Self-driving Tesla steers Calif. tech founder onto train tracks

By Stephen Council, Tech Reporter

Jesse Lyu trusts his Tesla's "self-driving" technology; he's taken it to work, and he's gone on 45-minute drives without ever needing to intervene. He's a "happy customer," he told SFGATE. But on Thursday, his Tesla scared him, badly.

Lyu, the founder and CEO of artificial intelligence gadget startup Rabbit, was on the 15-minute drive from his apartment to his office in downtown Santa Monica. He'd turned on his car's self-driving features, called "Autopilot" and "Full Self-Driving (Supervised)," after pulling out of his parking garage. The pay-to-add features are meant to drive the Tesla with "minimal driver intervention," steering, stopping and accelerating on highways and even in city traffic, according to Tesla's website. Lyu was cruising along, resting his arms on the steering wheel but letting the car direct itself, he said in a video interview Friday.

Then, Lyu's day took a turn for the worse. At a stoplight, his Tesla turned left onto Colorado Avenue, but it missed the lane for cars. Instead, it plunged onto a street-grade light rail track between the road's vehicle traffic lanes, paved but meant solely for trains on LA's Metro E Line. He couldn't just move over — a low concrete barrier separates the lanes, and a fence stands on the other side.

"It's just f–king crazy," he said, narrating a video he posted to X of the incident. "I've got nowhere to go. And, you can tell from behind ... the train's right here." (He pointed to the oncoming train, stopped about a block behind his car.)

hi @elonmusk - FSD v13.2.2 just drove me to a train line here in Santa Monica. sending this video clips and hopefully you guys can fix it fast. (i was shaking and i had to ran a red light to save my life). pic.twitter.com/GOERJSEcTq
— Jesse Lyu (@jessechenglyu) January 2, 2025

Lyu said he was "literally shaking." He disengaged "Autopilot" and ran the red light in the next intersection to get out of the train's path as it followed behind him. Safe and sound, but shaken. Once parked at his office, he uploaded a

video of his dashcam footage to X; the post has now been viewed more than 690,000 times, per the site.

A flock of commenters on X said Lyu should have taken back over from the self-driving tech sooner, and then nosed his car into the right lane. But he said that wasn't really an option — by the time the wheel had turned far enough to miss the right lane, the concrete barrier was in his way. Lyu said he feels it's "never been a good idea" to hold the Tesla's wheel as it turns on its own, because it's hard to perfectly predict the angle the car will take.

The incident points to Tesla's wobbly approach with self-driving technology. While Waymo's LiDAR-based approach has proven successful for its autonomous cars in San Francisco, Tesla is sticking with cameras, and loading what's essentially an iterative prototype of autonomous tech into thousands of on-the-road vehicles.

"Autopilot" is fairly basic, running cruise control and keeping a car in-lane. More tools and navigation features come with the package dubbed "Full Self-Driving (Supervised)," itself an oxymoron — the company only added the qualification in 2024. Drivers are told to keep their hands on the wheel at all times when using the tools. The tech doesn't make its cars autonomous, Tesla says repeatedly online; drivers like Lyu are supposed to stay constantly alert. But the cars do, often, ride without the need for intervention.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk's grandstanding adds to the confusion. In 2021, he posted that he was "confident" Tesla's self-driving tech would be better than a human driver by the year's end. Last March, he posted that the tech "will be superhuman to such a degree that it will seem strange in the future that humans drove cars." A slew of Tesla owners have built online followings with hands-off testing of the tech, with Musk sharing the videos along the way. Lyu said he wasn't trying to promote himself with the video, he was just posting it "founder to founder," in hopes of Musk's workforce fixing the left-turn issue.

"I'm just trying to share this video to Tesla and the team," he said. "This is a serious problem, and regardless how a human reacts, the autopilot algorithm should never put any of their vehicles onto the train track. That's just fundamentally wrong."

He added that he paid for the Full Self-Driving feature when it cost $10,000, and he's been pleased that he opted for the upgrade. Still, it's far from perfect.

"I like to try it; I like to use it," Lyu said. "The reason I'm sharing this is that, me as a customer, I want this feature to be better."

Tesla did not respond to SFGATE's request for comment.