

Spotlight

Second Life is an online virtual world where people can start their day with a trip to the moon and end it with friends at a dance. It is also a place where minds meet, lecture notes are reviewed and extra credit is earned.

Michael DeMers, an associate professor in the Department of Geography, has taken advantage of this hugely popular pastime by giving his students a virtual outlet to gather with peers – as well as their professor – for study sessions that give them an edge when they go to the classroom.

DeMers has offered the online volunteers extra credit to his "Fundamentals of GIS" class, which studies geographic information systems, for the past one and a half years as a way to give his students additional experience outside of the classroom.

"One of the first things I envisioned was that Second Life would be a really good way to allow for collaborative work on any projects that I require of the students," DeMers said.

It started as a fireside chat in Second Life, where students would gather, through their avatars, to talk about their projects. That concept evolved and expanded to include a regular online classroom where students can meet in Aggie Island, owned by New Mexico State University, and review notes from the previous week's lecture.

DeMers, whose alter-ego avatar is known as "Gadget Loon" in Second Life, said he meets his students in Aggie Island once a week, where they have a chance to ask him questions about the 10 points they had the most trouble with from his lectures. To help the students comprehend what they are learning, DeMers does not allow the students to literally talk during the online review sessions, but instead requires them to write out their questions and answers in complete sentences.

Students can also work on virtual lab assignments, such as creating a 3-D globe or conical, planar, or cylindrical map projections. They can also work on practice test questions using the Second Life equivalent of clicker technology.

"My idea is, if they're spending extra time on their work, they should get extra credit because they're learning something," he said.

DeMers said he has received positive feedback from his students who participate in Second Life, and the students who take advantage of the online world do see marked improvement in their classroom work.

DeMers shares space on Aggie Island with professors at NMSU–Alamogordo who also teach classes in Second Life.

As well as teaching classes online, DeMers has also given presentations for workshops. He recently published the book, "GIS For Dummies."

Written by Audry Olmsted



Michael DeMers, an associate professor in the Department of Geography, uses the online virtual world Second Life to give his students the opportunity expand on what they learn in the classroom, and also to earn extra credit. Here, he demonstrates how his avatar "Gadget Loon" teaches on Aggie Island. (NMSU photo by Audry Olmsted)