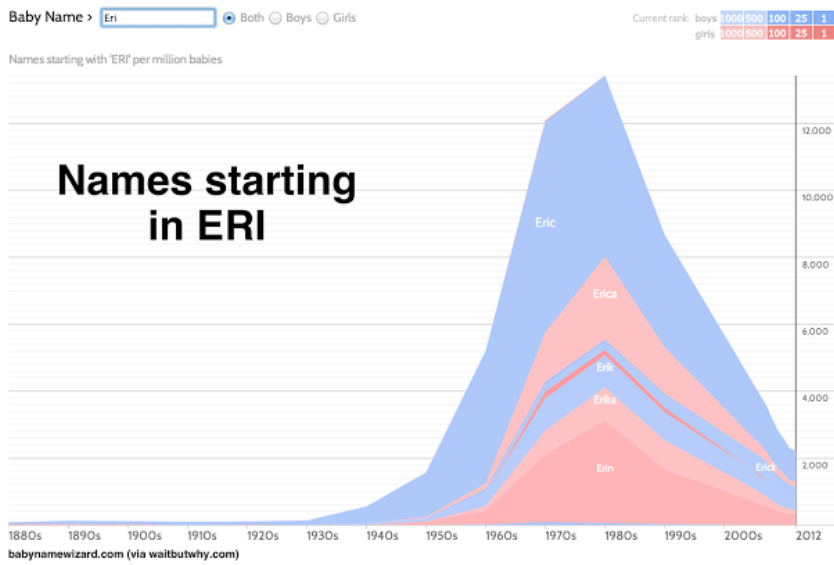
Consonant Names



And F names are for old people.

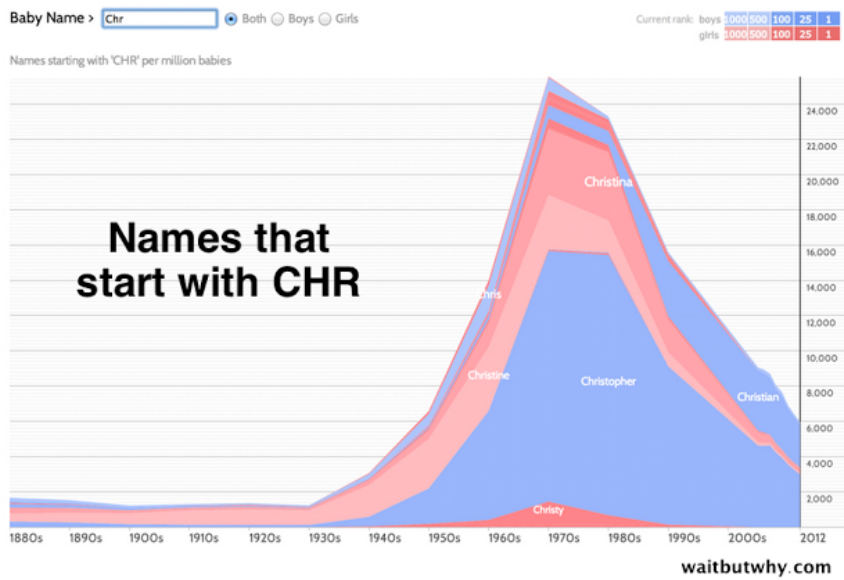


Names starting with ERI, LA, and the sound CR all went through fads in the 1970s and 80s. They're all over now.

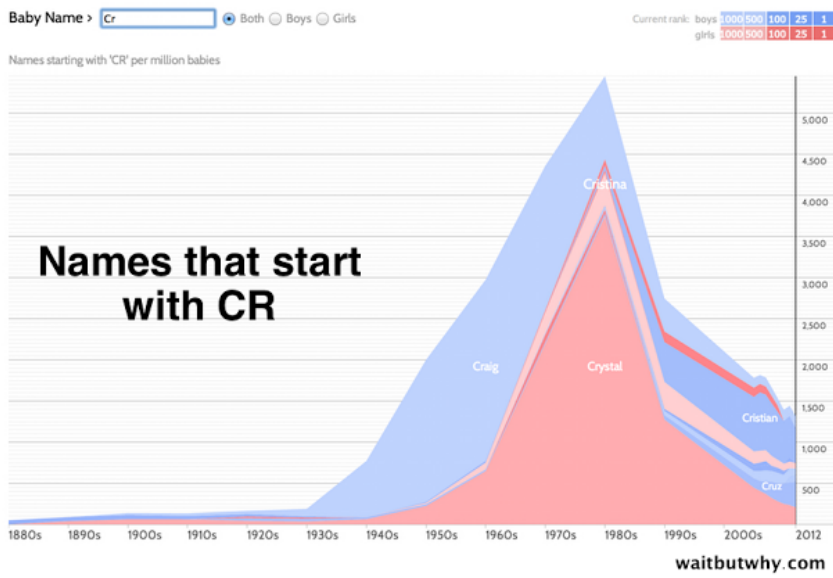
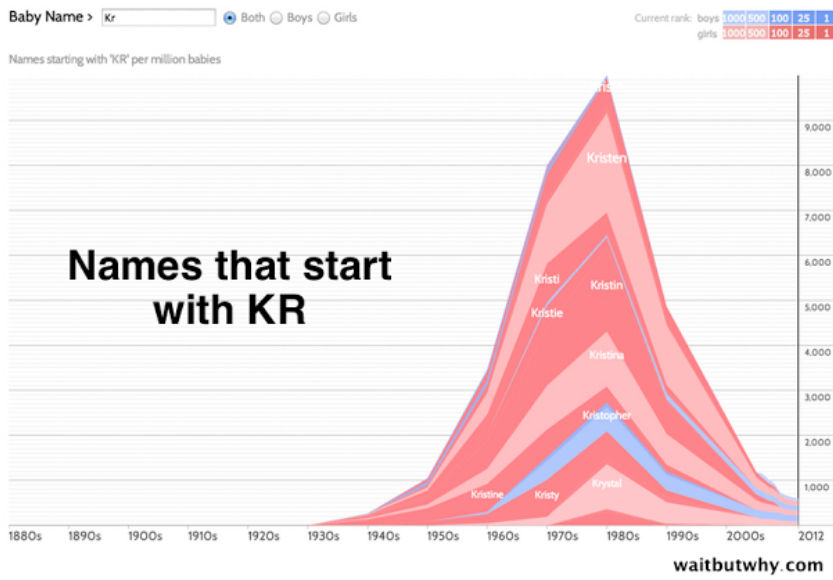




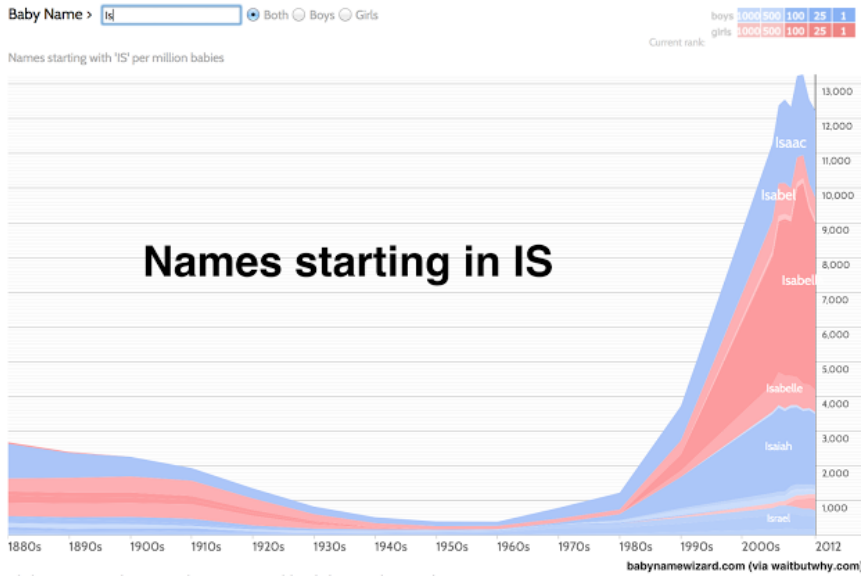
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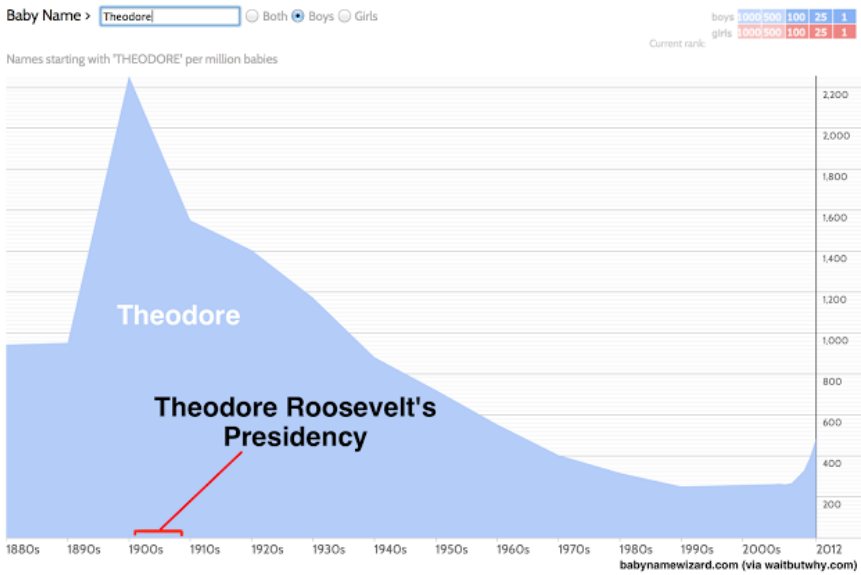
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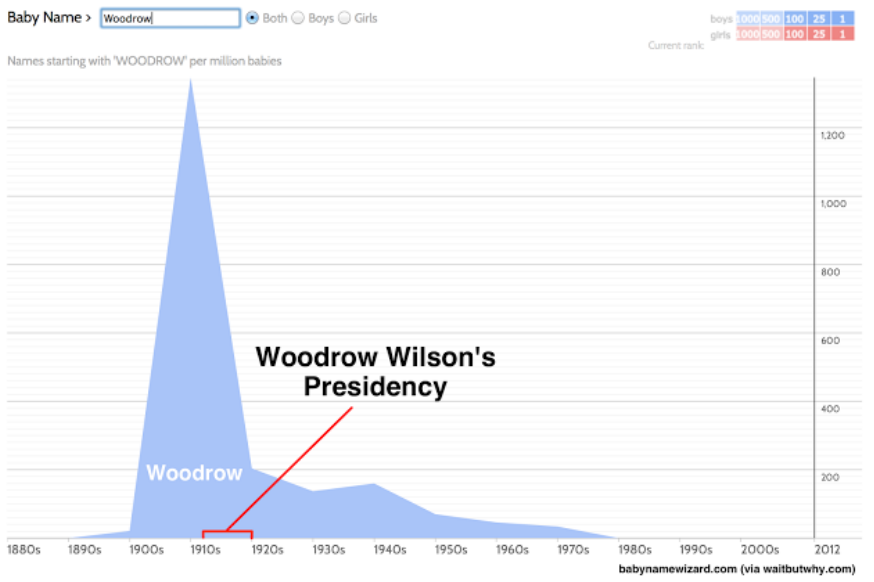
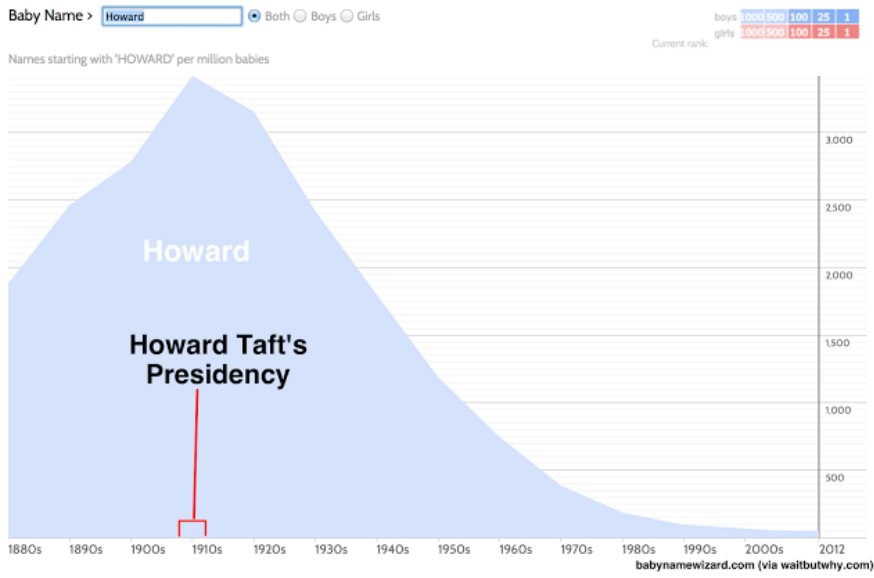


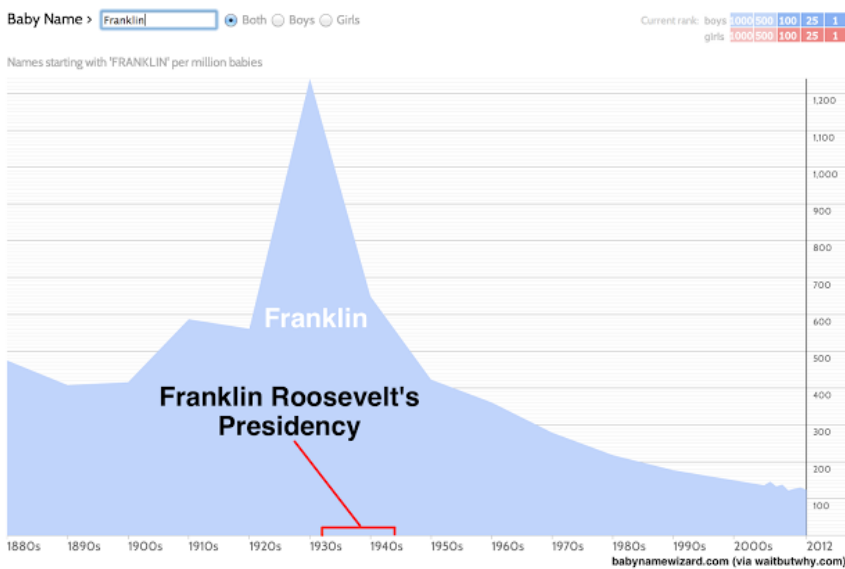
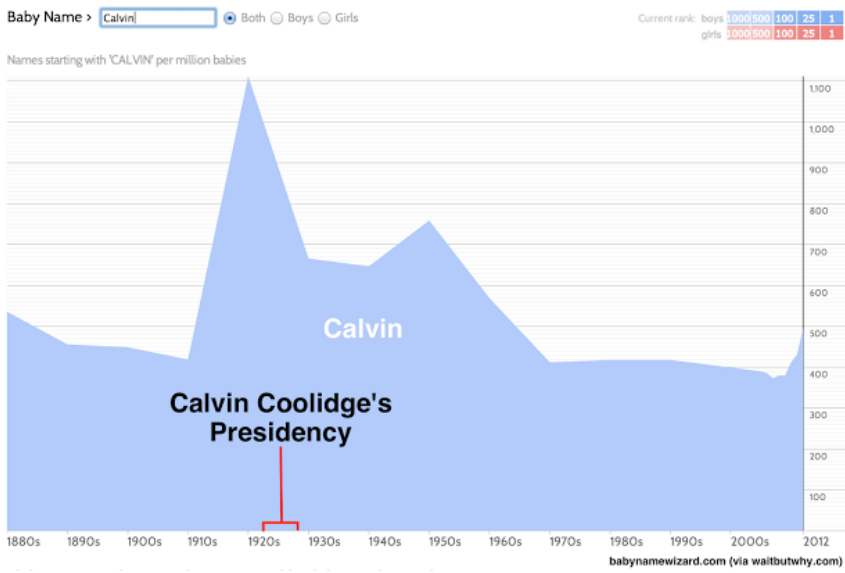
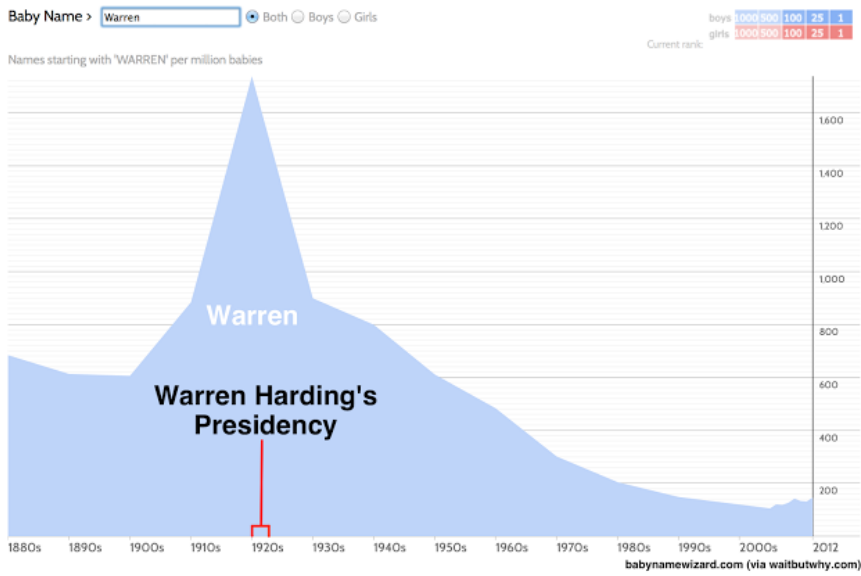
There's a current fad going on for names starting in IS.



People used to copy the president

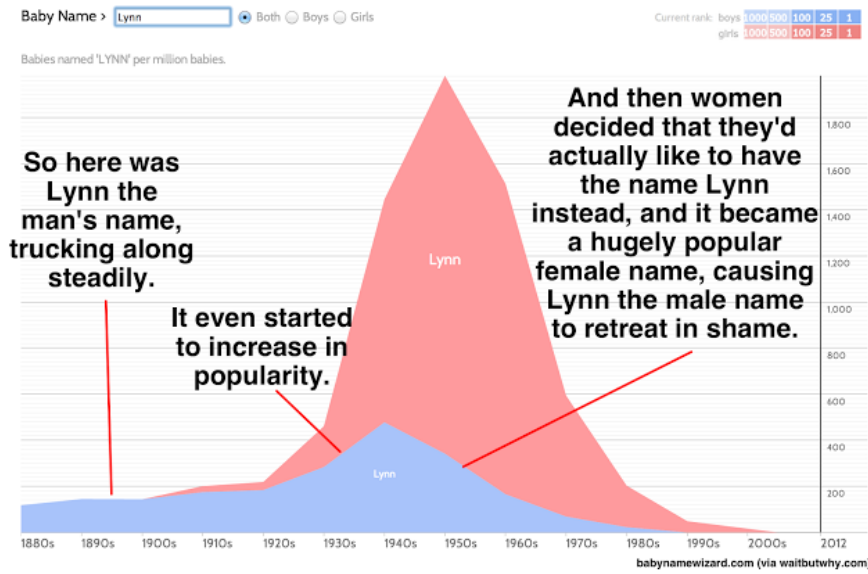




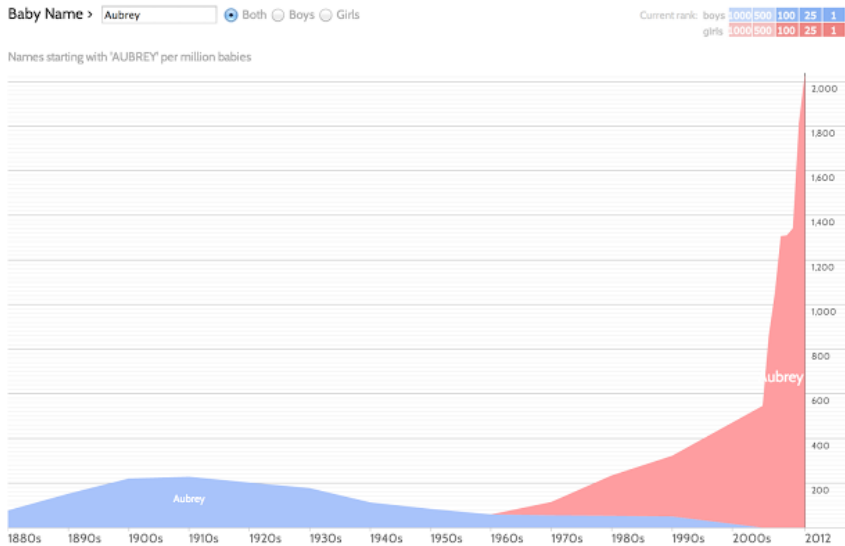


Genders being dicks

Sometimes one gender is doing its thing, living its life, when one of its names is suddenly stolen by the other gender:



Another case of females committing full-fledged robbery:



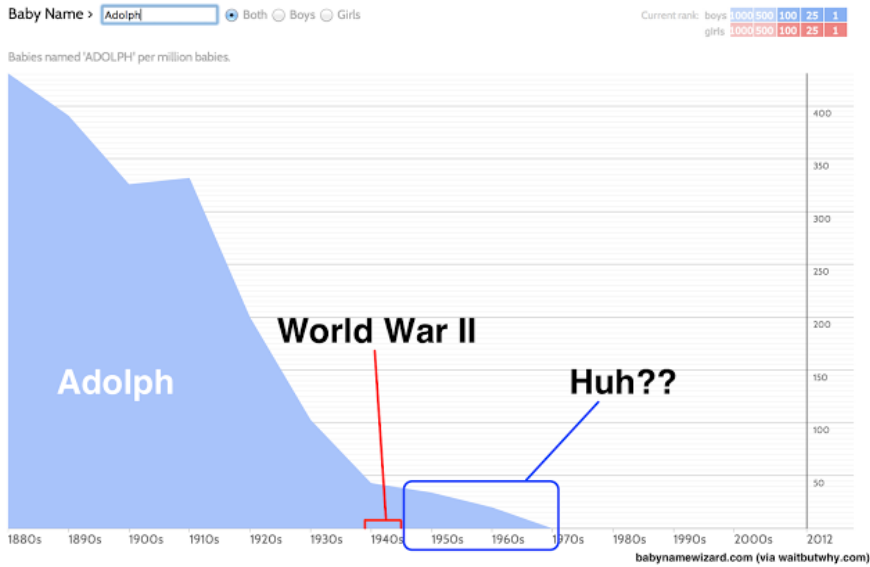
Genders also get jealous when the other has too popular a name. *Each* of the following names has had the *other* gender in the Top 1,000 during some stretch of the past (click on a name to see its history with the opposite gender).

John, William, James, George, Joseph, Michael, Thomas, David, Frank, Henry, Mary, Elizabeth, Sarah, and Margaret.



And now, many of the most popular baby names are popular with both genders, as if each gender can't handle the other one innovating without being included.

I know a lot about names right now. I'll leave you today with this puzzle:



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