

LA tech entrepreneur nearly misses flight after getting trapped in robotaxi
Dani Anguiano, *the Guardian*, January 6, 2025

A tech entrepreneur based in Los Angeles became trapped in a malfunctioning self-driving car for several minutes last month, causing him to nearly miss a flight, he said.

Mike Johns was riding in an autonomous Waymo car on his way to Sky Harbor airport in Phoenix when the vehicle began driving around a parking lot repeatedly, circling eight times as he was on the phone seeking help from the company.

“I got my seat belt on. I can’t get out of the car. Has this been hacked? What’s going on?” he can be heard telling a Waymo representative in a video he posted to LinkedIn three weeks ago. “I feel like I’m in the movies. Is somebody playing a joke on me? And I got a flight to catch.”

Johns initially believed it was a prank, he told the Guardian. “Having a lot of clever friends working in tech ... [I thought] maybe it was my friend,” he said. But with the vehicle continuing to loop around an island in the lot, he knew there was a real problem. “This car has a glitch.”

He became dizzy as it continued circling the lot in a moment that he said “felt like a scene in a sci-fi thriller”. The Waymo representative advised him to open his app as she tried to stop the vehicle, but said in the video she didn’t “have an option to control the car”.

The issue was resolved after a few minutes, Waymo said in a statement. He ultimately managed to catch his flight from Arizona to southern California, which he said was fortunately delayed. But he was frustrated about the experience and said he was unable to tell if the representative he spoke with was human or AI.

“It’s just, again, a case of today’s digital world. A half-baked product and nobody meeting the customer, the consumers, in the middle,” Johns, who describes himself as a futurist who is knowledgeable about artificial intelligence, told CBS Los Angeles.

The experience was jarring, Johns said. “I was stunned. It just further reminded me of the ghost in the machine. You’ll hear people reference autonomous vehicles or driverless cars – I will call it ‘human-less cars’.” He had used Waymo once before and said his recent experience wouldn’t deter him from using driverless cars in the future, but there were still things to work out.

“As a futurist, I feel like this is where everything is headed so you might as well get there first,” Johns said. “It’s just we have glitches that need stitches.”

Waymo told the Guardian the “looping event” had been addressed by a regularly scheduled software update. Johns was not charged for the trip, the company said.

The company offers autonomous ride services in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Austin, and provided more than 4m fully autonomous rides last year, according to Waymo. While the company’s vehicles have performed millions of rides safely, high-profile incidents, including a self-driving Waymo car that killed a dog and a collision that injured a cyclist, have fueled concerns.

For Johns, the experience has provided useful insight for a book he is writing on how artificial intelligence will affect jobs. “I became my own case study,” he said.