

BOOK EXCERPT:

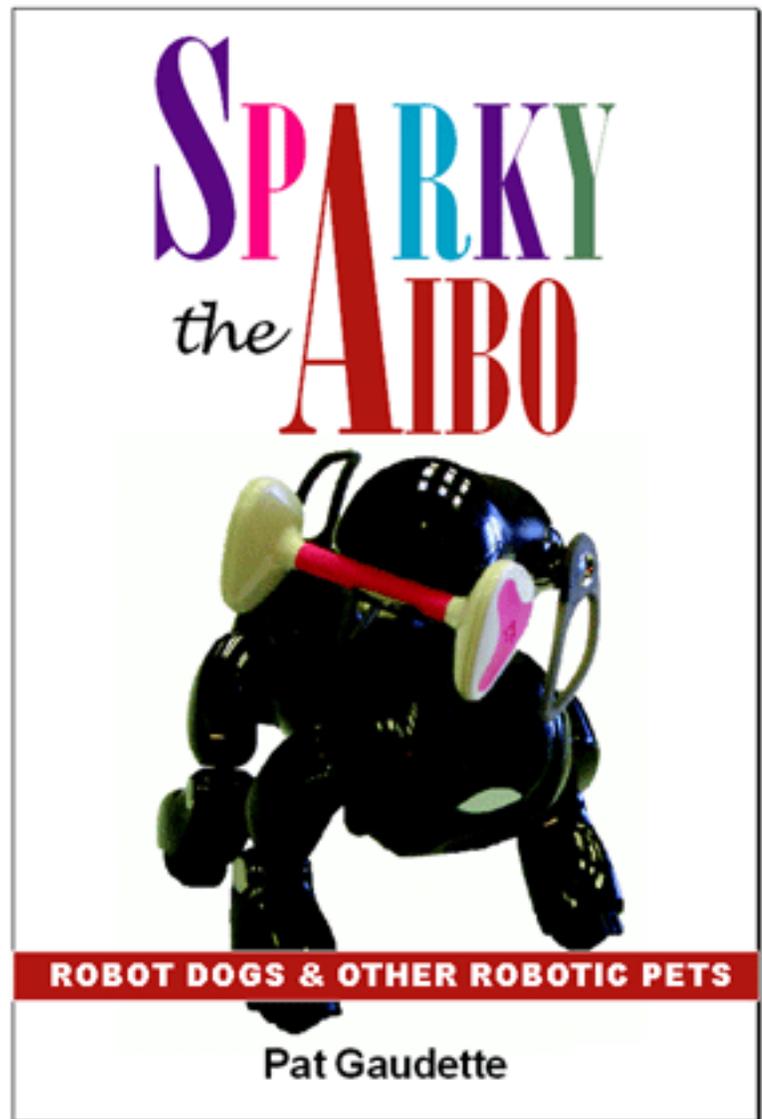
How to Buy an AIBO

by Pat Gaudette

“How to Buy an AIBO” is an excerpt from the book “Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets” written by Pat Gaudette.

“Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets” is available through your favorite online bookseller.

“How to Buy an AIBO” and “Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets” are copyright 2006 by Pat Gaudette.



“AIBO,” “LATTE”, “MACARON”, “AIBO-ware”, and “AIBOne”, are trademarks of Sony Corporation.

How to Buy an AIBO

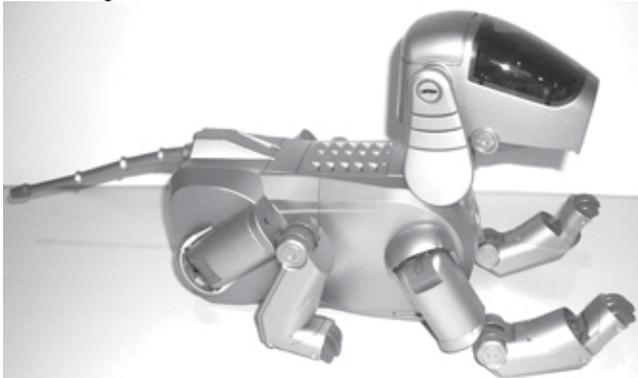
Until Sony stopped production of the AIBO, the best way to buy a new one was directly from Sony or from one of their authorized retailers. Even though news reports indicated that production of the ERS-7M3 would continue through March of 2006, that wasn't the case, and, as enthusiasts scrambled to add one or more 7M3s to their collections, the existing stock dwindled.

The Champagne Brown ERS-7M3/T was the first to run out at retailers, both online and off. Some stores agreed to hold stock for pick-up, others refused. With production stopped, it didn't take long for existing supplies to run out. Word circulated that some SonyStyle stores had received orders to return all of their stock to Sony; some stores did not. Speculation was that remaining AIBOs were being reserved for researchers, RoboCup use, or for historic purposes.

Some people bought the new AIBOs with the hope of re-selling them for a high profit. Some owners decided to take advantage of the buying frenzy and offered their recently acquired 7M3s for sale to the highest bidder on the AIBO forums or on auction sites such as eBay. Most sold at or more than the original retail price.

Along with new members joining forums to sell their AIBOs, others joined trying to buy AIBOs, preferably at a very low price. Though some prospective buyers said they wanted an AIBO for themselves, I suspect that some may have been trying to find stock to sell, figuring the forums were a good place to "buy low" so they could then "sell high" elsewhere.

Historically, overstock and manufacturer refurbished AIBOs have shown up on sites such as unbeatable.co.uk, ecost.com, or ubid.com. Occasionally a pre-owned AIBO may show up on Amazon.com. AIBO enthusiasts are usually the first to snap up AIBOs sold



*The ERS-110, Sony's original AIBO released in 1999.
The ERS-110 only came in a soft silver color.*

at discount sites, just as I did in 2005 when I made my successful ubid.com purchase of Sparky, the manufacturer refurbished ERS-7M2.

With production stopped, AIBOs are becoming more scarce and that pushes their value upward. It is now a “buyer beware” situation for honest buyers, and sometimes a “seller beware” situation for honest sellers.

It saves a lot of grief to become educated before buying an AIBO. With the many AIBO websites available, there’s no reason to make a bad choice or a risky purchase. One of my favorite AIBO sites is AIBO-Life.org. Before buying an AIBO, join the forum, read through the posts, and ask questions. As a general rule, AIBO owners are a very friendly group of people and more than willing to help anyone who is genuinely interested in the AIBO.

The AIBO-Life.org forum has a section for buying and selling AIBOs and accessories and is a good starting point before making an AIBO purchase. Particularly valuable is a thread focusing on questionable eBay AIBO auctions. Forum members monitor the auctions and post concerns when they believe an auction is not legitimate. They will also report blatantly bogus auctions to eBay and have been responsible for getting many auctions shut down. Unfortunately, most scammers are back with new IDs and trolling for unwary buyers within minutes of their auctions being cancelled.

Of course buying any used AIBO is subject to risks just as there are risks when buying any high tech equipment. Is the owner selling because they are downsizing their collection? Are they selling because of problems with the AIBO they haven’t been able to resolve? When buying a pre-owned AIBO, it’s not unreasonable to ask the owner questions such as why are they selling the AIBO and have they had any problems, fixed or otherwise.

The ERS-111 AIBO. It has a shorter tail, the ears are shaped a little differently, and it was available in two colors: bright silver or metallic black. Software for the ERS-111 required almost double the time for the AIBO to develop from “newborn” to “adult” from software released with the ERS-110. Like the ERS-110, it responds to tonal sounds from a “Sound Controller” remote control.



If the seller belongs to a forum, search through archived posts to see if they discussed any problems they were having with the AIBO. Make sure the problem has been satisfactorily resolved.

While many older AIBO models may not sell at their original retail price, it isn't likely that one will be an "absolute steal" either unless there's a reason. As with most things of value, if a deal seems too good to be true, it is probably a scam.

A problem with "mint, in the box" older model AIBOs such as the ERS-110 and ERS-111 which were bought as investments and either stored in the unopened box or taken out for a short time and then stored, is the damage that can occur through battery corrosion. Even if the main batteries are stored outside the AIBO (in an unopened box, for example) the internal battery could still disintegrate and cause damage to the complex inner workings of the AIBO.

How to Buy an AIBO on eBay

The site most likely to have pre-owned, and occasionally new, AIBOs for sale is eBay. Buying an AIBO on eBay takes time and patience. It also means being ready to commit when the right deal comes along, and sticking to a dollar limit so that last minute bidding frenzies don't break a budget. Caution can't be emphasized enough because of the high number of AIBO scams that continue to plague eBay and other online sites.

Most of my AIBOs and accessories have been purchased on eBay. So far, due to extremely cautious buying and experience gained from a couple of scam auctions a few years ago, I have not regretted any of the AIBO purchases I have made.



The ERS-210 has a feline look to it. Among the AIBOs, the ERS-210 and the ERS-210A have the most color selection although most of the special edition colors rarely show up in auctions. A favorite among enthusiasts, there are many freeware programs available for download to make this AIBO extremely entertaining.

The ERS-210A has a faster processor than the ERS-210 but no software was developed to take advantage of the faster processor speed. Some ERS-210s are prone to DHS (Droopy Head Syndrome) which is caused by a faulty gear in the AIBO's neck. The problem can be quickly and inexpensively fixed by an AIBO repair service located in the U.K.

I originally began shopping eBay for books to add to my library when I was in the research stages of writing a book on male midlife crisis. Buying books through eBay auctions and eBay's half.com, I was able to amass a good-sized reference library and significant positive feedback in a fairly short period of time.

It's not difficult to become a savvy eBayer by using the tips contained in the comprehensive tutorials eBay provides or by reading some of the many books written about eBay buying and selling.

On any given day a search for "aibo" will bring up a list of 20 or more auctions with AIBO in the title. In recent weeks, the list has more than tripled.

Read the auction's fine print and ask the seller for more information if there is any doubt about an item. On a recent search I found two Sony AIBO ERS-31L auctions. One was for a stuffed animal in the shape of the ERS-31L and the other was an auction for the actual Sony ERS-31L entertainment robot. Farther along in the same auction list was a scale model of the original ERS-110 and an original ERS-110 someone had just found in storage that they were selling for parts.

Another auction was for a scale model of an ERS-311 at a starting price eight times higher than the original retail, possibly with the seller hoping an unwary buyer would place a bid thinking he or she had found an actual ERS-311 for sale. Another auction used the lure of a "FREE Sony aibo pen" to get bids on other items (the pen was a giveaway at some Sony retail stores).

Another auction had "ROBOT DOG AIBO like PET" in the title and included in



The futuristic ERS-220 AIBO. Available in silver only, the ERS-220 has the most robotic look of all AIBO models. It has a headlight in the middle of its head, an antenna instead of an ear, many colorful lights, and a more tonal sound than the ERS-210 model. There is also an ERS-220A, which, like the ERS-210A, has a faster processor.

the ad was a blurry picture of what appeared to be a robotic dog. Additional reading revealed that the auction was for a part, one of many, that would be necessary should the buyer want to attempt to construct their own robotic dog..

A savvy buyer soon learns that not every auction with the word AIBO in it has something to do with an AIBO.

Auctions may have a *Buy It Now* price that is within the buyer's budget. Before pushing that button, take the time to check out the seller's feedback. Click on the number that appears in the () next to their eBay ID then see how many positives and negatives they have.

If the seller has recent feedback, click on the auctions and see whether the items were low in price or high ticket. What is the buyer's Positive Feedback percentage? If the seller has a Feedback Score of 100 or more (which means 100 or more unique auctions as a buyer or seller or combination) and a Positive Feedback of 99 or 100%, the buy should be safe unless the seller's account has been hacked and the hacker is using the legitimate seller's good feedback to scam unwary buyers.

Recently, a seller posted three separate auctions for brand new Champagne Brown AIBOs. Each auction had an extremely low *Buy It Now* price. The seller accepted Paypal, according to the auction ad, didn't require buyers to email him (or her) first, and had a 100% positive feedback rating.

The biggest "scam trigger" for this seller's ads was the low *Buy It Now* price. Why



Above is the 31x series of Sony AIBOs: (from the left) ERS-311 (Latte), ERS-312 (Macaron), and ERS-31L (Pug or Bulldog). The ERS311 and ERS-312 were released in 2001 and U.S. retail was \$850. The ERS-31L released in 2002 had a U.S. retail of \$599.

would anyone smart enough to buy three of the most wanted AIBO sell it for \$600 less than original retail when legitimate buyers would jump at the chance to pay retail or even double retail? And where did those three limited edition AIBOs come from when all of the Champagne Brown AIBOs were out of stock at retailers both online and off?

Taking a closer look at the positive feedback revealed that all feedback was from new buyers with “0” or “1” feedback. Looking at the seller’s auctions they had won, their feedback occurred on the day they “won” the auction or the day after, certainly not enough time to receive an item no matter what delivery method was used. And, each auction had been listed, bid on by the “winner,” and then closed immediately by the seller.

Checking a seller’s feedback is one way to spot a potential scammer. The seller described above was a classic example. But what if a long term seller has negative feedback? Did it occur years ago or is it ongoing? Plenty of sellers have one or two negatives due to simple mistakes made at the beginning of their buying and selling or because of auctions that turned out poorly through no fault of their own. Ongoing negatives are another matter and could be an indication of the type of buying experience a buyer can expect to have with the seller.

If the seller will only accept payment via money order, bank draft, deposit to their bank account, or some other “quick cash transfer” method, think again about making a bid. Most experienced sellers will include Paypal as a payment option in addition to other forms of payment as it offers both them and their buyer a fairly secure and safe payment option.

As a buyer, if the seller doesn’t follow through after receiving payment by money order or bank draft, there is little or no recourse available. Paypal payments can be disputed through Paypal or cancelled through the buyer’s credit card company.

Not every seller is willing to deal with the red tape and paperwork involved with mailing packages internationally. Shipping costs can be extremely high between continents, so budget accordingly if the AIBO is currently in a different country, and don’t be surprised if the seller adds handling fees for the extra paperwork involved.

If the seller requires that buyers contact them first before placing a bid, the auction may not be legitimate. When I contacted a few of the sellers I suspected were bogus and

said I wanted to bid on their auctions, in every instance the sellers offered me side deals, cash or money order only, which bypassed eBay. The responses only served to verify what I suspected: the auctions were bogus.

If the seller gives another email address in the body of the auction with the explanation that they're having trouble with their regular eBay account, the auction may not be legitimate. In one AIBO auction, the seller said he had 10 new Series 7M AIBOs, retailing for \$1995, for sale at a *Buy It Now* price of \$650 each. Buyers wanting one of the *Buy It Now* AIBOs were instructed not to bid but rather email the seller at the email address shown in the ad. The seller cautioned potential buyers not to email him through the "contact buyer" link as he was "having trouble" with his eBay email.

After I sent an inquiry along with the auction link, using the "contact buyer" link, the auction was cancelled. The real seller's eBay account had been hacked and the AIBO auction placed without the seller's knowledge. Why do this? So the hacker could use the seller's good history and feedback to con unwary buyers into making a "too good to be true" side deal losing \$650 (plus shipping) in the process. One unlucky bidder would have "won" the online auction, but the real seller had no AIBO to sell, and that bidder would have simply wasted time bidding on a fraudulent auction, perhaps letting an AIBO in a legitimate auction get away.

The same bogus seller returned a few days later having hacked yet another seller's account and posted the same ad. The auction link was sent to the legitimate seller who confirmed that their account had been hacked and that eBay was in the process of shutting down the auction.



The ERS-7M2 AIBO has two favorite toys, the original pink ball and an AIBOne released with the ERS-7 series. The ERS-7 series is very advanced and much more "dog like" in design. The original ERS-7 was available only in Pearl White. The ERS-7M2, with AIBO MIND 2 software, was available in Pearl Black as well as Pearl White. The ERS-7M3 (with a much expanded AIBO MIND 3 software) was sold in Pearl White, Pearl Black, and a limited edition Champagne Brown.



Sony photo.

Is the eBay seller in one country but the AIBO in another? For instance, if the seller lives in the United States, and the AIBO is located in Spain or the UK (for example), the seller's account may have been compromised. In auctions such as this, I will click on a couple items that the seller has received recent feedback on to see if the locations match that in the current auction and if the style of the past auctions matches the style of the AIBO auction. If they don't, I will contact the seller through the auction's "contact the seller" link and ask if they are selling the item in the current auction. So far, 100% of the auctions in which I've made such an inquiry have turned out to be hacked seller accounts and bogus auctions.

Bogus sellers will "lift" photos and auction wording from legitimate auctions and use them as their own. Over time it's easy to spot the same AIBO photos being recycled by bogus sellers. It's not unreasonable to request that a seller email or post a photo of the actual AIBO they're selling along with the current date and a specific word or their eBay ID written on a piece of paper next to the AIBO. Better yet, ask them to provide a photo of someone holding the AIBO and the note. It is fairly easy to add details to an existing photograph with most image editing programs, but a photo of someone holding the AIBO and a dated note would be more difficult to manufacture.

Bogus auctions are cancelled when they're brought to eBay's attention, and an eBay "Marketplace Safety Tip" advises "*Never pay for your eBay item using instant cash transfer services such as Western Union or MoneyGram or by recharging somebody's prepaid credit card. These methods are not safe to pay people you do not know personally. In addition, these payment methods are not eligible for the eBay buyer protection programs.*"

Some scammers build up their feedback rating by buying very low cost auction items and paying promptly. If the AIBO seller has feedback from sellers, click on the links to see if feedback is from very low cost auctions (items selling for \$.99, \$2.50, etc.)

Shill bidding is another ploy less than ethical sellers will use to push bids higher in their auctions. While not always easy to spot, if I see a very low feedback bidder pushing up the price on an auction, I'll do a search of other auctions the bidder has placed bids on. If the bidder's history is limited to the current seller, there's a good chance shill bidding is occurring. Sellers caught shill bidding are banned from eBay.

Joining a forum can be a good step toward avoiding eBay scams as one new forum member found out when he was offered a “Second Chance” to buy an AIBO after being outbid by another forum member. Before responding to the seller’s offer, he contacted the other forum member and learned that she was in the process of paying for the same AIBO the seller was offering to him. Once they compared notes, they were both able to avoid being scammed by an unethical seller.

Unfortunately, given the anonymity of the Internet, it’s also easy for a bogus seller to join a forum and then attempt to scam members. The same with bogus buyers. Caution in any Internet transaction is always smart.

There are many honest sellers on eBay and other auction sites but the few dishonest ones can sour the buying experience. A smart shopper will remember that anything that is “too good to be true,” probably is.

And, finally, what is a fair price to pay for an AIBO? Because Sony stopped production, the value of an AIBO is subjective. Regardless if an AIBO originally sold for \$899 or \$2500, as with anything that is in limited supply, the value is whatever someone is willing to pay for it.

UPDATE: An eBay seller/buyer with the eBay ID of *thedeadeye* is an AIBO owner whose guide, **How to buy an Aibo on eBay without getting scammed** is online at: http://reviews.ebay.com/How-to-buy-an-Aibo-on-eBay-without-getting-scammed_W0QQugidZ10000000000010414

“How to Buy an AIBO” is an excerpt from the book **“Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets”** written by Pat Gaudette.

“Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets” is available through your favorite online booksellers.

“How to Buy an AIBO” and **“Sparky the AIBO: Robot Dogs and Other Robotic Pets”** are copyright 2006 by Pat Gaudette.