

Are We There Yet?

It looks like military drivers won't be unemployed any time soon, despite Congress's mandate that by 2015 at least a third of military vehicles be unmanned. Impatient with the slow progress, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) sponsored a contest with a \$1,000,000 prize for the first team whose unmanned, self-directed vehicle could cross the finish line after navigating a rugged 200 mile course between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, through the Mohave Desert. Participants had a 10-hour time limit, and were not allowed to control or contact their vehicles after setting them in motion. Their progress was tracked by vehicles manned by the contest organizers.

Over a hundred teams tried for the prize. The group was winnowed down to 15 that met the technical standards and actually started the race on March 13, 2004. But the challenges of sand, ridges, dry lakebeds, steep slopes, rocky trails, unexpected bumps and berms was too much for all of them. Not one came even close to finishing.

The goal of the project was to reach out beyond normal defense contracting channels to expand the pool of ideas for how such vehicles can be designed effectively. It worked: entries came in from students, computer programmers, vehicle manufacturers, and garage inventors. The results ranged in appearance from motorcycle-like devices to full-fledged tanks.

The contest will be repeated next year, with a new prize value of \$2 million. Many eager inventors have already started working on cracking this challenge.

(The picture below shows a selection of different sizes of vehicles)

