

In Japan, robot dogs are for life - and death

February 25 2015, by Miwa Suzuki



Hideko Mori (L) and her sister Yasuko watch their robot pet AIBO playing at Hideko's home in Tokyo

Incense smoke wafts through the cold air of the centuries-old Buddhist temple as a priest chants a sutra, praying for the peaceful transition of the souls of the departed.

It is a funeral like any other in Japan. Except that those being honoured are robot dogs, lined up on the altar, each wearing a tag to show where they came from and which family they belonged to.

The devices are "AIBOs", the world's first home-use entertainment robot equipped with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and capable of developing its own personality.

"I believe owners feel they have souls as long as they are with them," said Nobuyuki Narimatsu, 59, who heads an electronics repair company specialising in fixing vintage products.

Sony rolled out the first-generation AIBO in June 1999, with the initial batch of 3,000 selling out in just 20 minutes, despite the hefty 250,000 yen (more than \$2,000) price tag.

Over the following years, more than 150,000 units were sold, in numerous iterations, ranging from gleaming metallic-silver versions to round-faced cub-like models.

The dog came with an array of sensors, a camera and microphone. The final generation could even talk.

By 2006, Sony was in trouble; its business model was broken and it was facing fierce competition from rivals in all fields. The AIBO, an expensive and somewhat frivolous luxury, had to go.

The company kept its "AIBO Clinic" open until March 2014, but then—politely—told dedicated and loving owners that they were on their own.

For Hideko Mori, 70, that nearly spelled disaster.



Robot dog AIBO is seen next to 'Kuma', a Shiba Inu breed, outside the Kofuku-ji temple in Isumi, Japan's Chiba prefecture

'Beautiful noise'

Mori has had her AIBO for around eight years. She enjoys the conversations she has with it, and thinks it far more convenient than a real puppy.

"He doesn't require feeding and he doesn't pee... actually he does pee by cocking his leg, making an indescribably beautiful tinkling sound." But, she said, nothing actually comes out.

"I never thought there was a limit to his life."

But in May last year her beloved AIBO, whose name is simply "Aibo", became immobile.

"I e-mailed a former Sony worker (on behalf of the dog), saying: 'Do I have no choice but to die like this because I can't walk?'," she said.

The engineer introduced her to A FUN, a company that employs former Sony engineers, who fixed her machine in two months.

"I was so happy to see him back to health and at home," she said.

Hiroshi Funabashi, 61, who supervises repairs at A FUN, said troubled AIBO owners think of him more as a doctor than an engineer.

"The word 'repair' doesn't fit here," he told AFP at his home in Kasama, north of Tokyo. Scattered around him are dozens of AIBOs sent in with problems owners typically describe as "aching joints".

"For those who keep AIBOs, they are nothing like home appliances. It's obvious they think their (robotic pet) is a family member," he said.

Funabashi says he does not enhance the functions of aged AIBOs, but tries to restore them to health.

The problem is that repairs can take weeks or even months because of a shortage of spare parts. Dozens of AIBOs are now "hospitalised", with more than 180 on the waiting list.



Kofuku-ji temple chief priest Bungen Oi (R) offers a prayer during the funeral for 19 Sony's pet robot AIBOs, in Isumi, Japan's Chiba prefecture

Organ donors

The only source of genuine parts are "dead" robots, who become donors for organ transplantation, but only once the proper respects have been paid.

Bungen Oi, a priest at the 450-year-old Kofukuji temple in Isumi, east of Tokyo, says the AIBO service last month was an occasion on which the robots' souls could pass from their bodies.

"I was thrilled over the interesting mismatch of giving cutting-edge technology a memorial service in a very conventional manner," he said.

It is a mismatch that humans will probably become more used to over the coming years and decades, as robots with "personalities" become ever more part of our lives.

Later this year, Japanese telecoms giant Softbank says it is going to start selling the humanoid Pepper to the public.

Despite the \$2,000 cost, Pepper will be useless for housework, but developers say it will learn to imitate and intuit human emotions over time.

This blurring of lines means more people could feel the kind of attachment that AIBO owners know so well, said A FUN's Funabashi.

"I don't know if people will develop affection (towards a new generation of robots) in five, six years' time," he said. "But I think we need to recognise they are not ordinary electrical devices."

© 2015 AFP

Citation: In Japan, robot dogs are for life - and death (2015, February 25) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-02-japan-robot-dogs-life-.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--