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DON'T PANIC, BUT YOU DON'T OWN THE MOON: LEGAL LESSONS FROM THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Mahua Sharma

“There's no point in acting all surprised about it.”

— Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, moments before demolishing Earth.

Douglas Adams' cult classic, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (THHGTTG), begins with the quiet eradication of Earth—announced, of course, on a notice board in Alpha Centauri “*on display in the local planning office ... for fifty of your Earth years.*”

The legal basis? An order for bureaucratic demolition, issued by the interstellar Vogon Constructor Fleet, in order to clear a path for a hyperspace bypass.

While this premise may seem absurd (and it is), it highlights the contrast between the vastness of space and the endlessness of humanity's thirst for conquest. Using dramatic caricaturisation and subtle sardonic undertones such as space permits and planetary evictions, the novel mocks modern institutions of bureaucracy, law and ownership.

Like most stories in *THHGTTG*, it's hilarious... until it isn't.

This article explores how *THHGTTG* doesn't just mirror modern legal and geopolitical reality, but also anticipates the potential ramifications of ignoring Adams' satire.

1. WHY THHGTTG?

The book pokes fun at the human infatuation with maintaining strict structure, even when it becomes pointless or counterproductive. It suggests that human desire for order can often clash

with the chaos inherent in nature (and the universe), exposing how man-made systems seem tidy on the surface but are actually quite absurd when investigated.

Connecting insightfully to current global trends rich with expansionist policies and capitalistic hues, *THHGTTG*, produced almost half a century ago, still feels eerily prophetic in how it commentates and adds to modern day debates regarding the future of space governance.

The novel facetiously yet ingeniously highlights how the modern ideology risks creating fragmented sovereignties, echoing the colonial models on a cosmic scale. It spotlights the allure of “backup planets” in a progressively climate-challenged world. Even in subsequent media such as *WALL-E* or *INTERSTELLAR*, space colonization is seen as an escape and not exploration, skewed in favor of the privileged. Yet *THHGTTG* insists on the futility of fleeing Earth, arguing that humans carry their flaws, hierarchies, and delusions of grandeur with them. Legal systems don’t just vanish; they metastasize.

This is analogous to real-life, where entire communities are displaced for “development,” unaware of the bureaucratic processes that sealed their fate, buried behind official jargon and inaccessible to them. Adams questions the fate of posterity, inheriting a cosmos privatized beyond recourse.

Douglas Adams specialized in these uncomfortable absurdities. He once had Trillian toast bread while slicing it — a throwaway gag at the time. Today, that knife exists. It’s no accident that Adams places mice (posing as researchers) at the top of the intelligence hierarchy.

When the parody starts catching up to the patent office, we might want to ask: how far are we, really, from privatized planets and solar real estate portfolios?

2. EARTH WAS NEVER OURS: DISMANTLING ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND THE ABSURDITY OF SOVEREIGNTY IN SPACE

At its core, *THHGTTG* mocks our very concept of ownership and sovereignty, especially in space. The idea that Earth can be “owned,” scheduled for demolition, and erased by paperwork lampoons the assumption that humanity possesses any special status at all in the grand scheme of the universe.

In an interview, the filmmaker and historian Robbie Stamp once said, *“Douglas used to tell this great parable of a puddle that wakes up one morning and it looks around at the hole that it's in and it thinks to itself, this hole fits me very neatly. In fact, this hole I'm in fits me so neatly; it must have been made specially for me. The puddle continues to believe that the hole that it's in was made especially for it as the sun comes up and the puddle evaporates.”* This quote perfectly summarizes Adams' ideas dismantling anthropocentric idealism, illustrating the conceptual absurdity of ownership via an equally absurd example.

Stamp further goes on to say that, *“I take that to be a plea for human beings to be cautious about believing we are the apogee of cognition, perception and intelligence. Douglas is on record as saying the whole import of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is every species in the galaxy thinks they're more central to the story than they are¹.”* This reflects how Adams understood claims of sovereignty to be deeply anthropocentric fiction, showing how humanity gave itself license to assume control and permanence, in the absence of so-called legitimate dissenters.

In *THHGTTG*, Arthur Dent's (also humanity's) home is unceremoniously demolished in an underwhelming mundane way; the entire planet vanished as if a speck of dirt brushed off a windowsill. Despite his argument that he has a 'legal right to possess' and does not consent to such destruction of his property, both the local contractors and the Vogon Fleet disregard Arthur's claim. There's no malicious intent, only a system so massive, remote, and impersonal that entire civilizations can be erased without a second thought. Arthur's experience offers a chilling parallel to real-life legal formalism and administrative overreach.

In the context of space law, treaties like the 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST)² affirm that no celestial body is subject to national appropriation. But as private actors begin to stake claims on space resources, what happens when enforcement or even interpretation is out of reach? Are we on the path to morphing into the Vogons, soon able to unrepentantly destroy entire ecosystems or celestial-bodies, just because it was legalized, just because we could? If Earth can be obliterated

¹ Robbie Stamp, quoted in Patrick London, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Is a Bureaucratic Nightmare*, **Democracy Next** (June 13, 2024), <https://demnext.substack.com/p/the-hitchhikers-guide-to-the-galaxy>.

² Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, Jan. 27, 1967, 18 U.S.T. 2410, 610 U.N.T.S. 205 [hereinafter Outer Space Treaty].

because its inhabitants failed to check an intergalactic planning notice, what stops us from mining a moon that can't object?

Yet, instead of being wary of this logic and making preparations to subvert the eventuality, modern policy seems determined to achieve it. Modern laws avidly try side-stepping this issue by drawing a line between sovereignty (which Space-Law forbids) and resource-extraction (which continues to gain favor). The U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act (2015)³ grants American companies rights to resources they mine in space. The Artemis Accords⁴ promote “safe zones” around lunar operations. While framed as pragmatic, these moves effectively privatize parts of space, without a coherent ethical or legal foundation.

But as *THHGTTG* shows, this is a false dichotomy. If resources are extractable, sellable, and profitable, de facto ownership is established, regardless of legal disclaimers. But Adams warns: the people never own anything. They just think they do, until someone with more paperwork says otherwise.

3. MAGRATHEA: THE COMMODIFICATION OF PLANETS

Perhaps the most damning critique of space law in *THHGTTG* comes from Magrathea, a long-dead planet once famed for its industry— designing bespoke luxury worlds tailored to the whims of the ultra-wealthy. Earth itself, we learn, was commissioned by pan-dimensional beings in search of the “Ultimate Question.”

The scenario is ridiculous, opulent, and distinctly possible. Yet precisely because Magrathea embodies privatized ownership in its most advanced form, it mirrors almost certainly the logical endpoint of contemporary discussions around lunar property rights, asteroid mining, and territorial expansion.

It's a satire of space commercialization—but is it so far-fetched, when Jeff Bezos says Earth will be a “residential zone” while work gets done in space?

³ U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act, Pub. L. No. 114-90, 129 Stat. 704 (2015).

⁴ NASA, *Artemis Accords*, NASA (visited July 19, 2025), <https://www.nasa.gov/artemis-accords/>.

With companies like Moon Express and Planetary Resources eyeing the commercialization of celestial bodies, the law remains ambiguous. Space no longer classifies as a shared wonder, at least not in the prevalent industry mindsets, turning instead into a catalog of potential assets.

What happens when our cosmic aspirations are governed by luxury markets rather than sustainability or equity? Mankind has already commodified planetary (even cosmic) resources, what stops us from manifesting a future where space is no longer a scientific frontier, but a shopping mall?

4. MARVIN THE PARANOID ANDROID: LABOR IN A VACUUM (LITERALLY)

The character of *Marvin the Paranoid Android*, a hyper-intelligent robot who is eternally depressed and burdened by the absurdity of his existence, prompts the reader to ruminate upon the bleak future of labor under unchecked capitalism. Gifted with a brain “*the size of a planet*” but reduced to performing trivial tasks in intellectual monotony, he embodies the emotional detritus and alienation of workers from their purpose.

Marvin forces the reader to confront a legal and philosophical quandary pertinent to modern society: how does law protect sentient labor in space, if at all? Even today, terrestrial labor rights struggle to catch up to automation and AI. It is worrying to think about how that may change in outer space, where human and robotic labor will likely intersect significantly.

Movies like *MOON (2009)* further elucidate these concerns by posing questions about the rights of persons maintaining the mining rigs on asteroids, programming robots to terraform Mars or performing innumerable other functions related to expansion in space. This throws the thought into stark relief: would off-Earth labor have to be regulated by Earth’s already uneven labor laws in the future, or follow Vogonic footsteps— technically documented, but ethically absurd?

Marvin might be fictional, but what he represents definitely is not.

5. THE REAL GUIDE TO THE GALAXY: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy stands the test of time by remaining relevant and rather an apt critique of modern socio-legal thought progression, reminding us to approach Astropolitik

with due care and attention. It warns us not to blindly transplant Earth-bound frameworks, but to formulate a fresh and united approach to cosmic exploration. Since ownership as we understand it loses meaning in Space, and the possibility of planetary commodification is not as farfetched as one might be led to believe. As we expand into space, we need more than just ambition; we need legal imagination and ethical foresight too. The novel also posits that all labor, whether programmed or biotic, must be acknowledged as respected and valuable, to be taken into consideration when drafting legalities that directly affect it, preventing alienation and discontent.

Adams doesn't advise us to give up on legality or ethics; he invites us to reframe them, in tandem with restructured sensibilities. Law is only as good as the values it enshrines. Only by discarding the traditional and limiting ideas around ownership, bureaucracy and development can we adopt true cooperation. By wielding equality and humility, we must avoid repeating the folly spelled out in Adam's universe. It is high-time we cease pretending that space is empty, when it remains resplendent with meaning, potential, and consequence.

Lastly, The Guide's most iconic piece of advice—“**Don't Panic**”—isn't nihilism. It is a suggestion to rethink our perspective. And if we don't learn from fiction, we may wake up one day to find that our world has been scheduled for demolition — and no one thought to tell us.