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Virtually yours: a girlfriend who's always on the phone

ALEX LO and SOPHIE TAYLOR , South China Morning Post

"Woman: Twenty, young and energetic; seeking companionship". It reads like any personal ad - except this lonely heart does not exist.

Welcome to the brave new world of virtual relationships. A group of Hong Kong-based programmers has created a cyber dream girl and soon you will be able to conduct an online affair with her on your 3G phone. The game, which can last for months, is billed as the world's first cyber-affair program.



"You can log on any time of the day, she'll be doing on your screen what people do in the morning, at night, at work or in the gym. She does sleep but we try to minimise that, as there isn't much you can do with her asleep," said Eberhard Schoneburg, chief executive of Hong Kong-based Artificial Life, which produced the dating game. The company is listed on the Nasdaq technology market in the US.

"You have to please her, send her chocolates and a diamond ring to make her happy," Mr Schoneburg said. "She gets upset if you forget anniversaries. She has her likes and dislikes, preferences and secrets you have to discover when you become intimate."

Cyber-sex, however, is out of the question. "I think a tease is more seductive," said Mr Schoneburg who expects to pair up with 3G providers and launch subscriptions for the game in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Britain and Germany by November.

While the game will prove popular among Hong Kong's gadget freaks, it may unleash darker tendencies and prove a public danger, one psychiatrist warns.

A virtual boyfriend will come out in January, said Mr Schoneburg, a former computer science professor and philosopher from Germany.

"All the 3G providers are interested. They have invested billions on [3G] infrastructure but there have been few good applications," he said.

"You carry on your end of the conversation by text-messaging, and she replies by both text messages and speaking out loud so you can hear her on your 3G phone."

The girl's responses are open-ended and have been programmed to react to contexts, key words and situations to approximate natural dialogue; the relationship can also evolve in unexpected directions. She can speak Cantonese, English, German, Japanese and Korean.

The company hopes to make money through subscriptions, commercial product placements - for example, meeting the girl in a chain coffee shop - and sales of virtual gifts to give the girl to advance the affair. "Eight dollars for a diamond ring, for example. That's not too expensive for a cyber-gift," Mr Schoneburg said.

The 3G dating game has been likened to the Tamagochi virtual pets popular a few years ago, but is likely to be more addictive because of the programming sophistication.

Dominic T.S. Lee, professor of psychiatry at Chinese University, says such a device could also encourage voyeuristic tendencies.

"I think to begin with there will be many people who buy the game out of curiosity, because it's quite fun to have a virtual girlfriend without all the responsibility," he said.

"However, people who are lonely and can't form social relationships but nevertheless yearn for the connections will buy the game.

"People prone to an addiction may also buy it. It would be dangerous if people got excited by these electronic experiences and tried to transplant them into real life. In vulnerable personalities who can't develop a relationship with a woman, that could develop into something voyeuristic or even dangerous."