

Diabologic: Home Jeeves (part 2)

by Frank Dolinar

A year and a half ago, I wrote an article musing about some future time when it would be possible to have an artificial intelligence (AI) system (aka “robot”) capable of driving cars. I knew the research was ongoing, and had been both before and since the 2005 DARPA Grand Challenge – a test for such autonomously driven cars on a 132-mile route in the Mohave Desert.

What I didn’t know was when these musings would turn into reality.

The transition occurred on March 1, 2012, much sooner than I had expected, when the state of Nevada authorized a limited experiment using Google’s fleet of Toyota Prius cars. According to Singularity Hub (<http://singularityhub.com>), Google had already been using its fleet of Prius cars in California “quasi-legally”, logging about 200,000 miles with them. Google received a patent for its self-driving cars in December.

Nevada is starting from a position of success, and other states have noticed. California will almost certainly be second out of the gate. But it won’t be alone for long. Hawaii, Florida, and Oklahoma are already following suit.

Having a robot-driven vehicle will ultimately be a very good thing for safety on the roads, gas mileage, and reduced stress and fatigue on the highway. I also think that it’s going to be a hard sell. I suspect that for most drivers in the US, letting go of the driving control of their car to an AI will be somewhere between difficult and anathema, mostly because so many people firmly believe they are safe and excellent drivers.

How will human drivers identify cars are being driven by an AI? Apart from visual cues provided by the extra hardware (aka “engineering modifications”), these cars will all sport red license plates – the first issued by Nevada since the 1940s. When and if the experiment successfully concludes and the service is made available to the general public, the red license plates will be replaced with neon green plates.

According to the Red Herring magazine article “Nevada Approves Google’s Self-Driving Robot Cars” (<http://www.redherring.com/consumer-electronics/nevada-approves-googles-self-driving-robot-cars/>) published on February 24, 2012...

The cars are designed to prevent traffic accidents. Google argues that computer driven cars can drastically reduce the more than 1.2 million lives lost every year in highway accidents by as much as half.

“This technology has been a passion of mine for years because it will help save lives, help lots of people who have difficulty driving, and reduce congestion on our roads,” Google’s Larry Page [blogged](#) about the project. “...Using technology to improve safety on our roads will make the world a better place.”

As robots make the roadways safer, cars can also weigh less, reducing fuel consumption.

These cars won’t be generally available for years. Probably the most rigorous testing that needs to be completed for general adoption of robot-driven cars will be of the legal system and the related insurances for the “driver”.

We’re still a long way from R2D2’s common sense.