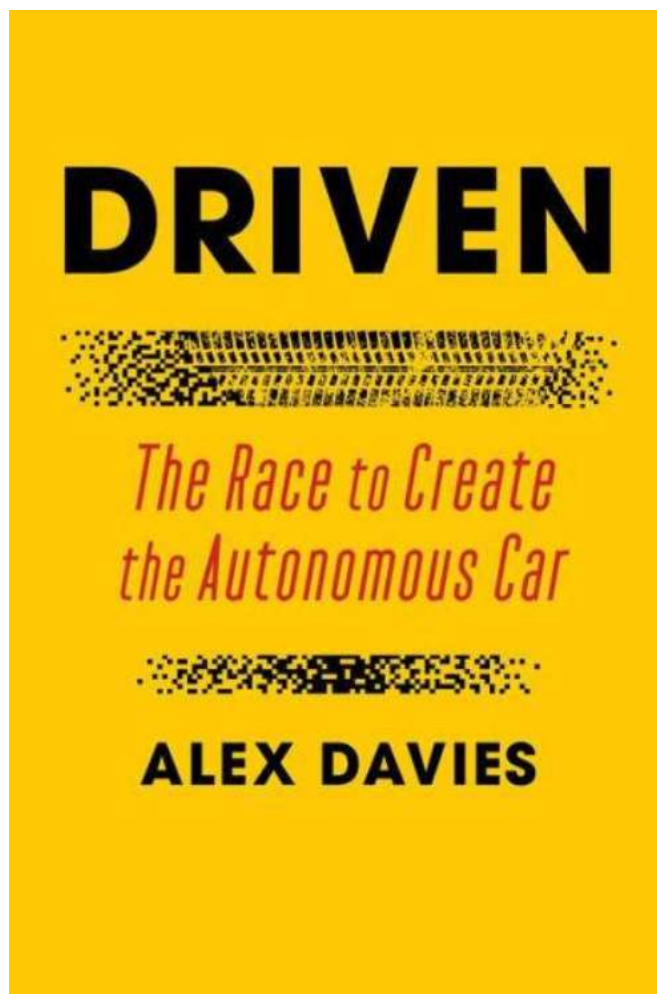


Dream of self-driving cars now coming true

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“Driven: The Race to Create the Autonomous Car” by Alex Davies. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021. 304 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“The dream of a vehicle that drives itself dates back to the early days of the automobile, as people abandoned sentient horses for machines that punished any lapse in attention,” Alex Davies explains near the beginning of “Driven: The Race to Create the Autonomous Car,” his new treatise on a quest that has captured our collective imagination for the past several decades. “In 1926, the Milwaukee Sentinel announced that a driverless ‘phantom auto’ would tour the city, controlled by radio waves sent from the (human-driven) care behind it.”

“At the height of its power at the time, GM leapt at the idea,” the author continues a little later. “A promotional video for its 1956 Firebird II concept car explained that ‘the driver might push a button, and the car would literally drive itself’ by picking up electronic signals from the highway. The automaker teamed up with RCA to build a test track in Princeton, N.J., but soon abandoned it as impractical at scale.”

“All the concepts, though, were limited in scope to the easiest part of the driving problem, cruising on the highway” Davies adds. “With cars pointing in the same direction, all you

needed was a way to keep them in their lanes and away from one another. No one seriously considered making a car that could negotiate a more complex environment, with intersections, traffic signals and pedestrians.”

OK. Admit it. You have occasionally pondered what it would be like to live in a world where you could “push a button” – or merely think a given thought – and have things automatically taken care of for you. As a child in the 1960s, I vividly recall watching the Jetsons and wondering if my life was going to eventually emulate George and Judy. Oddly enough, we are closer to realizing many of those futuristic predictions than you might have imagined. We are indeed making substantial progress on autonomous cars, the occasional highly-publicized mishap notwithstanding.

In many respects, the story of the ongoing effort to build the first truly self-driving vehicle parallels the lives of the innovators who have been competing with one another to be the first to achieve the holy grail of transportation science and engineering. The tale Davies tells is dramatic and colorful; the competition among the principal players in the game (Google, Uber and myriad other lesser-known but equally serious contenders) reads like a well-crafted mystery novel. There is even a huge military component to the story. Turns out the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which

was instrumental in the initial development of the internet, also has a key stake in building what they see as a land-based equivalent to the drone – a vehicle that could operate in war zones without risking human lives.

“Driven” is extensively researched, with 21 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the prologue, 11 chapters and epilogue that form the main narrative. I was especially impressed by the inclusion of an eight-page photo album that helps bring the text to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. The literary style is fluid and conversational; in addition to being a first-rate investigative journalist, Davies is also a thoughtful and highly entertaining storyteller. Whereas many readers might be inclined to assume this is a book intended for those with an innate interest in the subject matter, nothing could be farther from the truth. If you were not interested in self-driving automobiles before picking up this exquisite little primer, chances are you will be by the time you finish it.

Davies is a senior editor at Business Insider, where he coordinates transportation coverage. A former editor at Wired, his work has appeared in Medium, Financial Times, Yahoo Tech, Ars Technica, Slate and VentureBeat, as well as being featured on CNN.

Essentially, what Davies provides is a play-by-play chronicle of how technology continues to permeate virtually every aspect of our lives using our fascination with personal transportation as a rubric from which we can extrapolate our inevitable evolution as a species. And as is usually the case with progress, the world we now inhabit is an amalgamation of efforts to make our lives more comfortable intertwined with the desire to benefit financially from the ongoing transformation taking place (think Apple).

A good example of this dynamic can be found in “A Long, Slow Donkey Ride Through Hell,” the 10th chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“The difference between the screen in a driver’s hand and the one in his car was glaring. That difference took on new importance in 2014, when Google and Apple introduced their automobile entertainment alternatives. Android Auto and Apple CarPlay let drivers project their phones onto their car’s center screens, giving them access to maps, phone contacts, messages, music and other apps. They brought to the car operating systems that users already knew and liked, and whose quality would keep up with their phone’s. What scared the automakers wasn’t just that these options sapped customer interest in paying extra for their own systems, but that they ceded control of a major part of the in-car experience to Google and Apple.”

As you may have surmised, I found this one mesmerizing. Davies manages to fuse the technological dimension of the story with its necessary but often overlooked cultural and metaphysical counterparts. Indeed, “Driven” lays out the tremendous engineering and programming challenges that are endemic to developing a reliable, safe and user-friendly autonomous vehicle.

But his prose goes well beyond that overarching architecture to explore the implications that success in this arena will have for society-at-large. As Martin Ford, the best-selling author of “The Rise of the Robots and Architects of Intelligence” has observed: “Autonomous vehicles will someday reshape our cities and transform our lives.”

While the ultimate consequences of a self-driving car might be debatable, there is little doubt that the proverbial question posed by countless teenagers since the dawn of the 20th century; i.e., “Can I use the car tonight?” will take on an entirely different meaning once the ultimate goal has been achieved. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.