WASHINGTON, D.C. - Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, conducted the first ever Congressional hearing simulcast in an Internet-based virtual world today. The hearing addressed the evolution, culture and future of virtual worlds such as Second Life, Zwinky and There which are part of a new form of communication that has exploded over the last few years.

The following is the chairman's opening statement:

"Good Morning. I'd like to welcome everybody today to the first simulcast of a Congressional hearing in a virtual world. A recreation of this committee hearing room has been developed in Second Life and my avatar is there as well, in the virtual Chairman's seat.

"There are also several other avatars who have been invited to watch today's hearing from Second Life. In particular, I would like to welcome an avatar we have invited named "Wilde Cunningham" - which was created by an inspirational group of individuals with Cerebral Palsy at an adult day care center in Dorchester, Massachusetts. They are using their avatar to run, fly, and communicate with people in a whole new way. This is a prime example of how virtual worlds can empower and animate the lives of individuals with disabilities through the use of broadband technologies. Mitch Kapor, founder of Lotus in Massachusetts, who has transplanted out to the Silicon Valley, is also present via his avatar in the hearing room.

"We have also invited the avatars of several journalists, online advocates, and academics, as well as the avatars of several Federal government representatives from NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who have built an incredible locale in Second Life where individuals can watch the impacts of global weather conditions as well as fly into the eye of a virtual hurricane."
"In fact, virtual worlds often permit people to do things and model conditions that would be difficult to do in real life. For example, emergency first responders can train for scenarios that are difficult to stage in real life. Responses to things like natural disasters, or a flu pandemic, can be practiced and analyzed by professionals in this virtual medium. In addition, the American Cancer Society has raised tens of thousands of dollars in charitable contributions in Second Life and is quite active in the medium. Colleges and universities around the country are also present, harnessing the power of this new medium for education, experimentation, cultural exchange, and fostering understanding.

"Virtual worlds are at the cutting edge of so-called "Web 2.0" applications and services, which enable users to generate the content of the realm, such as with YouTube and Flickr and Facebook. Virtual worlds can also support business operations and commercial applications - from real estate sales, to business conferences, product marketing, music sales, and the general buying of goods and services. IBM, which is testifying today, has been an early and active colonizer of this electronic frontier.

"Today's hearing has been designed primarily to be educational. In time, virtual worlds will become ever more commonplace and millions of Americans will inhabit such worlds for parts of their day - for communications, for business, for education, for health care, for cultural interests. As that occurs, policy issues will inevitably arise that mirror the issues that confront policymakers in the real world - consumer protection, personal privacy, intellectual property protection, banking issues, online gambling, or child protection concerns. Policymakers will have to continue to monitor these issues to ensure adequate consumer protection as virtual worlds continue to evolve and grow.

"However, online virtual worlds, as represented by Second Life, or Zwinky, or There.com, are, at their best, vehicles for understanding across borders and for building communities. They can empower individuals, companies, and professionals with the ability to visualize and conceptualize not only what is present, but what is possible. To this extent, today's hearing is both a glimpse into the future and also a window into the current reality for millions of people across the world.

"As the Subcommittee delves into this first, educational hearing about virtual worlds, it is important to keep in mind that if we want to foster the best of what this medium has to offer, we must consider the policies that will be conducive to such growth. These include upgrading our broadband infrastructure and speed, fostering openness and innovation in our Internet policies, and ensuring that we bridge digital divides in our country so that all Americans can benefit.

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“I want to thank our witnesses for their willingness to share their experiences with us this morning and look forward to their testimony.”