Semi-autonomous and always available: A peek into the near future of car rental

The world is inexorably moving to an era where personal mobility is connected, shared, electric, and ultimately autonomous. But that utopian future — where we are whisked to work in an amorphous pod with IMAX movies and fresh popcorn, all the while checking emails and holding conference calls — is still pretty far out.

The here and now is all about "connected cars." But the question you may ask is, "connected to what?" A connected car is only as valuable or useful as what it's connected to, and today that's not much beyond a cell phone, mobile road service, or garage door opener.

That will change. In the near future, we'll see connected rental fleets where the car is not only connected to a user's mobile app but also a fleet-wide platform, as well as third party services. This [multi-dimensional connectivity](#) will enable the customer to have near total control over their experience – selecting a vehicle, extending or cutting the reservation, and even to find, reserve, and pay for a parking spot near their destination.

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Connectivity also offers benefits to the rental manager. Vehicles talk to the cloud and tell managers where they are, if they need fuel or air in the tires, and even what road conditions are like. This information helps fleets streamline operations, reduce costs, and manage demand.

Yet connected cars are really the first step in an even larger evolution that will be brought on by the arrival of autonomous vehicles. While there is much excitement about this technology, it's still anyone's guess as to what year we can safely say "they've arrived."

One thing that is not in doubt, however, is that autonomous vehicles will be introduced in two ways. First, vehicles will slowly add increasingly self-driving features, becoming more and more autonomous over time. Second, these vehicles will be prohibitively expensive for consumers, so they will be introduced to the public via on-demand mobility companies.

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What does a phase-in look like to the travel industry? Imagine if you will, a dedicated lane at airports for self-driving cars, where drivers control the car until the drop off is complete, and then the car drives itself to the rental lot. Then, when the car is at the lot, it drives itself to the different staging areas for cleaning, fueling, servicing, and back to the parking lot for pick up by the next customer. Similarly, when a customer exits baggage claim, the car is already there waiting for them to drive away in. This is just one example of how we might see the hybrid of self-driving and traditional vehicles put into use in a fleet environment.

As self-driving cars become even more autonomous, I can easily imagine a role reversal of the customer experience. For instance, today you rent a car and you pick it up at an airport or in-city location. Tomorrow, you could tap your app when you want a ride, and the car comes to you. When this happens, there will no longer be any need to own a car if you live in a city.

Just think of how different a city could be without parked cars on every street; without large parking lots or garages; without snaking lines of traffic.

Now – there's a lot of work to be done to get to that point, but also tremendous opportunity to innovate mobility alongside the development and deployment of autonomous vehicles, until then the IMAX and popcorn will just have to stay in the movie theaters.