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Driverless Cars: Be Careful What You Wish For

Driverless cars may not be strictly a technology topic, but let's delve into it anyway. I have had many questions posed about them and whether they are going to become a reality. I think they will become reality, but further off than most people think, and when they are available, you may not want one. There are three major items that need resolution before we start hopping into a vehicle and sit back to relax while we are whisked to our destinations.

Issue #1: The technology is not "there" yet.

Driverless cars need a lot of data to function properly. I repeat: A LOT OF DATA, and it looks like most of it will need to come from sensors placed in strategic points all over the car. It turns out all the mapping and video recording of streets is not nearly accurate enough to pre-program an auto with a route and just let it go. It will need many, many sensors to measure every dimension of the space around itself. Here's some tidbits to consider:

1. Early sensors were fooled by falling snow: one car refused to budge when it started snowing... you'll have to uncover the sensors before you go anywhere. Rain, dust storms, and bugs stuck to the front are bummers too.
2. Some sensors were fooled by various political and "for sale" signs on the side of the roads... and stopped.
3. Sensors and programming are expensive: there may be driverless cars, but will you be able to afford one?

Issue #2: Liability

Driverless cars cannot think for themselves: even an auto with artificial intelligence will need some base logic from which to begin processing routes. One of those logic loops is what to do when an unavoidable accident* is imminent: does the car swerve into a tree and kill the driver? Or does it kill the pedestrian who walks out into traffic? Safe to say you will still need auto insurance, even if you never touch the wheel. And no, I don't want to be in charge of deciding what the car does... *Yes there will still be auto accidents.

Issue #3: You might not own the car...

The major cost of driverless cars will not be the car itself, although that will be very high. The real cost is all the programming, data feeds, and pre-route surveying that goes into the systems that do the driving. The current thinking is that the cost of driverless cars will be so high that the car needs to earn its keep all day long. One solution: driverless cars may evolve into a "Zip Car" or "Uber" scenario: you don't own it, you just call one up when you need it: it takes you where you need to go, then goes to the next person. It moves all day and night...

There are some other sub-issues to consider:

- A. The cars will be ugly. The need for sensors placed in just the right places and viewing angles will make for some very ungainly looking vehicles. That will make Issue #3 easier to swallow.
- B. People may freak out with the way the cars will drive: in most situations, the cars will go at or slower than the speed limit, and obey all traffic laws... that will make for a slow commute, and you will need to allow more time. In other situations, they will follow each other very closely and at high speeds; perhaps too close for comfort of the human passengers. Control freak drivers (like me), this is your notice: we are in for a bad time.
- C. There are some positives that may evolve: if the car moves all day, we'll need fewer of them, and therefore fewer places to park in crowded downtowns will be needed. That may help get rid of those ugly parking lots...

-John Becker