Goofy Characters and Weird People -- Sounds Like a Hearing

By Dana Milbank

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International financial markets are in turmoil, gas is pushing $4 a gallon and a recession looms. But don't worry, folks: The House Energy and Commerce Committee is on the case.

Yesterday, in unwitting observance of April Fools' Day, the telecommunications subcommittee held a hearing on "online virtual worlds" and the use of cartoon-like characters called avatars.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in approximately 10 seconds, the Ed Markey avatar is going to gavel this hearing," the flesh-and-blood Chairman Edward Markey (D-Mass.) announced in the panel's Rayburn hearing room. "There he is. He's done it."

Markey looked across the room at a jumbo computer screen showing his cartoonish avatar, named EdMarkey Alter. "My avatar actually looks like he's been working out," Markey noted approvingly, adding: "There are also several other avatars who have been invited to watch today's hearing."

Avatars Take Over Congressional Hearing

At the Subcommittee of Telecommunications and the Internet, members discussed their feelings about the new virtual world called Second Life and the characters in the game.

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Indeed there were: a goth character with feathered wings, a pink cat, a phantom with shimmering gray dreadlocks, a winged grasshopper, women in tube and bikini tops, and a naked man floating through the air. They were all "watching" the hearing from cyberspace via the virtual community Second Life -- and the lawmakers were agog.

Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) admired Markey's avatar. "He looks like he is a bit younger, and he probably appreciates that, having come off a little basketball injury."

"Maybe in our Second Life we will always make our three-point shot and still run up and down the court like we did 20 years ago," mused Rep. Gene Green (D-Tex.). Raising bandaged fingers, he added: "And maybe I wouldn't break my finger."

Rep. Mike Doyle (D-Pa.) wanted in on the fun. "Mr. Chairman, you're not the only one with an avatar," he said, then flashed on the screen a cartoon resembling the Simpsons.

Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) told Markey her suspicion that "the real reason we're here is so that you can get some pointers on how to get past the seventh level of the World of Warcraft."

Only Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) managed to keep her perspective. "I can't help but think of the phrase, 'get a life,' " she remarked.

Actually, maybe Congress should get an online life. In Second Life, participants create fake personas and spend endless hours interacting in a fantasy world with few tangible results to show for it -- kind of like, well, Congress.

"Some might also think of Congress as a virtual world," a self-aware Harman observed. "Many think we have little connection to the real world. . . . We fly into and out of town so quickly that we might as well send avatars to the floor to vote in our stead."

Stearns, the ranking Republican on the committee, saw a potential benefit to this scenario. "If somehow, some way, you as the distinguished chairman find the virtual world so enjoyable that you wish to remain in it for a while, I'll be glad to ease your conscience here," he offered. "Take some of your colleagues with you, and I'll be glad to run the subcommittee in your absence."

Only a few dozen trusted participants were allowed into the Second Life virtual hearing - - a way to limit nudity, flying and other unhelpful behavior by avatars. The participants -- located across the world -- kept up a virtual dialogue on the computer screen. "Has anything started yet?" an avatar named Pica Paperdoll asked, 20 minutes after the hearing started. Others contributed comments such as "smile," "wave," "hooo!" and "hahahaha."

"This is so bizarre," Pica Paperdoll observed.

Agreed, Pica Paperdoll. The lawmakers covered the potential downsides of virtual worlds (recruiting for terrorists, child pornography, human isolation) but much of the hearing served as an infomercial for Second Life. "Virtual worlds," boasted Second Life founder Philip Rosedale, are "changing the nature of communication itself." The chairman even allowed him to play a promotional video.

Another witness, Larry Johnson of the New Media Consortium, went so far as to proclaim that "any dichotomy drawn between the activities in the real world and that of the virtual world, we believe, is artificial at best."

This claim produced some skepticism from the lawmakers, who pointed out that another witness, Susan Tenby of TechSoup, had an avatar named Glitteractica Cookie. "And my appearance is a pink cat," Tenby added.

"You can be a cat," Johnson allowed. "You could be a cube if you like."

Second Life's Rosedale tried to redirect the conversation. "When you're in Second Life,"
he ventured, "there's a very strong sense that you are kind of, in a way, becoming more of yourself."

Becoming more of themselves, however, posed significant dangers for the lawmakers. "An avatar -- it's either a Hindu or a Buddhist name for a god," Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.) pointed out. "I don't think anyone perceives us as gods," he added. "Well, maybe some people do up here in Washington."

The chairman felt it necessary to issue a disclaimer that "any resemblance is completely coincidental" between Markey and his muscular avatar. "I think only lobbyists see us as gods," he said. "I think the rest of the world has a clearer perception of who we are."

After yesterday, the perception should be even clearer.