

FAA, NSA, and Navy v. the Furby

By Terry Kraus, FAA historian



In 1999, the Furby became the hottest selling holiday gift for kids (and some adults). Furby, an electronic robotic toy, resembled a hamster or owl-like creature and became a must-have toy following its holiday season launch. Almost 40 million of the animatronic toys were sold during the three years of its original production, with 14 million sold in 1999.

The first successful attempt to produce and sell a domestically aimed robot, a newly purchased Furby started out speaking "Furbish," the unique Furby language. It started using English words and phrases in place of Furbish over time. Its speaking capabilities were translated into 24

languages for the global market. A simple electric motor and a system of cams and gears closed the Furby's eyes and mouth, raised its ears, and lifted it off the ground in a display of mobility. The toys were also programmed with certain responses to stimuli: tickling a Furby might prompt it to kiss you, if it was then petted, it was more likely to kiss you again in future.

Many found the Furby to be annoying, because it chattered continually – it had no off button. As long as the batteries remained charged, the toy continued to talk, and talk, and talk. If you put two or more Furbys together, they interacted with each other. They sang and chatted together. One Furby will sing a lullaby and the others fell asleep. If one sneezes, so did the others.

Some considered Furby a danger and even as enemies of the nation. The FAA, for example, became concerned the Furbys could disrupt flight equipment. With rumors circulating that the agency had put the Furby on its no-fly list, the FAA denied the allegation and explained, "We did recommend that Furbys should not be on when the plane is below 10,000 feet." A FAA spokesperson said, "We look at the Furby as any other electrical device," likening it to portable radios, laptops, and beepers. As a result of FAA concerns, most airlines did ask passengers to remove the Furby's batteries. In response, the toy's manufacturer, replied "there have been no reports of Furbys interfering with any kind of takeoff or landing."

A misconception also quickly arose that the Furbies repeated words that were said around them. Consumers thought that Furbys contained built-in recorders that could repeat audio. Many did not realize the toy was pre-programmed and would say these same words aloud, regardless of what was spoken to it. Because the use of sensors in the toys were new technology and seemed strange at the time, most people and some federal agencies did not understand how the technology worked, and made erroneous assumptions without actually performing an autopsy on the critter to see how it really worked.



As a result of this misconception, some accused the Furbys of being spies, because they learned language, and, as such, must contain some sort of insidious recording devices. The U.S. National Security Agency, for example, banned the toy from its headquarters in 1999. Photography and audio-visual recording equipment are prohibited in NSA headquarters, and the agency was worried that the toy might unintentionally record and repeat classified information.

The Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, VA, also banned the bug-eyed toy for security reasons. According to an email from the shipyard, shared with the press, security personnel were to seize any Furbys they saw and question the owners. The shipyard's security staff thought the toy could record and repeat speech. One of the craziest theories circulated at the time revolved around the idea that Furby could somehow launch spacecraft.

Soon after the NSA ban, the owner of Tiger Electronics, the toy's manufacturer, publicly announced the toy actually had no ability to record anything. The company actually issued a statement announcing, "Furby is not a spy."

Despite the company's explanation, many still feared the Furby. In one bizarre case, after finding a suspicious package on her front porch, a woman in Waldorf, MD, called the sheriff's office. The package, with an out of town return address the woman did not recognize, kept beeping and humming. Afraid to open it, the sheriff's deputies called the bomb squad. When that team opened the package they found a Furby inside. Crisis averted!

As press reports proliferated on the Furby dangers, a spokeswoman for Tiger Electronics, which makes the cuddly toy, said the latest Furby furor was just a big misunderstanding. She said people assume Furbys contain recording devices simply because the dolls react to light, touch, and sound and seem to learn English. As the toy's popularity decreased over time, so too did concerns about its ability to disrupt flights and record classified information.