

Unit 7

The Virtual World

The dawn of electronic virtual assistants

Stratumsoft are developing the first electronic virtual assistant or EVA. If EVAs live up to the developer's claim, they could provide the illusion of personal service without the cost. Call centers, online advertisers and Internet service providers are among the initial targets.

It is predicted that eighty percent of call center requests could be dealt with by an EVA. E-commerce is another application. "The best experience you can have as a shopper is personal contact, and EVA is designed to give that " says Stratumsoft's director of marketing.

The technology behind EVA combines two global trends in Website design. One, developed out of the computer animation and gaming industry, is the ability to give Web images the impression of three dimensions. The other is the use of dynamic database skills and artificial intelligence- style searching to retrieve information from data banks.

Each EVA can be programmed with information such as a product catalogue, answers of frequently asked questions or an online encyclopedia. It is also equipped with a search engine to interpret customer requests made in colloquial language. Queries are typed in and answered via on-screen text boxes.

If the EVA does not have an answer, it will interrogate the questioner, record the response, and add the answer to its database for future enquiries. EVA s are not fully animated to imitate human features but they can be programmed to gesture and imitate different moods. An EVA is run via a Java applet - a small, self-contained program coded to download on to any type of personal computer.