Two apologies

I read somewhere the worst thing you can do is starting a text with an apology. Nothing I ever read said anything about what happens when you start with two. Maybe one cancels out the other.

Anyway.

I have been thinking about how to call all this, and the only thing I have come up with is **The big makeover, aka the boring proposal**. Because, and that is the first apology I want to offer, this is not a proposal for a dummied down interface to *Second Life* for beginners. It is, instead, a proposal for a complete revision of the interface for all users. An interface easy on the beginner, but powerful enough for the seasoned user — a lofty aim indeed. And one I prefer to the one this contest is originally about.

Of course, such a huge enterprise as redesigning all of SL's client features and dialogues is far beyond my means. Both time and design talent are lacking. Which means that, by necessity, this proposal can only outline principles, and sketch out the key parts of the interface as an illustration of said principles.

This is probably most obvious in the very sketchy nature of the interface elements I present, and particularly when one looks at the ridiculous icons I have used (courtesy of Apple's generous sprinkling of Dingbat fonts and a plethora of other, unexpected sources). The poor graphic quality of what I present thus is the second thing I want to apologise for. People have offered to help spruce up my graphics (notably Botgirl Questi and Jacek Antonelli, both of whom I am deeply indebted to for the offer), and I am sure they would have made a far better job of it than I have, had I given them the opportunity — which simply lacked due to time constraints.

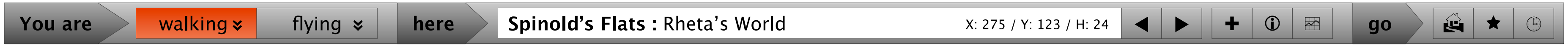
But in a way, I am rather happy this is how things turned out, graphics-wise. After all, this proposal is not an attempt at starting a discussion on colour schemes (my *Dazzle* critique notwithstanding), or icon design. Though my own designs, primitive as they are, betray my love for Apple's last *OS X* incarnation, they are meant to be sketches, mere illustrations of what I mean, not polished proposals for a look. Not least because when all is said and done, the interface should be fully skinnable. Everybody should be free to create his or her own colour scheme, widget styles, and icon sets — instead of disagreeing with mine.

Why the « boring » proposal ? Well, simply because I have made no attempt at creating something fashionable, conceptually new or otherwise fancy, focusing instead on bundling, clarifying, and cleaning up. Admittedly not the most exciting way to do things. And that would have been the third apology if, yes if only, I wasn't completely at ease with it. A boring proposal suits a boring mind.

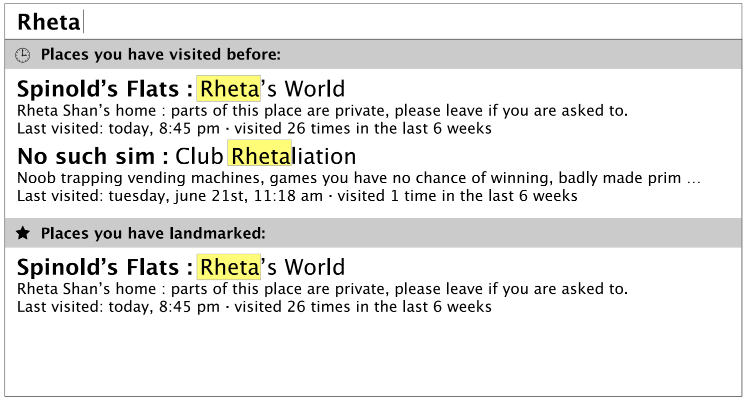
Disclaimer

Contact information :

rheta.shan@gmail.com
Rheta Shan in Second Life



Spinold's Flats : Rheta's World X: 275 / Y: 123 / H: 24



Rheta

◷ Places you have visited before:

Spinold's Flats : Rheta's World
Rheta Shan's home : parts of this place are private, please leave if you are asked to.
Last visited: today, 8:45 pm · visited 26 times in the last 6 weeks

No such sim : Club Rhetaliation
Noob trapping vending machines, games you have no chance of winning, badly made prim …
Last visited: tuesday, june 21st, 11:18 am · visited 1 time in the last 6 weeks

★ Places you have landmarked:

Spinold's Flats : Rheta's World
Rheta Shan's home : parts of this place are private, please leave if you are asked to.
Last visited: today, 8:45 pm · visited 26 times in the last 6 weeks

Navigator, please

One of the most obvious failings of the SL client is that it does not acknowledge the discontinuous experience of space residents have in a world which is at the same time huge and offers point to point travel by teleport. This might be due to it originally adapting 3D game concepts, where movement through and orientation in space are subordinated to the action happening in that space — but in a world like *Second* Life, getting there is just not enough : you also need to a good idea where « there » is, a way to backtrack, and a way to store places you need to visit more frequently.

All of these basically exist in the present client, but they are exposed badly, if at all. Current location is in the status header bar. Backtracking capabilities have been rather crudely added to chat, of all places, turning a communication channel into a navigation tool ; a navigation history function worthy of he name is missing altogether. Landmarks are scattered all over the inventory. Home hides in the main menu, the map in the button bar at the bottom of the client. Landmarks can be created out of the main menu, or the map.

Bundling and exposing navigation capabilities in one place according to a well known paradigm (web navigation) is obvious. But it is more than just cleaning up the scattered mess the current client has made — it also serves to reinforce the understanding that what the client exposes is a world, a huge, persistent, interlinked network of spaces. Your first welcome to the new world should be that you are not lost in it.

The second one should be you can move through it — which makes the inclusion of movement modes into the bar an obvious choice, displaying the main two movement modes (on land, or by air). Submodes are found in the menu available when you keep one of the buttons pressed (crawl and run for stand / walk, jump for fly).

Bye bye « stand up » button : in sit mode, neither of the movement modes is active. To get up again, do the obvious thing : stand up / walk somewhere, jump / fly up, teleport somewhere else. Just like it should be.

Design principles

Emphasise the client is a **window into a world** by exposing the navigable nature of the spaces it displays.

Bundle related functionality into **logical interface areas** with a consistent and familiar **UI paradigm** — in this case, web navigation.

Emphasise **logical consistency through optical cues**. Here, the icons for landmarks (★) and history (◷) are used both in the location filter and in the toolbar. Toolbar keys are :
✚ **Add** place as landmark
ⓘ Show place **information**
▦ Show place on **map**
⌂ Go **home**
★ Show stored **landmarks**
◷ Show navigation **history**

Give feedback : where are we, what has been found, how do we move.

Keep interaction direct : lookup and mapping are available directly from the filtered location dropdown.

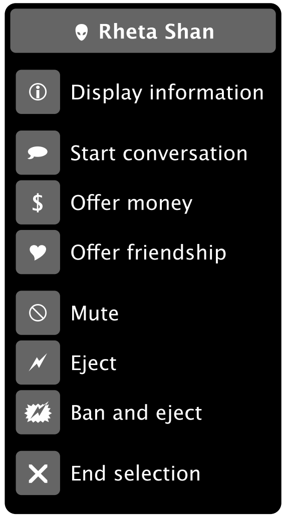
The world, in action

What is the main thing happening when you sit down in front of the *Second Life* client ? Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that it runs smoothly. Yes, exactly.

The world is happening.

Yes, I know it sounds trite, but if it does, why is there so little opportunity to keep tabs on it happening ?

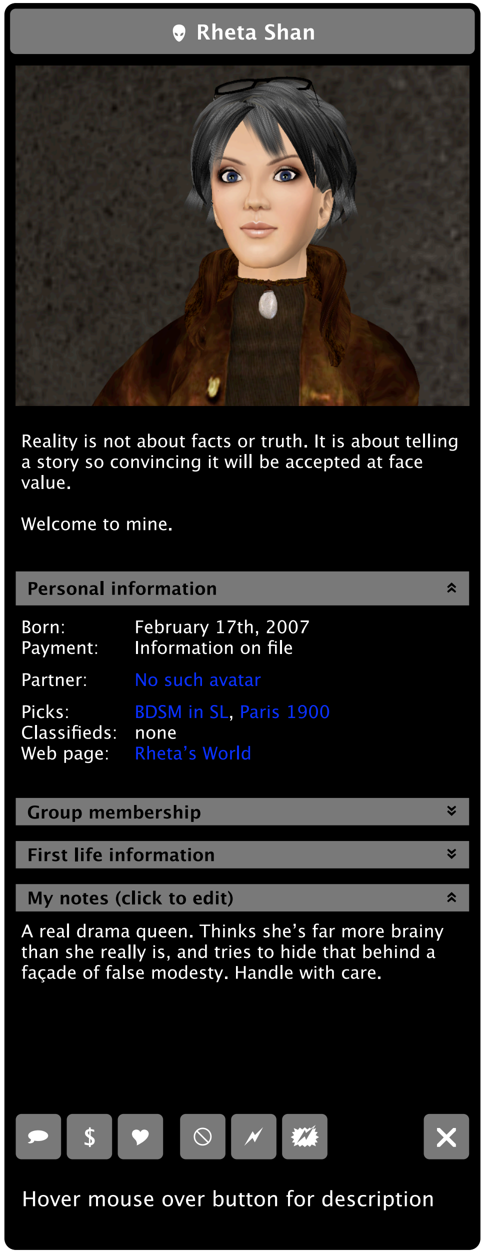
Enter the information panel — your quick way to explore your surroundings, and to act on them. It huddles happily in the rightmost area of the SL window, displaying compact information about everything you click on. It can be hidden anytime, and called up again through the contextual menu of items / avatars / spots in-world. Or the *Display information* button on the navigator, for a specific place. Or by double-clicking items / avatars / spots in-world. And when you don't select anything, it will display information on the place you are in.



Oh, and maybe we will manage that without rotating your arms 360 degrees, too. Wouldn't that be nice ?

But the panel is not just displaying information — it also presents the actions applying to the selection. And for those among you who want it out of the way, the actions are also available in compact menu form on a secondary click of your mouse. Enjoy.

Bye, bye Miss SL Menu pie. And bye bye, blue menu box, too — because scripted menu type dialogues integrate into the panel and context menu, too. All in one spot. Just like it should be.



Reality is not about facts or truth. It is about telling a story so convincing it will be accepted at face value.

Welcome to mine.

Born: February 17th, 2007
Payment: Information on file

Partner: No such avatar

Picks: BDSM in SL, Paris 1900
Classifieds: none
Web page: Rheta's World

A real drama queen. Thinks she's far more brainy than she really is, and tries to hide that behind a façade of false modesty. Handle with care.

Hover mouse over button for description

Design principles

Emphasise the client is a **window into a world** by exposing both information about and interaction opportunities with the user's surroundings.

Bundle related functionality into **logical interface areas** with a consistent a familiar **UI paradigm** — in this case, selection, inspector panes, and contextual menus.

Emphasise **logical consistency through optical cues.** Actions have an icon identifier which is found wherever the action is available. Both the menu and the panel identify their topic through name and object icon.

Keep interaction direct : actions are available on the panel or in the context menu of in-wold objects.

Also note the usage of **transparency** (not shown, as NeoOffice does not export transparency to EPS) — elements overlaying the world proper fade into it.

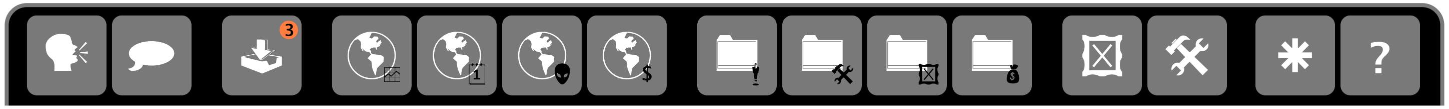
So much to do, so much to see

The most puzzling question, once you face the world of *Second Life*, is what can you do beyond watching it with astonishment, and aimlessly wandering through it. As any experienced resident knows, there is so much to do and see in SL you can get dizzy, but the point is how ? Exposing the richness of the world beyond the small window afforded by the suer’s surroundings is one of the keys to the interface.

Enter the bar, sitting at the bottom of the client window, just over the status bar. From left to right :

- **Communications** — leftmost chat and voice chat (🗣) — while read-only text chat / listen-only voice chat is always on, this function calls up panels allowing for active participation. Next : conversations (aka IMs — 💬), which calls up a list of friends and groups, each of which can be expanded into a conversation.
- **Message box** (📥) — notifications and off-line IMs go here and can be browsed, read and deleted much like in email program. The orange badge is the new notifications count. Never cycle through blue boxes again.
- **World browsers** (🌎) — these are the entry points to what the world has to offer. From left to right : places (combines the places search with the map), events, people (combines people search and group search), marketplace (combines classifieds, search for objects on sale and land sales).
- **Personal browsers** (📁) — from left to right : looks (anything placed into outfit folders or in the body parts and clothing system folders), actions (animations, gestures, sounds, scripts), gallery (snapshots and textures, with visual browsing) and property (L$ balance including LindeX buy and sale and links to account history, land owned, objects).
- **Workbenches** — left the photo workbench (⊠), right the building workbench (⚒).
- **Preferences** (✱) and **help** (?).

Inspired from the OS X dock as it is, the bar can, of course, be set to auto-collapse in advanced preferences. It also supports reordering and removal of items and, possibly, extensibility.



Design principles

Emphasise the client is a **window into a world** by exposing both the richness of the world’s content and of the communication opportunities it offers.

Bundle related functionality into **logical interface areas** with a consistent a familiar **UI paradigm** — in this case, browsers and applications.

Emphasise **logical consistency through optical cues**. All items of the bar have an icon identifier which is found wherever related windows or actions are displayed.

Reduce UI diversity. Similar applications are based on the same window concept (browsers and workbenches).

Keep the user in charge by allowing for **asynchronous notifications processing**.

Working on it

Directly manipulating the world through menu commands reaches its limits where the manipulated object is too complex to easily accommodate this mode of interaction, or the manipulation applies to abstractions of the world. Appearance, snapshots, building — all of these need more than a few simple menu commands.

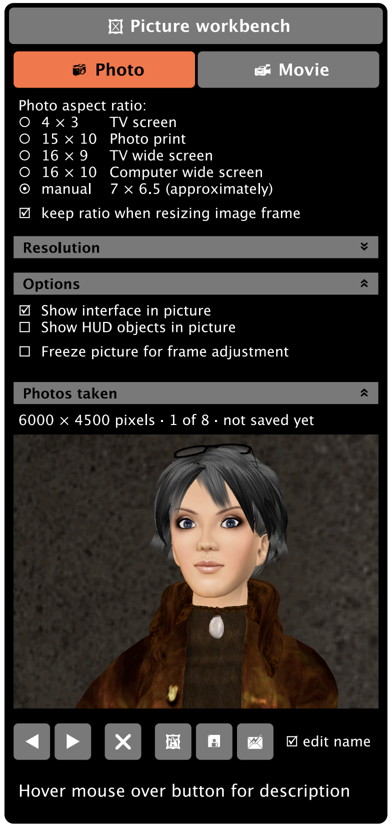


Photo aspect ratio:
○ 4 × 3 TV screen
○ 15 × 10 Photo print
○ 16 × 9 TV wide screen
○ 16 × 10 Computer wide screen
● manual 7 × 6.5 (approximately)

☑ keep ratio when resizing image frame

☑ Show interface in picture
□ Show HUD objects in picture

□ Freeze picture for frame adjustment

6000 × 4500 pixels · 1 of 8 · not saved yet

☑ edit name

Hover mouse over button for description

The current SL client exposes manipulation of the three areas named above in different ways. Appearance is manipulated through a property pane only, while the avatar freezes to a live preview, effectively making appearance editing a modal process. Snapshots are also manipulated through a property pane only, but these do not lock either world or avatar. Building finally mixes properties exposed through a pane and direct manipulation of in-world objects, also in a non-modal mode.

The revised interface unifies these approaches into workbenches — combinations of an editable property pane and components directly manipulatable in-world, while setting the user into a mode :

- The **Prim workbench** supplants the ancestor and closest model to the workbench concept — the building mode.
- The **Picture workbench**, which allows residents to take photos (snapshots in old style parlance), and movies (depicted on this page). The picture frame is directly resizable and movable using the mouse, complementary information, settings and applicable actions are found in the accompanying pane.
- The **Appearance workbench**, which replaces the old appearance dialogue. Baring technical impossibility, the avatar and clothing mesh should also be directly manipulatable through well placed placement / resizing /rotation handles — and everything that does not fit that model easily goes into an accompanying pane, like in all workbenches.

Design principles

Bundle related functionality into **logical interface areas** with a consistent **UI paradigm.**

Keep interaction direct : whatever can be manipulated directly in–world will be available for direct manipulation.

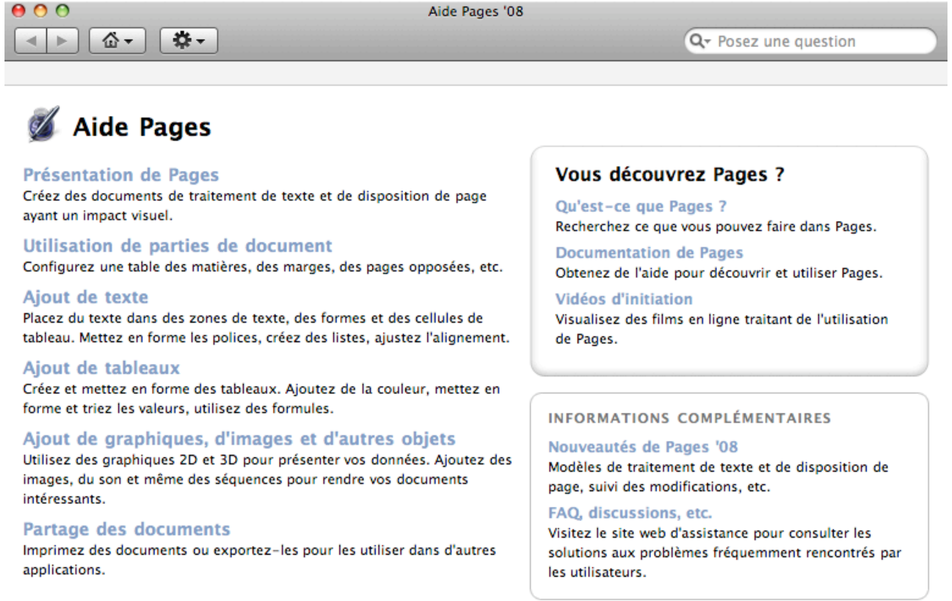
Create **modes** for activities that need to be disconnected from the usual flow of of time and content in the world.

Emphasise **logical consistency through optical cues.** Familiar toolbar keys include :
◀ **Previous** picture
▶ **Next** picture
✕ **Dismiss** picture
▣ Save picture to **gallery**
▣ Save picture to **disk**
✉ **Email** picture

Also note the usage of **transparency** (not shown, as NeoOffice does not export transparency to EPS) — elements overlaying the world proper fade into it.

Could you help me with that ?

Maybe the most glaringly absent feature that would make *Second Life* easier to use is a help system worthy of the name. In-world help has been so long gone most people are probably not aware that it still does exist on the web. Instead, the help menu item redirects to the support portal.



Aide Pages

Présentation de Pages
Créez des documents de traitement de texte et de disposition de page ayant un impact visuel.

Utilisation de parties de document
Configurez une table des matières, des marges, des pages opposées, etc.

Ajout de texte
Placez du texte dans des zones de texte, des formes et des cellules de tableau. Mettez en forme les polices, créez des listes, ajustez l'alignement.

Ajout de tableaux
Créez et mettez en forme des tableaux. Ajoutez de la couleur, mettez en forme et triez les valeurs, utilisez des formules.

Ajout de graphiques, d'images et d'autres objets
Utilisez des graphiques 2D et 3D pour présenter vos données. Ajoutez des images, du son et même des séquences pour rendre vos documents intéressants.

Partage des documents
Imprimez des documents ou exportez-les pour les utiliser dans d'autres applications.

Vous découvrez Pages ?

Qu'est-ce que Pages ?
Recherchez ce que vous pouvez faire dans Pages.

Documentation de Pages
Obtenez de l'aide pour découvrir et utiliser Pages.

Vidéos d'initiation
Visualisez des films en ligne traitant de l'utilisation de Pages.

INFORMATIONS COMPLÉMENTAIRES

Nouveautés de Pages '08
Modèles de traitement de texte et de disposition de page, suivi des modifications, etc.

FAQ, discussions, etc.
Visitez le site web d'assistance pour consulter les solutions aux problèmes fréquemment rencontrés par les utilisateurs.

Let's just see one moment through which hoops a user will have to jump to find some help through the help menu : first, confirm the modal dialogue asking you if you want to visit a website after you clicked help (was that really what you wanted to do ?). Wait for the portal to load, resize the client browser until it is usable. Choose a support option. Start searching through the knowledge base. Easy. Er.

There is nothing wrong about maintaining the help online, on the web. SL users are online by necessity when they use the application, and a server based help allows for better maintenance. But there is everything wrong in just labelling your knowledge base online help.

Online help should be helpful. Trite as it sounds, that means it has to be crafted with great care, be easily accessible (by context, even), and indexed for fast and relevancy ranked search. Like the online help of Apple products on OS X, really, which is why I took that as an example.

Rewriting help from scratch, by someone trained to do that — expressly not a developer —, would be one main component of any interface improvement.

Design principles

Focus on user experience instead of technicalities by creating a help document that is actually helpful. Try to explain both the underlying logic and the way to use and mange it in easily understandable chunks.

Allow **direct access to the help document**, and offer shortcuts to certain help sections in the interface of complex functions.

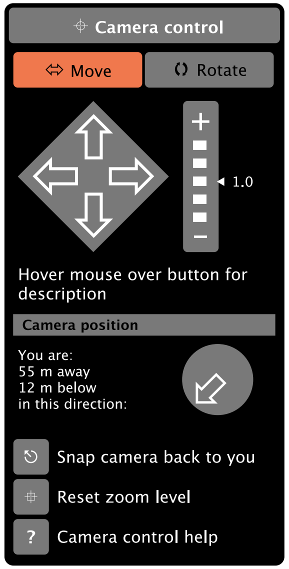
Offer a good **introductory overview** as a start page.

Expose **help search function** right on the help page, allowing to search for content and keywords, and rank multiple results by relevancy to the search criteria.

Link to further information available online outside the help proper, making clear these are external links.

Feed me back

One of the most surprising omissions in the *Second Life* client interface is that such a powerful, complex application entirely foregoes telling its user anything about what it does. Except for the sound level,whose slider by its very nature is both a control and a feedback element, the interface does not expose much of what goes on. This gets particularly critical wherever the world itself does not deliver enough of a cue to what goes on. The position of your camera, relative to you ? Guess from what you see. The viewer zoom level (which is not identical to camera zoom, incidentally) ? Better remember what you did. And as to telling us why we still see grey blobs where pictures should be, or why a crowded sim seems to be void of avatars, hey, you know how it works, right ?



You are:
55 m away
12 m below
in this direction:

Or maybe you don't.

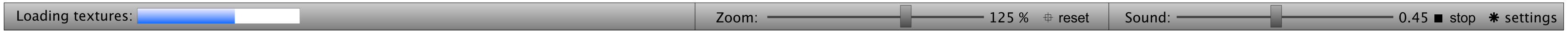
As a user you feel a bit like you are at the wheel of a car that has about 200 different buttons of six different types, all neatly labelled with only one small symbol, but whose dashboard instead of dials, meters, or warning lights only sports one screen which lights up occasionally with messages like « you will be out of fuel in 1.5 km ». Or « something went wrong », for that matter.

Which, really, won't do. A revised interface should try to give feedback on what goes on wherever possible. One example : the camera control pane, which pops up automatically as soon as as you start to cam around (and can, of course, also be displayed permanently). Another example : the status bar, which displays basic information pertaining to the technical functioning of the client itself.

And of course, both offer the most needed relevant functions *in situ*.

Simplifying an interface often simply means getting away from the workings of the underlying application, and focussing on user experience instead. A case in point is Second Life's weird play / stop / pause concept for sound streams. From the user's point of view, there is no pause (sound streams are not per user asynchronous) and no difference between pause and stop — both effectively mute the sound.

Another aspect of this is the question of defaults and logical consistency of settings. If an application is set to play sound (as the SL client is mostly), users will expect it to do so — the fact that you have to start each stream by clicking play is perfectly counter-intuitive. A smart solution would be to have the button toggle the preferred state : stop if sound is set to play by default, start otherwise. Which is what we do.



Design principles

Give feedback, both through an easily assimilated optical cue and more detailed textual information.

Keep interaction direct : camera movement can be executed in the feedback pane, and zoom and sound levels can be set in the status bar. Also, the most needed functions related to these (resetting the camera position, resetting viewer zoom, stopping the sound) are accessible from there.

Simplify functions by thinking of their effect on the user, not of their technical implementation.

Bundle related functionality into **logical interface areas** with a consistent and, wherever possible, familiar **UI paradigm**.

Hide rarely used complexity : here, by moving all advanced sound settings into the sound preference panel.

Dude, where's my stuff ?

Believe me or not, it's still all there. Every single idiosyncrasy of *Second Life* is still available. Some of it might have had to relocate, and you might feel a tad lost while you peer at the new facade in search of your favourite tweak or trick. But it's all there.

- Well, nearly all of it. Some things are disabled by default : for instance, mouselook, re-christened **POV camera**. By default, it is only available to scripts, for usage in vehicles, or weapons. But if you absolutely must, you can reactivate it in the advanced part of the camera preferences.
- **Alpha keyboard navigation** is another victim. Yes, I know it is traditional. Only, you see, the tradition stems from games, which put far less emphasis on communication than *Second Life* does. In SL, all typed alpha keys should go to chat. Always. But if you feel using the arrow key block is just unbearable, you can re-enable that too — and have fun suddenly flying when you intended to type « f » again.
- The **lag meter**. Again, you can enable it in the advanced interface preferences, to display in the status bar.
- **Scripts** — no, I'm kidding.

And that's about it, really, as to the concept.

The holes in that are another matter entirely. It sorely needs more examples of info panes, browsers, workbenches. Better icons. A schematic of the slimmed down main menu structure. An overview of the mouse and keyboard shortcuts. The communication window needs a makeover. The browsers and the message window are assumptions only.

I could go on — but that won't help. Because what I have been lacking was time to do all this. So what you have here is the best I could do in time.

Warts and all, but yours.

Thank you

to **Apple** for making a superb OS, which was a great inspiration, and also for its excellent, low cost page layout application Pages, on which this document was typeset.

to **openOffice.org** for its office suite, the vector drawing component of which was used to create the mock-ups and interface bits displayed in this document.

to the **NeoOffice group** for actually making the above behave like a good Mac OS X citizen instead of an X11 barbarian.

to **Microsoft** (gasp !) for creating Georgia, the font this document is typeset in, and the Wingdings and Webdings fonts which I have drafted into service as interface symbols.

finally, to a plethora of **developers and designers** unnamed, whose ideas I have liberally plundered.