

Sad, Lonely? For a Good Time, Call Vivienne*

By **KEITH BRADSHER**

Published: February 24, 2005

HONG KONG, Feb. 18 - Men, are you tired of the time, trouble and expense of having a girlfriend? Irritated by the difficulty of finding a new one?

Eberhard Schöneburg, the chief executive of the software maker Artificial Life Inc. of Hong Kong, may have found the answer: a virtual girlfriend named Vivienne who goes wherever you go.

Vivienne likes to be taken to movies and bars. She loves to be given virtual flowers and chocolates, and she can translate six languages if you travel overseas. She never undresses, although she has some skimpy outfits for the gym, and is a tease who draws the line at anything beyond blowing kisses.




If you marry her in a virtual ceremony, you even end up with a virtual mother-in-law who really does call you in the middle of the night on your cellphone to ask where you are and whether you have been treating her daughter right.

She may sound like a mixed blessing, decidedly high maintenance and perhaps the last resort of losers. But she is nonetheless a concept that



Nick Bilton/The New York Times

ARTICLE TOOLS

-  [E-Mail This](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
-  [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
-  [Reprints & Permissions](#)
-  [Single-Page Format](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS **SIDEWAYS**
SPONSORED BY **NOW PLAYING IN THEATERS**

cellphone system operators and handset manufacturers are starting to embrace.

Vivienne, the product of computerized voice synthesis, streaming video and text messages, is meant not only to bring business to Artificial Life (she will be available for a monthly fee of \$6, not including the airtime costs paid to cellphone operators or the price of virtual chocolates and flowers). But she is also meant to be a lure for the new, higher-tech, third generation, or [3G](#), cellphones.

Vivienne, who may soon be joined by a virtual boyfriend for women and, after that, a virtual boyfriend for gay men and a virtual girlfriend for lesbians, is at the leading edge of a wave of services that companies are developing to take advantage of the much faster data transmission rates made possible by 3G technology.

These include the ability to download everything from high-resolution television news broadcasts to music videos to trailers of the latest movie releases.

Cellphone games are already available in Korea and Japan that allow users to change the clothing, hair style and other features of doll-like images of people. Vivienne - and similar games that are likely to follow from other companies - is distinctive in that she is a figurine who appears to be three-dimensional and moves through 18 different settings like a restaurant, shopping mall and airport.

She can converse on 35,000 topics, from philosophy to movies to sculpture. Artificial Life tweaked and reused close to 70,000 questions and answers on banking alone for Vivienne - those questions were developed for an unrelated contract for a Swiss private bank.

The cellphone chip cannot manage all of this; instead, the phone merely communicates with servers that run the program. The servers use so-called expert systems for dialogue, a specialty of Mr. Schöneburg, a former professor of artificial

Most E-Mailed

1. [Op-Ed Columnist: The Secret Genocide Archive](#)
2. [Editorial: Some Inheritance](#)
3. [The Pour: Best Supporting Grape](#)
4. [With \\$3.50 and a Dream, the 'Anti-Christo' Is Born](#)
5. [In Quest of the Perfect Roast Chicken](#)

[Go to Complete List](#)



Colin Beere for The New York Times

Eberhard Schöneburg, the chief executive of the software maker Artificial Life Inc. of Hong Kong, holds an image of Vivienne. She can handle English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, Spanish and Italian.

intelligence and neural networks who used to work on expert systems for German military projects.

But Artificial Life has already run into delays in introducing Vivienne to men in Asia and Europe. It originally hoped to have her flirting on cellphone screens by last Christmas.

The problems have ranged from the cosmetic - Vivienne is being reprogrammed not to bare her navel or display body piercings in conservative Muslim countries like Malaysia - to the technological.

"Every cellphone is a little bit different," and the programming must allow for this, said Stephen Leung, the project manager at Artificial Life.

She is now scheduled to become available, so to speak, in Singapore and Malaysia by the end of April, in Western Europe by late spring and possibly in a few American cities by the end of the year.

The delays are indicative of the broader problems facing 3G technology and the businesses that hope to piggyback on it. Users have complained of batteries that run down quickly, dropped signals while driving or in fog or rain, and phones that cost several times as much as current models unless the cellular service company subsidizes them. Cellphone operators have found that consumers are slow to sign up for costly video services, using 3G phones mostly for voice calls.

3G phones currently account for less than 2 percent of the world's handsets, but that proportion is starting to grow quickly, industry specialists said. The technology allows cellphone system operators to transmit voice as well as data more cheaply than existing systems once the initial investments are made.



Photo: Junks in the Harbor of Kowloon, Hong Kong, 1952

[Learn More.](#)

NYTimes: [Home](#) - [Site Index](#) - [Archive](#) - [Help](#)

Sad, Lonely? For a Good Time, Call Vivienne*

Published: February 24, 2005

(Page 2 of 2)

"It is happening because it's driven by cost savings for the operators, and they've already paid for the spectrum," said Duncan Clark, the managing director of BDA China Ltd., a telecommunications consulting firm in Beijing.

At an Internet game parlor here, packed with young men busily shooting or chopping apart a wide variety of villains and monsters, there was no clear consensus on whether people would pay to exchange valentines with Vivienne.

"It's a little bit for the losers," said Rick Wong, a 32-year-old off-duty security guard, who nonetheless added that, "even people who have girlfriends, well, girlfriends are not perfect, so they may play anyway."

Yet the willingness of companies like Artificial Life to invest in applications for 3G shows the complexity of programming that the new cellphone technology will permit.

Vivienne, for instance, will double as a translator for travelers. Type in the desired words in English while traveling and, with additional programming in the next few months, her synthesized voice will coo it back in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, Spanish or Italian.

"You can say, 'What is chicken soup in Chinese?' and she will say it out loud, so you can give it to someone when you order," Mr. Schöneburg said.

Users must type in their questions as they would a short text message on a cellphone, as the system software does not include voice recognition. Vivienne responds with both a synthesized voice and text.

Vivienne's largest database is for processing those difficult conversations about



Nick Bilton/The New York Times

Advertisement



romance and intimacy. "People will see that they can't have sex with her, but they'll try to," and Vivienne has many ways to hold them off, Mr. Schöneburg said.

Vivienne is fairly prudish, partly because Artificial Life is hoping the market will include teenagers from affluent families. Artificial Life has been contacted by companies interested in the development of a racier version, and perhaps even a pornographic version, and may license the technology but will not enter that market itself.

Partly to prevent anyone from becoming addicted to Vivienne's charms, the program will limit users to an hour of play time a day.

Even an hour could be costly. The monthly fee will not include airtime for the data - a big incentive for cellphone operators to offer the service, notwithstanding recent questions about whether teenagers have been running up excessive cellphone bills even without virtual relationships. Mr. Schöneburg predicted that most subscribers for Vivienne would be able to entertain her using the free data allowance provided with the initial monthly fee for 3G service. But subscribers who use the basic allowance for other services could end up paying several dollars a month more to the service provider.

Users eager to advance quickly toward a virtual kiss or even marriage should know that she has a faintly mercenary appreciation for gifts, from flowers and chocolates to cars and diamond rings. Some virtual gifts are free, but others will require users to make real charges against their monthly phone bills of 50 cents to \$2.

"The money goes to us," Mr. Schöneburg said, grinning at the prospect of lovelorn suitors around the world paying real money to woo a computer program.

Vivienne does offer a way to test out approaches to a virtual woman before trying them in reality. "If you buy her a membership to a gym, she may take offense and say, 'What, am I too big for you?' " Mr. Schöneburg said.

Artificial Life is not suggesting Vivienne is any substitute for a flesh-and-blood girlfriend. "I hope they think of her as a companion," said MaryAnna Donaldson, the company's creative content editor, "and will see her as a practice round before the real one."



Colin Beere for The New York Times
Eberhard Schöneburg, the chief executive of the software maker Artificial Life Inc. of Hong Kong holds an image of Vivienne. She can handle English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, Spanish and Italian.

NYT Store



Photo: Junks in the Harbor of Kowloon, Hong Kong, 1952
[Learn More.](#)