

# ShameStation: Transposing Freedom from Shame and Guilt from Computer Games to the Real World

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## ABSTRACT

Is it still possible to attribute emotions towards others, such as shame and guilt, when a person is able to hurt people by controlling another person? ShameStation does not provide an answer to that question, but give users the opportunity to experience transitions from shame and guilt to freedom from these feelings by way of an interactive installation within the recognizable context of a computer game.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.1 [Public Policy Issues] – Ethics

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences] – Sociology

K.4.1 [Public Policy Issues] – Use/abuse of power

## General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our society, shame plays an ambiguous role, attacking our integrity, but also protecting us from harmful behaviour. But where does shame come from? What sets it apart from guilt? Do we learn to be ashamed or are we born with it? These questions are hard to answer. What is clear, however, is that shame and guilt prevent us from doing exactly what we want. They act as our very own police officer.

The ShameStation project confronts users with the phenomena of shame and guilt. It presents a game that elicits questions about the nature of shame and guilt, about responsibility. As the user gains control over another person's actions, he is free to do as he likes, as it is not him who is performing the actual, physical actions. On the other hand, the person being controlled is incapable of seeing or hearing his environment and is simply following orders from the other user. Therefore, he cannot be held fully responsible for his actions either. So who's to blame?

## 2. SHAME VERSUS GUILT

Shame can be defined as a painful emotion, caused by an apparent difference between our actual self and our ideal self. It is mostly a negative though necessary emotion. It helps us to fit in with our social surroundings. Social interaction therefore commonly provides triggers for experiencing feelings of shame. Guilt, as opposed to shame, focuses not so much on *who we are*, but *what we do*. Where shame concerns a painful feeling about oneself as a person, guilt is more of a feeling of regret and responsibility for one's actions.

It is hard, however, to make very specific and objective distinctions between the two. The difference between shame and guilt is the object of much discussion and is more than a little blurry. Both have a relation to personal values and those of the surrounding society and they are not mutually exclusive. One can lead to the other, as the things you do can bring you to think about the kind of person you are.

What is clear though is that both guilt and shame are easily triggered in social surroundings and serve a protective function for our personal integrity. They prevent us from socially undesirable behavior and if we want to maintain our desired social status, we cannot do without either.

## 3. THE REAL-LIFE AVATAR

In the light of a social environment triggering shame and guilt, one may think of ways to avoid these. One such way may be found in virtual surroundings, using so called 'avatars'.

An avatar is a virtual representation of a person -- very common in today's online society. In computer games you interact with the virtual world through an animated figure and in chat boxes you provide a (possibly fake) name and description. As people interact socially, these avatars are all they see of the person they interact with. The avatar provides the gift of anonymity, becoming something to hide behind, a persona under your full control, allowing you to do things you might be ashamed of doing in the real world.

Of course, avatars in virtual worlds are of no use in the physical world. We are still burdened by our own rules and those of society. So why can't we hide behind someone else, have our very own 'real-life avatar'? The ShameStation project provides exactly this. One person (the player) gains control over the

actions of a second person (the avatar) putting the real world surroundings in a game-like setting. The player guides the blindfolded avatar with the aid of radio-transmitted auditive commands, controlled by a joystick. Seeing through a camera mounted on the head of the avatar, the player experiences a live 'first-person-shooter'. He can even 'fire', by having the avatar spray water around with a water pistol. It offers good old kids fun, which you wouldn't dare do 'for real'.

#### 4. QUESTIONS WILL ARISE

Although it may seem like the perfect instrument to escape shame, it makes you wonder. The player is not really doing anything as it is not the player who is actually shooting at those people; he is just playing a game. But then again, can the avatar be blamed, being the one with the water pistol? The avatar has the excuse of not being able to see or hear his surroundings and is only doing as he is told, without being aware of the consequences of his actions.

Of course different viewpoints can be taken and it can be argued that both player and avatar are aware of their actions and can both be held responsible. Fact is however, that the player is not immediately visible and the avatar is blinded in that he cannot see or hear. So who gets blamed? Both the player and the avatar, when confronted, may defend themselves by arguing that they are innocent. In this case, shared responsibility is turned into a potent weapon to achieve freedom of action, and shame and guilt take vague and disorienting positions.

#### 5. RESULTS

The ShameStation is a working prototype of an arcade-style game, consisting of two parts: a game console and a head-mounted control set worn by the avatar. The game console is basically a custom-built arcade console, with a joystick, an action-button and a monitor. The movement of the joystick is translated into audio commands for the avatar, which are sent via a wireless headphone transmitter to the avatar. The monitor is connected to a receiver for a wireless camera, providing the player with a first-person view from the avatar.



*Fig. 1:*  
*The ShameStation  
game console*

The head-mounted control set consists of a helmet with a mounted wireless camera, which continually streams video to the receiver in the console. Wireless headphones are attached to the helmet, which provide the commands generated by the player using the joystick. Of course a blindfold is provided and a water pistol functions as a weapon in the hands of the avatar.

#### 6. EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The ShameStation installation was open for use by the public as part of an exhibition in September 2006, over a period of 9 days. It received many enthusiastic reactions from people who used it. It seems to be effective in reaching our goal of freeing people from the burden of shame and guilt, replacing them with feelings of power (experienced by the player) and unconstrained fun (experienced by the avatar).

The first prototype made use of a soft, cushioned hammer as a weapon for the avatar. This turned out not to be as safe as expected however, resulting in our choice for a water pistol in the new prototype. For safety reasons concerning electronic equipment, the water pistol's 'beam' will be a mild spray.

Some other drawbacks have arisen in using the ShameStation, which are hard to prevent. For one, each person reacts differently in the role of the avatar. Some are too careful, others too rash, and some avatars just do what they like without following the commands very well. Another drawback we found is that people tend to look at the ground when blindfolded, which results in poor sight for the player. The angle of the camera can be manually adjusted, but a quicker solution needs to be found for this.

However, these problems do not interfere with the fun experienced by players and avatars alike. The question remains to what extent users are fully freed from shame and guilt, but we can see a significant effect in users and it definitely generates a discussion on the subject.

#### 7. FUTURE WORK

Further development of this project would include building an improved headset, ideally with visual commands, giving us more accurate control over the direction the avatar walks in. Perhaps this would also solve the dilemma of avatars walking with their head down when blindfolded. With enough resources, all of the hardware in this project can be tuned up to a higher standard.

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