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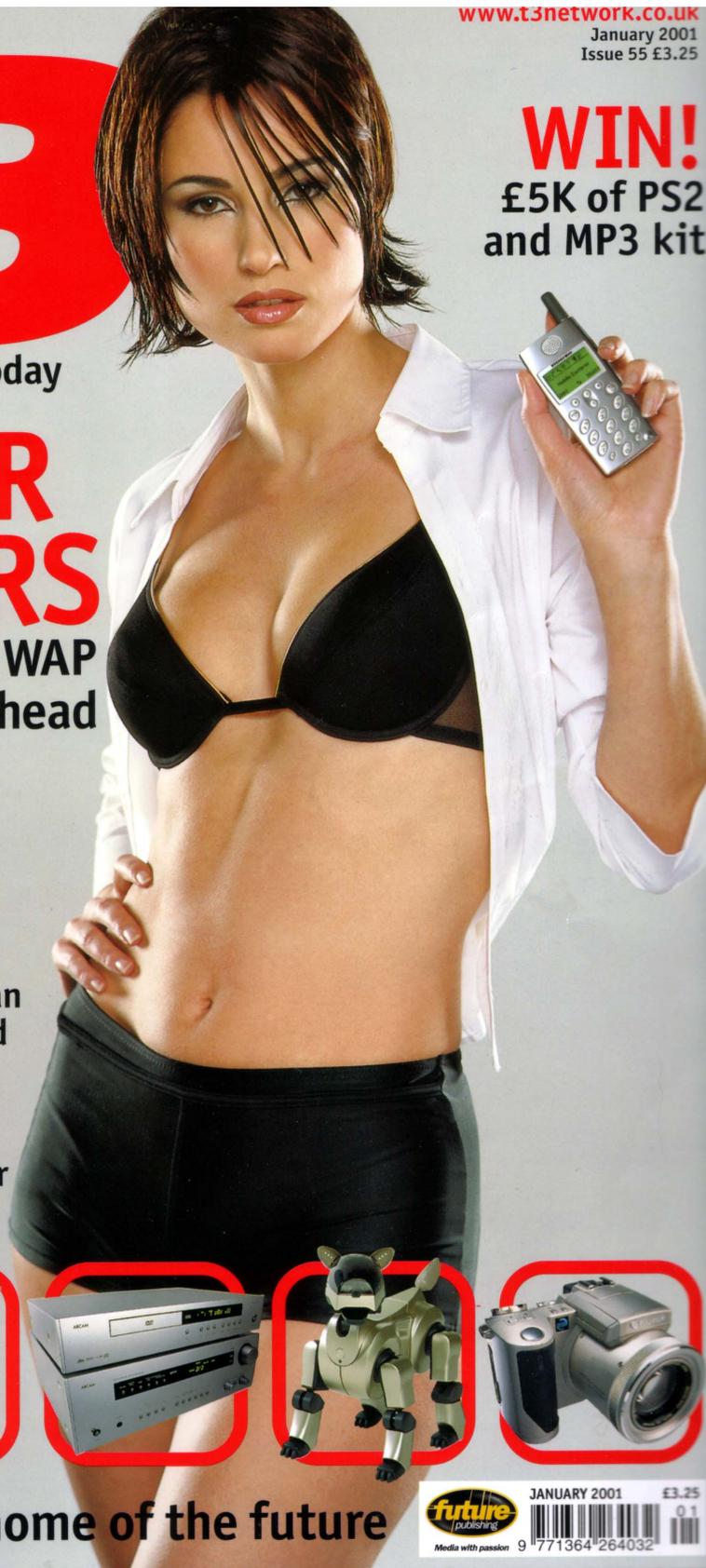
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THE LITTLEST AIBO

The dog has finally had his day with the arrival of Sony's next generation AIBO. **Cavan Scott** rubs paws with the new Lion King

KIT AIBO ERS-210 • COST £1,124 (with basic software) • CONTACT 020 7365 2938 • WEBSITE www.aibo.com

Dogs don't like me. They never have and the feeling's mutual. So it was no surprise when Sony's original AIBO took an instant dislike to me. While he used to perform tricks for all and sundry, as soon as I picked up the little fellow he promptly looked at me with a glare that said if he could he'd poop in my slippers.

So I was overjoyed that the second generation AIBO wouldn't be fashioned after a mutt. In an attempt to distance itself from the Poochis and Tekstas of this toy robot-cloning world, the new mechanical pet is based on a cute little lion cub. Fantastic. I've never had problems with the King of the Beasts, so the new AIBO would fall head over heels in love me. Hopefully.

My mood darkened as the wee Simba turned his back on me at my first command. Perhaps it's just robots that don't like me. Things got worse when **TB** editor Rob told the beast to sit and he obeyed happily. "Lay down," said Rob, and

There's something about calling AIBO and having him turn to face you that'll have you wetting yourself in glee

AIBO's belly flopped before you could draw breath. "Lay down," says Cav, and he cocks his leg in disgust. Bah.

This is one of the two major differences between AIBO version two and its now clunky predecessor. The all-new lion cub has lost some of the cuteness of the original dog, with its floppy ears and over large head, but makes up for any failure to prompt 'ahhs' by being a far sleeker critter. Coming in three colours – silver, black and champagne – AIBO now has ears that flick like a cat and, bizarrely for pussy, a tail complete with three tone light that wags like nobody's business when he's chuffed. The resulting look is far more sci-fi and, thankfully for the easily embarrassed among us, you can now slip the Lithium-ion battery pack in the animal's belly rather than up his bum. Phew, thank god for that.

But styling aside, the most exciting development is AIBO's new voice recognition. The original dog came with a remote control

that emitted a series of bleeps and whistles. When he heard a pattern he recognised AIBO would perform a trick. The trouble is what happened when you lost the remote? You'd be in the dog-house before you'd know it.

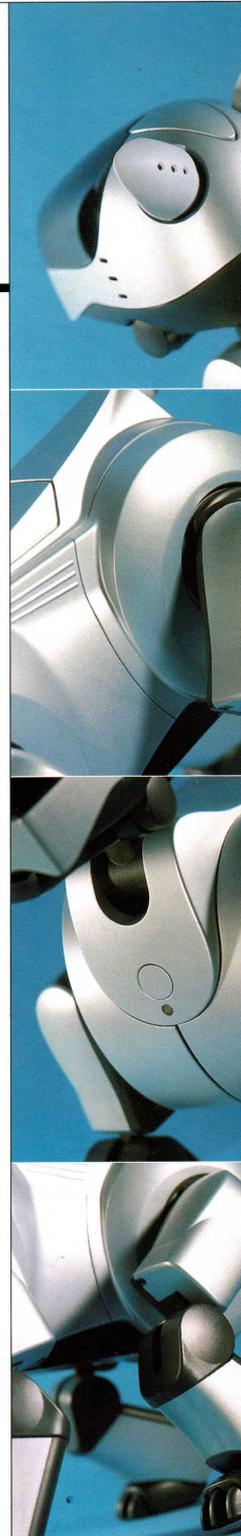
Not with new AIBO. Oh no. By the time your pet has reached maturity he will know and react to about 40 words. Now, the AIBO I was handed was a fully grown creature, but Sony claims that training a newborn is exactly same as raising a child. If, every time AIBO performs a little dance, you tell him to 'Get down' the infant will eventually recognise those words as a command to get jiggy with it. The same goes for a dozen or so other commands that will cause AIBO to kick his ball, walk back or forth, turn left or right and so on. There's even a crazy mode in which AIBO mimics the rhythm of your speech with R2D2-esque bleeps.

Once you've trained your AIBO he will respond to your voice, but only when he wants to. If he's bored or angry, he will simply wave a paw to dismiss you or even turn away in disgust. This isn't to say that your friends or family won't be able to order him around, it's just that there's more chance of AIBO listening to you.

It has to be said that this is undeniably cool. There's something about calling AIBO's name and having him turn to face you that'll have you nearly wetting yourself in glee. Then you have the smug sense of ownership when he obeys your every whim and then snubs your mates as they vainly yell at him. Hence Rob's self-satisfied grin when our AIBO easily recognised his dainty tone while he had trouble registering my more masculine (that's foghorn-like – Ed) voice.

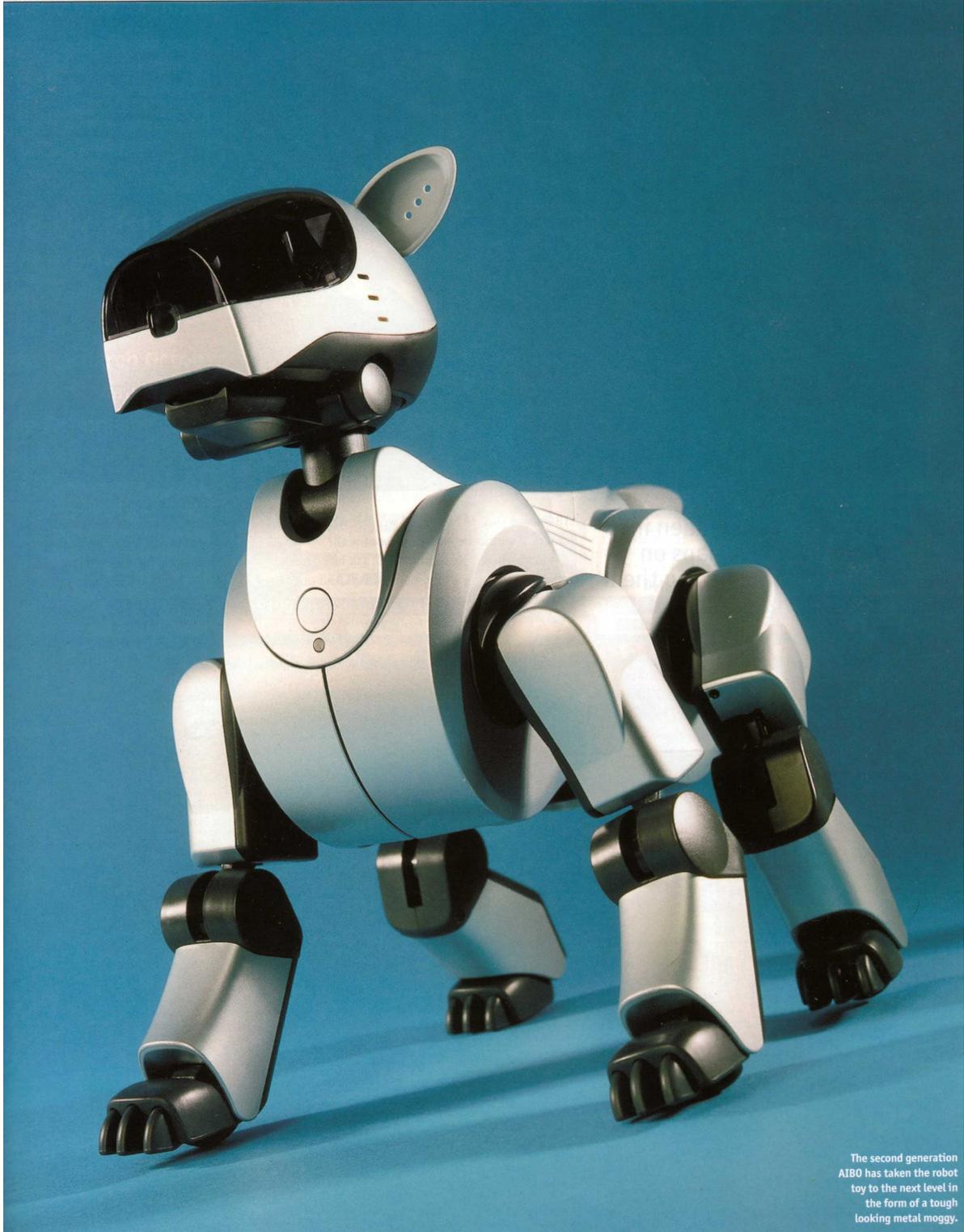
Of course you don't have to always tell AIBO what to do. Pop him in autonomous mode and he'll wander around quite happily, just like his predecessor, and learn new things, playing footie and maturing over time. Also as before you can pet him when he does good, but this time there are new sensors on his back and, at last, under his chin. Furthermore, you can't help noticing that his movement is much slicker, with joints that now have 20 degree of freedom.

According to the boffins AIBO's colour identification is more advanced too, although



PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CHEADLE

ontest



The second generation AIBO has taken the robot toy to the next level in the form of a tough looking metal moggy.



AIBO's joints may've been improved and his battery cased modified, but he still loves his favourite pink ball.



SUMMARY

Key features

- 1/6 inch CMOS digital camera
- 20 motors
- Acceleration sensor
- Memory Stick slot for dedicated SDMI-protected software
- Back, head and chin touch sensors
- PC card slot
- Infrared distance sensor
- 40 word voice recognition
- Available in Champagne, Silver and Black
- Optional Wireless LAN card
- 32Mb of RAM

Also consider

Poochi (£30) or Teksta (£50)
They're cheap. They're cheerful.
They're fooling no-one.

That a dog is for life not just for Christmas

Don't be drowning AIBO come Easter just because the kiddies want the next fad. Or we'll call Rolf Harris. We're warning you.

Verdict

The lion goes from strength to strength. Looking cooler than ever before this right little mover adds voice recognition to his repertoire. Give him a clap

T3 ★★★★★

A digital camera hidden in his eye will take snaps on command, transferring them to your PC via a LAN card

pink things still attract his attention. If you're feeling particularly sadistic you can stick pink Post-It type notes all over the wall and AIBO will think they're his ball and nip off to investigate, repeatedly banging his head as he tries to work out what's going wrong. He he.

By the time you read this, the final animals will be on sale and will have one feature my AIBO is missing. A 1/6-inch CMOS digital camera hidden in his eye that'll take snaps on command, transferring them to your PC via a £141 wireless LAN card. Once on his own, AIBO will also take photos of what he's up to, ready to show you proudly when you get home. The LAN card also means that you'll be able to programme

AIBO from your PC screen. I wonder what ole Barbara Woodhouse would make of it all?

What is there else to say? Well, ask how much is that AIBO in the window, and you'll find out it's just over a grand – plus an extra £64 for the main *AIBO Life* software. At first glance this seems cheaper than the older model until you realise that the energy station is now an optional extra costing £120 and extra software, such as *Party Mascot* which has AIBO singing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* while breakdancing like a loon costs an extra £71. You can even buy Hello AIBO, a special MemoryStick that transforms your pet into a fully grown AIBO instantaneously.

AIBO in any generation is a fantastic thing, one of the best toys money can buy and the voice recognition is a step in the right direction. All you now have to do is work out if his animated antics will keep you interested to warrant the price or alternatively will you be saving your pennies for Sony's Robot Man. Perhaps *he'll* like me... **T3**

THE AIBO FAMILY TREE



Way back in September 1998 **T3** reported that Sony was working on this prototype robot mutt. How we scoffed...



Until we clapped eyes on the finished android article in late '99...



With the current model things have got catty as AIBO turned from pooch to pussy...



But for now all eyes are on the Sony's new 'man machine'. What comes next...?