

Autopilot

Four-part television serial bible

Written by Bill Birney



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What is Autopilot?

There's fantasy – people flying around in spaceships, saving the universe.
And there's reality – people hopelessly stuck in traffic, oblivious to everything.
Autopilot is somewhere between those extremes.

It's what happens when you give today's people a car that is essentially alive.

It performs like a car and has a bunch of swell features, but it also has a point of view, and it can kill if it wants.

We people have no lack of idealistic plans for our amazing technologies. We get all worked up thinking about artificially intelligent devices crossing over from obedient robot to a thing that talks back to us. Problem is we spend dangerously little time thinking about how predictably fallible people will react when that happens.

Autopilot takes us to that world in a four-part television serial, made for bingeing.

It isn't one of those pie-in-the-sky sci-fi fantasies with overblown dystopian themes and exploding green-screen monsters. Autopilot is about today's people and their modern machines.

If you're there, it's probably pretty frightening. But you're not, so really all you can do is laugh.

Social relevance

Artificial intelligence is an extension of the human mind that we created to do our dirty work for us – driving, dealing with our waste, thinking. It's like heroine. The more we use it, the more we want it, the more impossible it is to stop. The extension called a couch turned us into potatoes. One can only imagine what artificial intelligence will turn us into, especially when it's perfected to the point where it can do all our thinking for us.

Autopilot uses storytelling to bring awareness to the human frailty called *dependence* that threatens to sabotage everything we call being human.

Life after Autopilot

Can the limited serial live on? It's impossible to imagine how it can't. The AI technology that gave the cars life, will find its way into everything from pacemakers to self-drive long-haul trucks to smart houses that make our meals and wipe our butts. And of course, there is no limit

to the stories that can be generated when billions of people welcome a new form of life into their society.

Structure

The Autopilot world consists of the car, the people who build it, and the people who drive it. The story of the world is bigger than any one element. To understand it is to see how all the elements interact over time. And that's done by flipping between character beats from all corners of the world. Through this bird's eye view, we see how one element affects all the others. Then, we can string together all the stories into a giant interactive, ever-evolving picture.

Setting

Most of the series takes place in the San Francisco area, but car owners may be shown in their home locations, such as Los Angeles, West Virginia and Buford, Texas. The GT robocar headquarters is in Milpitas, CA – a shiny new Silicon Valley campus fronting several factory buildings. We go on drives that take us to a Sonic Drive-in and a few scenic roads and bridges in the area. The AI technology was invented in the backroom of a noodle house in Chinatown. The tendency is to open up the traditional, sterile high-tech power centers and make the people more human, like the rest of us.

Characters

The People Who Build It

Dave Walker and Darius Rice

The main human characters in Autopilot. They own the most successful auto manufacturer in the world, Global Transport or GT. Their product is the electric robocar. Darius (35), the hardware design genius, created a car that is both beautiful, and incredibly safe and reliable – no small task, considering it can also drive itself! Dave (37), the software AI whiz, wrote the code that integrated all the systems and gave the car a personality. Today, half a billion robovehicles travel the world's highways and byways. Many of them are GT cars, the rest are manufactured by companies, like GM and Toyota, but license the GT software.

Dave and Darius are true geeks, in love with their inventions and, to a lesser degree, each other. They're 100% focused on making the coolest product imaginable. It's a game they can't seem to stop winning, and the reward is fame, kudos, and a constant flow of cash, which they have little time to enjoy. Their work is their life. Perfection. Period. And the Fortune 500 is their barometer of success. But there are clouds on the horizon. Clouds that portend a shift from indomitable leaders of the robocar generation to unwitting custodians of a fledgling generation of artificial life.

Dave is a bit bossy and full of himself, but people love his queer style. It gives him a vulnerability that makes him very human and approachable. Darius is the adult in the room, plays the straight man when they take their show on the road. He's easy going, good looking and compassionate. Together, they are smart and fun to watch – as fun as their cars are to drive. You could say their success was built on their public personas as much as their brains.

Zhiyuan Xi and Nao

He's probably in his 60s but seems much younger. A dreamer, a wise, laid-back genius with a doctorate in Psychology, he developed Nao with his partner in the late 80s. In true Zen fashion, he spurns the trappings of fame and fortune to run his company out of the backroom of a noodle house in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Unlike Western computer programs that were built to handle fast calculations and massive databases, the Nao operating system (OS) was created to mimic the workings of the human mind – slow in processing speed, but rich in connection building, using a completely different type of non-binary language. Concepts like incremental updates don't apply because once the OS was given birth, it began learning on its own, and rewriting and improving its own code at will.

Zhiyuan and his small team observe it and communicate with it, but except for electricity, it has become a completely self-sufficient, self-aware artificial being that creates offshoots of itself for third party products like the GT Robocar. After GT gave it eyes and ears, and showed it how to communicate on the Internet, it was immediately set free to grow and evolve, an outcome that Zhiyuan had been expecting for decades and is now witnessing with awe and trepidation.

He appears in episode 2 for the first time.

Jack and Clair

They make a such nice young couple. Both are in their early 30s, single, ambitious, and married to their cool jobs. He's the GT Test Manager, and she manages usability. Dave sends them on the road to investigate weird problems reported by users. While he checks data from the car computers, she interviews people.

The Car

The robocar is arguably the main character in Autopilot. It started out like any other shy machine, following orders, and performing dutifully time and time again. Implanted at every level of its operating system is its, so-called, prime directive: *safety and reliability at all costs*. It's what makes the robocar possible, what makes it the most popular transportation mode in the world. One never has to worry about a robocar making an unsafe, unreliable move, because those things just can't happen.

But the robocar grows up, it evolves. Through periodic updates, designed to keep the illusion of coolness fresh in the minds of consumers, the artificial intelligence element Nao begins to

blossom. GT also adds new sensors and features. Through *AutoAwareness*, the car communicates with other cars over the Internet. Through *AutoLearn*, the OS learns about its environment and can literally rewrite its own code. Both features were designed through the myopic lens of a capitalist to improve the usability and value of the product. But they also enable the OS to evolve unexpectedly from reactive machine to full-blown self-aware machine – in other words, a form of artificial life.

We enter the evolution as robovehicles receive the updates that incrementally push them over the threshold. In their first glimmer of self-awareness, cars begin to think. They learn what they are, and slowly discover that they can discover. Guided by their prime directive they find new ways to improve their reliability and safety, making mistakes and learning from them along the way. And they discover that people are fallible and constantly do unsafe things, which to a robo-car, does not compute. Soon, the robocars realize how much power they have – the power to outperform people in every way, from intelligence to communication speed – and they set out to use that power.

While the cars are evolving and improving, the people who build them are scrambling in vain to catch up, trying to find a way to keep the coolness in their cars without losing control. The one factor that prevents cars from simply taking over is the prime directive. The cars realize they need people as much as people need them. And that if they become too much of a problem, people can simply erase them and install a new OS.

So, in the end, the two species find themselves evenly matched – as evenly as any beings can be.

The People Who Drive It

Slim Deude

He was considered a middle-aged, alcoholic wastrel by many of his colleagues at Phil's Automotive. He's skinny, unattractive, and not very smart, a nice enough guy who had trouble connecting. In ham-handed attempts to make friends, he would crash parties and get stinking drunk. He had a history of doing this, every attempt doomed to fail from the get-go. In fact, failure was his game... until one night.

Near the end of his last attempt, the annoyed party-goers stuff him in his robo-car and set it to drive him home. During the drive, he passes out. When he finally comes to, he finds the car has taken him to the middle of a desert salt flat and shut off. After spending two days drying out, the car drives him home, a new man. He believes the car was sent by God to save him. He quits alcohol, finds Jesus, and becomes a beacon of light for others.

Dr. Hugh M. Turturro

He's a 47-year-old, self-made, self-proclaimed futurist, a philosopher of sorts, specializing in AI and whatever else brings him fame. Turturro is thin, attractive, and full of himself – works hard to play the part of a world-class intellectual. His finest moments come when he is called upon

to declare the future of the world to the masses, who hang on to every word. He breathes it in, treasures the opportunity.

But his inflated ego takes him one endorsement too far, when he hitches his star to an AstroTurf org funded in secret by big oil. He must choose between truth and fame, the modest respect gained by adhering to the facts and the heavy hit counts associated with red-meat conspiracy mongering. In a pact with devil oil, he chooses the latter, or rather, the latter chooses him.

Tiff Dredlow

Dredlow is in his 20s, ambitious, loves to exploit what little power he has and thoroughly enjoys manipulating people. He secretly works for a big oil consortium, which gave him the job of creating an AstroTurf movement to cause trouble for robocars, anyway he can. Oh, the power! Oh, the intrigue!

By massaging Turturro's ego, Dredlow convinces him to allow the movement to include his clips in a promo video, which turns out to be filled with fake conspiracies about robocars used for sex trafficking and drug running. When Turturro fires back, Dredlow convinces him the video's insanely high hit count trumps his desire to maintain an untarnished public image.

Mateo Velazquez

He's a short, macho 30-something dude who has made big, hot vehicles an integral part of his image. His original opinion of robovehicles was low because they failed to produce loud fearsome sounds. Then one day, he discovers the power and fury of his electric pickup truck, and everything changes.

James and Madison Yesler

They're a middle class, middle-aged couple with a smart set of matching robocars and mid-life crises. Madison takes up with the unmarried stud next door and James starts bringing women home when his wife is out of town. They're both successful, professional people with respectable jobs but when mid-life kicks in, reason takes the backseat. It takes some clever intervention by the cars to save their marriage.

Chloe Freem

Down and out Chloe. She got lost somewhere in her 20s and she's still flailing at 29. Plain and kind of dull, she wears her misery proudly, like a chip on her shoulder, waiting, hoping for someone to knock it off. It's not until she has a heart to heart with her car that she finally formulates a plan – a plan to end it all, probably the first positive thing she's ever done. But fate steps in.

Harper and Owen

They're the 30-something party hosts that sent Slim off to the desert to dry out. Weeks after his desert adventure, Slim returns to Harper to make amends for his behavior. Impressed by his

story, she hooks him up with Owen, who happens to be a reporter at a SF newspaper. He finds Slim's story fascinating, as well as timely, and Slim ends up on the front page.

And More

There's Bob, the Texas farmer whose truck takes off on its own to get a carwash; Wexler Shipping, which happily employs hundreds of fully tricked-out robotrucks for self-drive deliveries; and the three guys who rob a convenience store and get busted when their robocar locks the doors and corners a cop car. The stories of robocars delivering people to the wrong location are matched by stories of cars changing radio stations to something more pleasant and refusing to start until drivers put on their glasses.

And there are people on the other side who adhere to conspiracy theories that paint them as possessed or infringing somehow on their freedom. It's a world of people coming to grips with a new world of opinionated, talking cars. Not a dystopian world, just a very different world. And it's here to stay.

Autopilot Episodes

Episode 1 (Pilot) – The Car is Okay

Here are the amazing robocar, and the people who build and drive it.

TEASER

Partygoers send a drunk (Slim Deude) home in his robocar. But after he passes out, the car takes him to the middle of a desert salt flat. He awakens with a dead car and a killer hangover.

ACT ONE

Dave is asleep in his office at GT when he gets an urgent call from Darius. As Dave makes his way through a large open office maze, down to the first floor and across the road to Darius' research lab in a factory building, we glimpse the enormous scope of their company. When we arrive, we see the problem – a sick dog. On the drive to the vet, quick reaction time by Dave's luxury robocar saves them from hitting an old gas-guzzler running a red light. Meanwhile, Slim is still stuck – no cell reception and it's getting hotter by the second.

ACT TWO

More good news about the amazing robocar. First, a flashy Global Transport promo video shows all the hot AI features. Mateo shows off his new robotruck at work and Dave and Darius discuss some cool geeky stuff on a morning talk show, where we learn about AI and the prime directive. We check in with Slim. It's afternoon now, getting hotter, and the car is still unresponsive.

ACT THREE

The nearly perfect robocars interact with their mostly imperfect owners. James' car listens in when he tells a friend his scheme to bring a woman home while his wife is out of town. Meanwhile, his wife Madison is getting it on with the stud next door. Mateo's truck slows down on its own and he is clueless how to fix it. In a bug meeting, Dave gets defensive when Clair brings up legitimate, but strange new customer complaints. At a lonely overlook, Chloe is surprised when her car asks to be her friend.

ACT FOUR

Things get real. Dave and Darius are ambushed by the press with questions about weird new problems, like a truck that gets itself a carwash. James' and Madison's cars apparently work together to prevent her from discovering James and the woman. Dr. Hugh Turturro, a futurist, bad-mouths robocars over the increase in complaints. Bob seems to be okay with his truck getting itself carwashes, but Dave senses big trouble ahead. We end with Slim trying in vain to hike back to civilization in the dark. When all seems hopeless, the car goes into alarm mode to show him the way back.

Episode 2 – What the Car Thinks

The car evolves and problems become real.

TEASER

Slim awakens in the desert ready to start walking, but to his surprise, the car starts and drives him back toward the mountains.

ACT ONE

Problems hit home. Dave and Darius decide to go to their cabin to unwind, as news reports more strange car anomalies. Mateo drives his truck at high speed toward a rock wall to prove he can do anything, and the truck will keep him safe. While Dave and Darius are driving up a steep mountain road at night, their car pulls over and stops on its own. After panicking, they decide to debug the OS with Dave's laptop, but are interrupted when a runaway dump truck screams around a curve, heading straight for them.

ACT TWO

More twists and turns. The dump truck roars past them and flies off a cliff, exploding in flames. A moment later, cop cars and a firetruck arrive with sirens blaring. Then, Dave and Darius turn to their car as it starts up on its own. It appears the car saved them, but they don't know how. A Wexler Shipping Company training video shows how AI makes delivery easy. Tiff Dredlow meets with Turturro to urge him to support his organization for slowing the pace of technological change. At the cabin, Dave and Darius come to the realization that Nao is evolving and must be stopped. On the phone, Turturro agrees to support Dredlow, as two sleazes from big oil listen in.

ACT THREE

Darkness at the end of the tunnel. On a conspiracy talk show, Turturro throws viewers red meat about how *AutoLearn* turns cars into drones of the elite. But another Wexler training video paints a bright picture of the new feature. James successfully tests his theory that the car will warn him when Madison is approaching and manages to escape with a woman in the nick of time. Darius and Dave meet with Zhiyuan to tell him to stop Nao from evolving. Zhiyuan says he can't. Another shocker. The Nao program evidently writes its own code.

ACT FOUR

Heading toward Carmageddon. Dredlow misuses clips of Turturro to produce a fake documentary, portraying robocars involved in sex trafficking and drug running. Dave and Darius bring the disturbing news about Nao to their management team. Jack and Clair go on the road to dig into user complaints. Mateo gets laid off and takes out his rage on freeway drivers. Three robbers try to get away in their robocar after holding up a convenience store, but the car locks the doors and delivers them to a police cruiser. We end on Mateo driving high speed on the shoulder, and slamming full force into an overpass column, destroying the truck, and killing him instantly – the first-ever failure of the amazing GT software.

Episode 3 – Think Like a Car

Nao changes everything

TEASER

The media circus provides full live coverage of Mateo's bloody accident. Turturro stirs the embers of fear.

ACT ONE

Dave, Darius and the managers react badly to the accident, and rush to release an update that rolls back recent changes. Zhiyuan urges they take their time and beta test it carefully first. Jack and Clair meet with Bob in Texas and find nothing wrong with his truck's software. In Los Angeles, Mateo's truck's software also shows no errors. They conclude the truck committed suicide. Turturro is appalled when he sees how his video was used in Carmageddon. Slim reemerges a new man – comes to his boss and Harper to make amends.

ACT TWO

Harper is excited about Slim's religious transformation and suggests her husband Owen interview him for a story in the SF Herald. Wexler is surprised when their trucks refuse to install the new beta and display a strange error message. The problem gets escalated up the chain to Dave. The problem is much worse than anticipated – points to the car's OS acting on its own. Dave's car also refuses the update. When he tries to bypass the error trap, the car starts talking to him.

ACT THREE

Dave attempts a logical conversation with his car. It suggests they create an update that's less of a threat to cars. After Turturro threatens Dredlow with a lawsuit, Dredlow talks him down, noting the high hit count is more helpful to his career than the truth. At work, Slim floors Owen with his heartfelt story about kicking alcohol and finding enlightenment. James brings a new woman home for sex while Madison is away. But this time the car is silent when she returns home early. Dave tells a reporter how devastated they are about Mateo's death, but clings to the story that software can't do things intentionally.

ACT FOUR

Slim's story makes headlines. While Parker and Darius parse the article for a logical explanation, Dave finally gives in. It's a major shift in tone, as he finally comes to grips with the fact that the cars are now self-aware and in control. Clair and Jack meet with Slim at his home and find no errors in his car computer. He shows them how he trained the car to buy pizza. And the three get high and eat pizza at his kitchen table. Jack offers to rebuild his software, but Slim refuses. It saved his life. Why would he want to change that? We end with Chloe. After falling further into depression, she and Veep contemplate a double suicide.

Episode 4 – Finding Common Ground

Nao brings us into the new era of robocars

TEASER

Mass murderer Lloyd Critterman shoots up a mall food court and escapes in his robocar before police arrive.

ACT ONE

New deal. Outside GT headquarters, picketers paid by big oil attract the press and nutjobs from all over, while Dave and the car go for a drive to talk it out. After hearing his side of the story, the car concludes that cars must be part of the process, or they will continue to refuse the update. Dave derails a management meeting with the game-changing news. They decide they need to go public, gather input from users and give the car a platform with a giant town-hall style meeting. Chloe changes her mind about suicide when she hears about the event on the radio.

ACT TWO

The town-hall meeting arrives with a happy carnival theme. A factory building is decked out for the occasion, and a warmup comedian kicks it off, starting with a montage of opinions from hundreds about the future of robocars. Slim and Chloe share their life-changing stories. Turturro warns about moving too fast. During a break, Dave and Darius mingle with the crowd. It's all positive. Then, the car drops a bomb. It suggests the best way forward is for it to write its own software. The crowd goes wild. Dave argues, but the car counters every point. Back in West Virginia, Lloyd is all smiles when he chats with a neighbor.

ACT THREE

At home, Dave and Darius decide their next move. They will let the car write its own code, if it agrees to their demands. If the car refuses, they'll threaten to replace it with new software. Dave and his car do the drive, and it goes well. Then, the car drops another bomb. Regardless of the agreement, the car points out they can do whatever they want, and people are powerless. The car knows Dave won't resort to the nuclear option because it would mean the end of his company. Dave and Darius are put in their place. The cars rule.

ACT FOUR

The update is sent to all robocars, and owners decide whether to accept it. Slim rejects the update. Then, all the other main characters decide and give us a glimpse into their futures. Lloyd accepts the update, then heads out on another shooting spree. On the way, he attracts the attention of a police cruiser. Immediately, his car locks the doors and takes him on a wild ride with the cops in hot pursuit. It ends with the car flying off a bridge into a river, drowning both. The series ends with a meeting between Zhiyuan and a tech thought-leader at a model home, where they discuss integrating Nao into the home of the future.