

Don't want to bother with cat litter? Japan offers robots

January 25 2018, by Yuri Kageyama



In this Jan. 10, 2018 photo, Yukai Engineering's Tsubasa Tominaga demonstrates Qoobo, a cushion robot, at his office in Tokyo. A fuzzy, huggable cushion with a whimsically swishy tail, Qoobo is designed to deliver a calming therapeutic effect for the cat-lover who can't have a real kitty. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

Japan, home of the "kawaii" cult of cute, has always had a soft spot for companion robots, in contrast to the more industrial or mechanical types used for assembly lines, surgeries and military missions. The Associated Press spent some time recently with three relatively affordable home robots from Japanese makers that target the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter.

KIROBO MINI

Toyota Motor Corp.'s Kirobo Mini is small enough to fit in your hand and looks like a child clad in a space outfit. It's apt to repeat phrases like, "I missed that; can you say that again?" and "Hmmmmm"

Its name combines the word for "hope," or "kibo," and "[robot](#)." And it's designed for cuteness, wiggling seated on its behind, jiggling its arms. It turns its head toward a speaking voice, its saucer-like eyes glowing, sometimes asking inane questions like: "People? What are people?"

The robot understands only Japanese so far, but can be programmed to recognize your name and the name you give it. Such functions are managed through a smartphone app that updates its software periodically so Kirobo Mini will get "smarter"—growing up, so-to-speak.

I rented Kirobo for two months and named it after my son, Isaku. I got it to use facial recognition to call me by my name, Yuri, and to say "War is bad, isn't it?"

"Isaku has learned one more thing about Yuri today," it says in a high-pitched electronic voice.

Teaching Isaku a short song took some patience. It turns itself off if told to go to sleep, but only after politely asking: "Please play with me again."

IQ ASSESSMENT: Much more intelligent than a windup toy.

PRICE: 39,800 yen (\$350)

SIZE: 10 centimeters (4 inches) height seated; 183 grams (6.5 ounces) in weight.

POTENTIAL: Toyota is considering connecting Kirobo to car-navigation and smart-driving capabilities. It now connects to the latest Prius hybrid, placed in a special dock that links to car navigation, but only has basic functions like reminding the driver to turn off the headlights. It won't do any driving.



In this Sept. 27, 2016, file photo, Toyota Motor Corp.'s Kirobo Mini, a compact

sized humanoid communication robot, sits during a press unveiling in Tokyo. Kirobo Mini child-like robot recognizes faces and can manage simple chatter. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi, File)

AIBO

Sony Corp.'s Aibo robot dog is back with all its disarming and unpredictable charm.

The Japanese maker of the PlayStation video game consoles pulled the plug on Aibo 12 years ago, drawing an outcry from global fans.

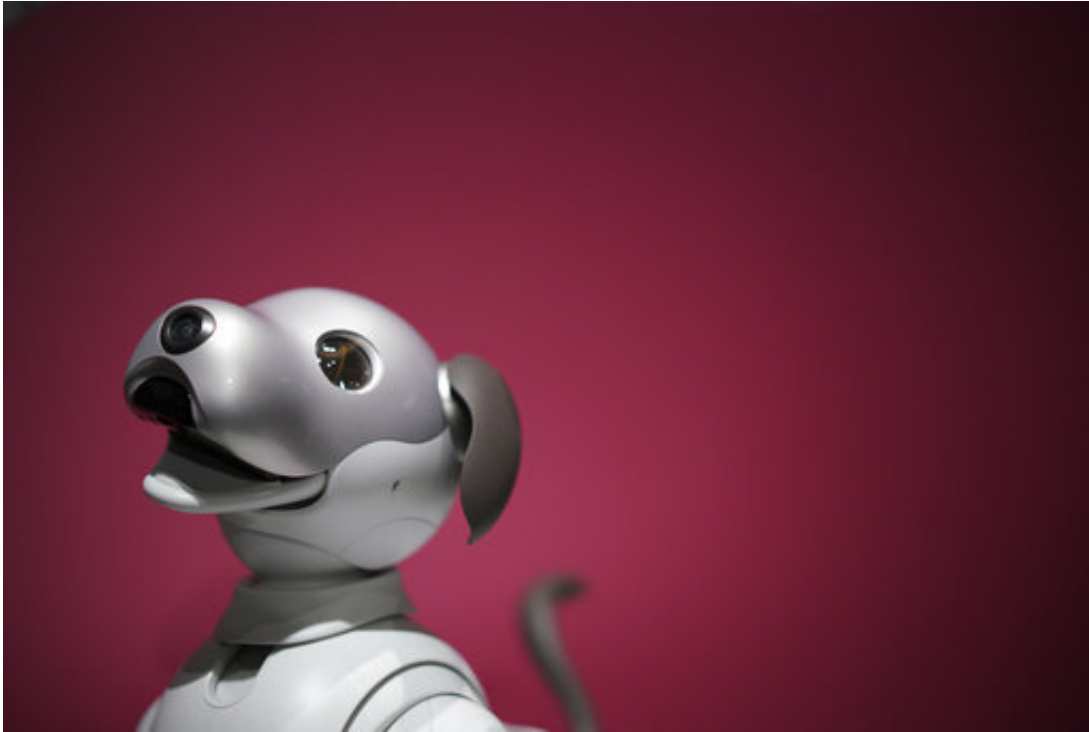
The improved Aibo has more natural looking eyes, thanks to advanced OLED, or organic light-emitting diodes. It can cock its head and sway its hips at more varied, subtle angles. Sony says its "heart," more aptly its brain, is in an internet "cloud" service that serves as Aibo's memory. In theory, it could, with time and work, develop its canine artificial intelligence.

Aibo has a high-pitched electronic "bark," but can't otherwise talk. Like the original model, it responds to a pink ball and a pink plastic bone, to voices and to petting. It can crouch on its belly, strut around and wag its tail, do tricks like picking up the plastic bone with its mouth or lifting its paws. It seems to pant with joy when petted, and can perk an ear like it's listening.



In this Jan. 11, 2018, photo, a guest plays with Sony Corp.'s new Aibo robot dog at its showroom in Tokyo. The Japanese maker of the PlayStation video game consoles pulled the plug on Aibo 12 years ago, drawing an outcry from global fans. The improved Aibo has more natural looking eyes, thanks to advanced OLED, or organic light-emitting diodes. It can cock its head and sway its hips at more varied, subtle angles. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

Sony's Yusuke Kozuka says that given recent advances in robotics and AI, the time seemed right for a new Aibo.



In this Jan. 11, 2018, photo, Sony Corp.'s new Aibo robot dog is displayed at its showroom in Tokyo. The Japanese maker of the PlayStation video game consoles pulled the plug on Aibo 12 years ago, drawing an outcry from global fans. The improved Aibo has more natural looking eyes, thanks to advanced OLED, or organic light-emitting diodes. It can cock its head and sway its hips at more varied, subtle angles. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

Aibo went on sale Jan. 11 in Japan. The first batch of advance orders, in November, sold out in 30 minutes. Overseas sales are being considered but still undecided.

IQ ASSESSMENT: Puppy-level.

PRICE: 198,000 yen (\$1,800), but extra costs for cloud and maintenance

services.

SIZE: 30.5 centimeters (12 inches) long body; 2.2 kilograms (5 pounds) in weight.

POTENTIAL: Not a disappointment for hard-core fans, but does it have enough mass appeal to be a big seller?



In this Jan. 11, 2018, photo, Sony Corp.'s new Aibo robot dogs are displayed at its showroom in Tokyo. The Japanese maker of the PlayStation video game consoles pulled the plug on Aibo 12 years ago, drawing an outcry from global fans. The improved Aibo has more natural looking eyes, thanks to advanced OLED, or organic light-emitting diodes. It can cock its head and sway its hips at more varied, subtle angles. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat

litter. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

QOOBO (pronounced koo-boh)

A fuzzy, huggable cushion with a whimsically swishy tail, Qoobo is designed to deliver a calming therapeutic effect for the cat-lover who can't have a real kitty.

This companion robot is ingenuous in its simplicity—much is purposely left to the imagination: It has no face or whiskers, no legs and no purr, just a responsive tail that wags slowly when it is gently stroked and energetically when it is tapped, so it could be a dog.

"Some say this reflects the Japanese cultural ability to appreciate negative space in art," says Tsubasa Tominaga of Tokyo-based Yukai Engineering, which designed Qoobo.

He said Japanese prefer to interact with cute things, not digital assistants on impersonal gadgets, as Apple does with Siri and Amazon with Alexa.

A single charge will have your pillow-with-a-tail wagging for eight hours. It's available for through a fundraising site and online orders. Delivery, now only for Japan and the U.S., is set for later this year.



In this Sept. 27, 2016, file photo, compact sized humanoid communication robots, Kirobo Mini, are displayed during a press unveiling in Tokyo. Kirobo Mini child-like robot recognizes faces and can manage simple chatter. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi, File)

IQ ASSESSMENT: Not really needed for a cushion.

PRICE: About 10,000 yen (\$90) with a definite price being set later.

SIZE: 33 centimeters (13 inches) by 54 centimeters (21 inches); 1,000 grams (2 pounds) in weight.

POTENTIAL: Not for every home but unobtrusive and cheap enough to

catch on with some.



In this Jan. 10, 2018 photo, Yukai Engineering's Tsubasa Tominaga demonstrates Qoobo, a cushion robot, at his office in Tokyo. A fuzzy, huggable cushion with a whimsically swishy tail, Qoobo is designed to deliver a calming therapeutic effect for the cat-lover who can't have a real kitty. The relatively affordable home robot targets the elderly, kids and hard-working salarymen pressed for time. Unlike real children or pets, they have off switches and don't need constant attention, dog food or cat litter. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

© 2018 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Don't want to bother with cat litter? Japan offers robots (2018, January 25) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-dont-bother-cat-litter-japan.html>

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.