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SEPTEMBER 24, 2007, 10:01 PM

## Would You Pay \$5 for a Chance to Walk on Mars?

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

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NASA's vision of the future has its astronauts taking the first steps on Mars. But you could beat them to it by buying a lottery ticket. (Image: NASA/Pat Rawlings, SAIC)

It's Mars Week here at the Lab. Now that I've used my [Findings column](#) to plead with billionaires to go to Mars, I'd like to hear your ideas about the trip. I want to consider arguments that it's too soon to go Mars — that instead of an expensive one-time dash to the planet, we should wait until spaceflight is cheap enough to properly colonize the planet. And I'd like to debate how Mars should be colonized — specifically, whether or not it should “terraformed” into a warm planet with a breathable atmosphere for humans.

But before we get to those debates, let's start with something simpler: How interested would you be in buying a ticket in a lottery for a seat on a spaceship to Mars? I first heard this lottery idea in 1998, at the founding meeting of the [Mars Society](#) in Boulder, Colorado, which I [wrote about for Reason Magazine](#). A member of the society named Alex Duncan, who had some experience in the commodities markets, proposed a Mars Lottery modeled on the international lottery based in Lichtenstein that raises money for the Red Cross. The lottery could offer cash prizes at fortnightly or monthly drawings, and then also give the winner of each a chance at the grand prize of a seat on spaceship (assuming he or she met the physical and mental requirements for the trip). Mr. Duncan estimated that the lottery could raise enough money in just two or three years to pay for a mission.

Another fan of the Mars lottery is Esther Dyson, the technology consultant. (I'd call her a high-tech guru except that Times style forbids that use of guru.) As my colleague John Schwartz notes in his [excellent piece](#) on the future of space travel, Ms. Dyson sees a parallel between space today and the Internet 15 years ago: now that the government has opened up the frontier, it's ready to be developed commercially. Ms. Dyson told me that the idea of a Mars lottery was batted around informally this past summer at Flight School, the workshop on air and space travel that she runs through [EDventure.com](#).

“The lottery would be a way of building excitement about Mars,” Ms. Dyson. “It would help create a constituency for going to Mars.” Ms. Dyson wants to see humans on Mars, and she figures that a private expedition is probably a better hope than a government one. “I'd rather see a Mars trip be tried by a person with passion rather than by a committee because the committee will probably never get there,” she told me.

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### About TierneyLab

John Tierney always wanted to be a scientist but went into journalism because its peer-review process was a great deal easier to sneak through. Now a columnist for the Science Times section, Tierney previously wrote columns for the Op-Ed page, the Metro section and the Times Magazine. Before that he covered science for magazines like Discover, Hippocrates and Science 86.

With your help, he's using TierneyLab to check out new research and rethink conventional wisdom about science and society. The Lab's work is guided by two founding principles:

1. Just because an idea appeals to a lot of people doesn't mean it's wrong.
2. But that's a good working theory.

Comments and suggestions are welcome, particularly from researchers with new findings. E-mail [tierneylab@nytimes.com](mailto:tierneylab@nytimes.com).

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