



Written by [James Heiser](#) on August 28, 2009

Private Companies compete for Google Lunar X Prize

The recent launch of South Korea's Naro-1 rocket marked the emergence of the 10th nation with the capacity to launch payloads to orbit. But several private corporations — including SpaceX and Virgin Galactic — have been redefining the role of private corporations in the opening of the next frontier.

Now, a growing number of private companies pursuing [the Google Lunar X Prize](#) are demonstrating that space exploration is not just for governments any more.



The conditions of the Google Lunar X Prize competition are easy to summarize, but profoundly challenging to complete:

The Google Lunar X PRIZE is a \$30 million international competition to safely land a robot on the surface of the Moon, travel 500 meters over the lunar surface, and send images and data back to the Earth. Teams must be at least 90 percent privately funded and must be registered to compete by December 31, 2010. The first team to land on the Moon and complete the mission objectives will be awarded \$20 million; the full first prize is available until December 31, 2012. After that date, the first prize will drop to \$15 million. The second team to do so will be awarded \$5 million. Another \$5 million will awarded in bonus prizes. The final deadline for winning the prize is December 31, 2014.

At present, there are 19 teams competing for the prize; two other teams have withdrawn from the competition. Odyssey Moon Limited became the first company to register for the Google Lunar X Prize on December 6, 2007, and the Isle of Man-based company was recently the subject of [a profile story on MSNBC](#). Reporter Scott Budman introduces his story on Odyssey Moon with the question: "We've been to the moon before, but can you imagine our lunar satellite as a place where we might live and do business? These people can."

A common criticism of the NASA moon landings of the Apollo program is that they were essentially "flags and footprints" missions; the goal of Apollo was, first and foremost, to beat the Soviet Union in the race to the moon. This criticism is somewhat unfair, given the substantial scientific and technological benefits that came both from the research and development involved in the space program and the advances in our knowledge of the moon, which came from both robotic probes and manned landers. But the sudden termination of the Apollo program during the Nixon administration left NASA floundering, and set back the entire program of human exploration of the solar system. Discussions of human settlement of the Moon and Mars have largely remained confined to blackboards and PowerPoint presentations ever since — the political winds blow NASA in different directions with each presidential inauguration.

The goal of most competitors in the Google Lunar X Prize is to open the way to extensive exploration, private development, and eventual permanent settlement of the Moon. NASA's "Constellation" program



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intends to return Americans to the Moon by 2020, but the recent Augustine Commission has called into question any significant manned American space flight program for the foreseeable future. The possibility of manned flight to the moon was proven four decades ago; the question now is whether mankind *will* return to the moon, and whether government, or private business ventures, will lead the way.

Near the end of the MSNBC story, Dr. Bob Richards, the founder of Odyssey Moon, says, "It will give young people hope for the future. They'll be able to look up for the first time in human history and know that there are people up there — us— on another world." At a time when collectivists and radical environmentalists continue to obsess over zero population growth and zero-sum economic phantasms, a vision of the future in which people are still valued and can still hope to accomplish great things is a healthy alternative.

It is worth noting that the Google Lunar X Prize is by no means the only privately funded space-oriented competition. Other private competitions are also helping to spur interest in space exploration. For example, the Mars Society's annual University Rover Challenge (URC) was established several years ago as an annual competition for students in various fields of engineering and the applied sciences. The URC involves student teams from universities around the world in the process of designing and building rovers which can operate and perform scientific experiments in a simulated Martian environment.

Private ventures may open the way to the new frontier. What remains to be seen is whether governments will help, come along for the ride, step aside, or get in the way of such endeavors. One thing is certain, with the conclusion of the Lunar X Prize competition scheduled for December 31, 2014, we will not have too long to wait to learn whether Odyssey Moon and other competitors can rise to the challenges set before them.



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