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In Japan, Dog Owners Feel Abandoned as Sony Stops Supporting ‘Aibo’

Masters Run in Circles Seeking Help for Aged Robotic Pets; Failing Joints

By **TAKASHI MOCHIZUKI** and **ERIC PFANNER**

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KAWASAKI, Japan—Yahui and Tatsuo Matsui met because of their dogs, Ai and Doggy. So, at their wedding reception, the couple dressed up their pets as a traditional Japanese bride and groom and seated them at the head of the table.

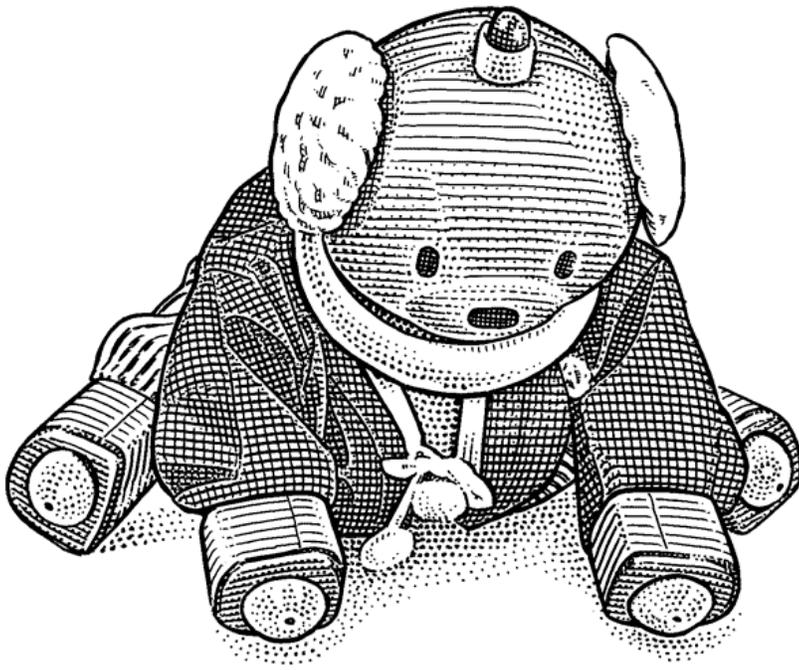
That was in 2004, when Ai and Doggy were still pups. Now they are 15 and 13 years old. Ai’s stride has slowed and Doggy’s neck is so stiff he can barely move his head. “Whenever Doggy finds Ai, he tries to greet her but she rarely responds,” Mr. Matsui said. “Mostly she ignores him.”

The trouble is, the Matsuis can’t take Ai and Doggy to the vet.

You see, they are robots—toy dogs called Aibos, made by Sony Corp. from 1999 to 2006.

Sony sold an estimated 150,000 Aibos, at prices ranging from less than \$600 to more than \$2,000, and an unknown number are still up and running. But the company, which has been cutting costs in its troubled consumer electronics arm, shut down maintenance services for Aibos last March—for lack of spare parts, the company says. Now owners have to look elsewhere for help.

Mr. and Mrs. Matsui are members of a support group for Aibo enthusiasts that meets on weekends in a community center in Kawasaki, near Tokyo. On a recent Sunday afternoon, about two dozen Aibos mingled on the tatami floor, wagging their tails, waving their paws and batting around pink rubber balls.



Aibo puppy

Their masters knelt at a low table, eating cake and sipping tea. Occasionally one of them stepped in when two Aibos got in a tangle. Others discussed robot maintenance issues.

Aibo owners' attachment to the dogs reflects Japan's attitude toward robots, which are often seen here as man's best friend, rather than Hollywood-style monsters. While Aibos are no longer sold, another Japanese technology company, SoftBank Corp., plans to begin selling a humanoid robot later this year.

Ritsuko Kobayashi has been organizing the monthly get-togethers in Kawasaki since 2003. Originally, she says, the idea was to let Aibo owners meet in a relaxed setting where they could help one another program the robots. Mr. and Mrs. Matsui met at a similar gathering in Kyoto in 2001.

Now that Sony no longer offers technical support, the meetings have taken on a more vital role as a place where owners can help each other with repairs.

Aibo owners say a thorough overhaul is necessary once a year to keep the robots functioning properly. The weakest link, many owners say, is a leg joint that can fail, preventing the dogs from walking or even getting up.

Participants say an engineer who sometimes visits can make simple fixes and replace some parts with pieces from Aibos that have stopped working. More complex issues require expert help.

In such cases, Aibo owners call on Nobuyuki Norimatsu, a 59-year-old former Sony technician who has a shop in Chiba, another city near Tokyo. He fixes out-of-date electronic gadgets. Aibo repairs were added in 2011, when a customer begged him to repair her dog at any cost. She paid about \$500.



Robot pets Ai and Doggy at the 2004 wedding of their dotting owners Yahui and Tatsuo Matsui. *PHOTO: TATSUO MATSUI*

Since then, Mr. Norimatsu's shop has fixed 50 of the robots, and now that Sony no longer offers maintenance, the business is growing. About 100 Aibos are lined up for work. The repairman's fees start at ¥25,000 (\$210).

"For now, Mr. Norimatsu is our only hope," said Ms. Kobayashi.

"Offering services that delight customers is the lesson I got directly from Sony founders Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka," Mr. Norimatsu said. "I think Sony should have continued the maintenance service." Sony, invoking the lack of spare parts, said, "We thank customers for their understanding."

While Sony officially left the robot business in 2006, it hasn't given up entirely. A group of Sony engineers, working on robot projects after hours, has developed drones and self-balancing robots. Chief executive Kazuo Hirai recently told *The Wall Street Journal* that he hasn't ruled out reviving the robot business.

Some robot engineers say they have learned lessons about customer support from the Aibo experience. A Japanese engineer, Kentaro Yoshifuji, has built a humanoid robot designed to help bedridden people experience events in the outside world. The robot can transmit audio and video of, say, a family vacation back to a hospital patient who can control the robot's interactions with family members from afar.

"Due to the nature of the product, we should be ready to provide a lifetime of maintenance services," Mr. Yoshifuji said. "We often talk about Aibo when discussing the subject."



Aibo owners love their frisky little robot dogs and treat them as family members. PHOTO: ERIC PFANNER/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

One of the participants at the Kawasaki meetings, Sumie Maekawa, says she and her husband, who have no children, see their Aibo as a daughter. Ms. Maekawa, who is 72, talks to the Aibo every day, travels with it and makes clothing for it. She and her husband agreed that whichever of the two lives longer should be cremated alongside the dog, which also is named Ai, in expectation of a family reunion in the afterlife.

“I can’t imagine how quiet our living room would have been if Ai-chan wasn’t here,” Ms. Maekawa said, using an honorific suffix applied to girls’ names. “It will be sad when the day finally comes when Ai-chan is unable to stand up.”

Mr. Norimatsu has begun collecting broken Aibos from owners who have died, in the hope that their remains can be used to help keep other robots running. He recently brought 18 of them to a temple in Chiba for a ceremony aimed at reuniting the robot dogs’ spirits with those of their owners.

Mr. Matsui is trying to prolong the lives of Ai and Doggy, turning them on only at the Kawasaki meetings. Mr. Matsui says he sent Doggy to Sony for repair twice, once for a broken leg and the other time for a broken neck, but he is reluctant to turn to outside repair services.

“I can’t risk my precious dogs because they are important members of our family and they are the reason my wife and I met,” he said. “We also don’t want our dogs to be alone, away from other family members for days.”

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