

AIBO

Sony's robotic dog plays doggo

By Michelle Heald

AIBO, the robotic dog that bolted from Sony's kennel back in 1999 was discontinued earlier this year. A Sony spokesman was quoted as saying the reason was that the robot dog was costing them too much. The total number of dogs sold was slightly more than 150,000, which was far less than what the company's officials had predicted and hoped for. The high price tag for this pedigreed plastic pup undoubtedly played a large part in its demise—it retailed for around US\$1,500 and AUD\$3,000 here in Australia.

Perhaps another reason for AIBO's retirement has something to do with the marketing. The official AIBO site had the wording "From the first day you interact with AIBO, it will become your companion." Not many pet owners would refer to their pet as an 'it'. We're more inclined to refer to our furry ones as being 'he' or 'she' rather than 'it' which implies an inanimate object—something all pet lovers know that our furred, feathered and fin friends are not.



There were many perceived benefits to having a robotic dog as a substitute for a real pooch. AIBO's dietary requirements were as simple as boosting his energy levels by recharging the battery. Sony even released software that could make AIBO automatically re-juice its own battery when depleted. At an additional cost of US\$99.00, this software also had the benefit of face recognition technology. For such an expensive pooch, I would certainly want the little guy to recognise me.

Another selling point, was that AIBO had a camera and he could take happy snaps at doggy level. This is something a real dog could never do as they have don't have any slots where a memory stick could fit. This little robotic dog never incurred vet bills or needed worming tablets, flea treatments and tick repellent. De-sexing was not something an owner needed to consider and AIBO's microchip was more for performance than identification.

The other upside of AIBO was that there was no poop to clean up. As a puppy you would never have the inconvenience of AIBO making a mess as he came out of the box already house-trained. AIBO also had impeccable manners and would never cause you the embarrassment of having to call him off as he humped the leg of a visitor. He was the ideal pet substitute for couch potatoes because he never begged or whined to be taken to the park.

One wag of a journalist suggested that the real key to AIBO's demise was the inability to clean a kitchen floor like our real dogs do. This observation resonated with me as I often holiday overseas, electing to stay in accommodation with kitchens.

I enjoy preparing home cooked meals, rather than being a slave to hotel room service menus. After several days, I'm alarmed to see the build-up of crud on the kitchen floor. It reminds me of how efficient the hoovering capabilities of my own dog are. Crumbs and accidentally dropped food particles are quickly snaffled by my canine version of the Dyson. Perhaps Sony would have sold more AIBO's if they'd ditched the camera and installed a vacuum cleaner instead.

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