



ECHOES BY
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The Simpsons and Economics: D'Oh!

In April 1991, Lisa Simpson's teacher, Miss Hoover took leave because she fell sick. A substitute teacher, Mr Bergstrom came. The episode *Lisa's Substitute Teacher* became famous because Dustin Hoffman stepped in to give the voice of Mr Bergstrom. Mr Bergstrom becomes very popular with Lisa and her classmates. Little does Mr Bergstrom or the viewers know this *Simpsons* episode silently teaches economics and accomplishes something that textbooks wrestle to make simple and easy.

A rumour is spreading that the Springfield Museum of Natural History will close down soon because people are not showing interest. Mr Bergstrom insists the class should visit the museum before it's too late. We don't know if the museum is privately or publicly run. All we know is, the museum does not charge an admission fee. Since there's no admission fee, the museum is *non-excludable*. Nobody can be excluded should they want to visit. The museum is almost never crowded. This means it is *non-rivalrous*: one person's use of the museum will not restrict the use of another person's visit to the museum. When the day comes, Lisa manages to take Homer Simpson with her to the museum.

When they arrive at the museum, Homer sees a notice: *Suggested Donation \$4.50*. Homer asks the clerk, what does that mean? The clerk responds, "Sir you can donate any amount, but our suggested amount is \$4.50." Homer asks back, "What if I decide to donate nothing?" This means, what if Homer decides to be a *free-rider* to the museum? Having found the individual benefits of visiting the museum without paying, being a *free-rider*, Homer encourages Mr Bergstrom to *free-ride* as well. Slowly and gradually, everybody follows Homer in being a *free-rider*. What happens in the end? Nobody makes a

contribution to the maintenance of the museum. If nobody contributes to the maintenance of the museum, in the end, the museum can't run and has to shut down.

This is a classic example of a *Public Good*. Paul Samuelson identified this type of a good in 1954. These goods aren't free like the museum. But once these goods are produced nobody can be excluded (non-excludability) because they are consumed collectively by



a group, like the museum. Most of the times, museums aren't crowded. Therefore, the additional burden of letting an extra person visit the museum is next to zero (non-rivalry). This is where the problem of *free-riding* arises. Everybody thinks their personal contribution of \$4.50 doesn't make sense because they aren't creating traffic to visit the museum.

If each individual's extra consumption of the museum

costs next to nothing, then there's no point in paying for admission. When we all think like this, the museum has to close down since nobody's paying. This is known as *market failure*. Now what to do? Somebody or some institution has to step in.

Since museums are a part of our heritage, they have many positive benefits that spillover to members of the community or society. Museums are therefore collectively enjoyed (consumed). Individual decision-making to fund will probably never work. The society demands museums stay open. If individual decision to pay for admission doesn't work, then the government, a governing authority or a philanthropic institute or individual needs to step in. This is where the responsibility of a government lies in any society.

Since its first episode on December 17, 1989, *The Simpsons* has been educating people around the world on textbook topics related to science, philosophy, economics, and game theory. If you've never watched *The Simpsons*, you don't know what you're missing. A big D'Oh to Homer and *The Simpsons*.

Source:

The Simpsons, Lisa's Substitute Teacher, April 25, 1991.

Further Reading:

The Simpsons & their Mathematical Secrets by Simon Singh. Bloomsbury, Oct 2013.

Homer Economicus: The Simpson and Economics. Editor: Joshua Hall. Stanford University Press, Jul 2014.

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Cheats for a Desk Makeover

There is always that moment of dire distress when we know that we've got all the work in the world piled up for us, we know we're going to be yelled at for missing those deadlines but we cannot seem to get through with finishing it. Do you want to know why? Nope, not because we're lazy (maybe sometimes) or careless but because our desk/workspace/cubicle looks like a shipwreck. In that case, instead of being a sore procrastinator, work up a new look for your boring old desk with the help of just a few tweaks or as I like to call them, DIY cheats.

The first things that need organising are probably those files, letters and notebooks which have been towering relentlessly on your table top. If you've not been using your drawers for slothfulness or simple convenience, so be it, but here is how you could simultaneously make it look good:

- ◆ Brandish beautiful new file holders made out of the very humble cereal boxes. How? On the wider face of the box, use a marker to draw a diagonal line running from the top left corner to above 3 inches from the bottom on the right. Cut along the line and do the opposite side in the same way. Flip it back to the initial position and trim the thinner side of the box on the right, keeping 3 inches from the bottom. What remains should resemble a file holder. Now, simply glue on fabric or pat-

terned paper in bright and bold colours and you're good to go.

- ◆ If not file holders, what about bookends? To keep your notebooks snugly standing together, paint bricks in the attire of your favourite book covers. Trust me, camouflage has never looked better!

- ◆ Next you'll discover an array of pens (both functional and completely inkless), pencils and a whole lot of 'bits and pieces', kind of ridiculously important stationeries scattered all over the desk. If you think stuffing them separately is a problem, here's your solution:

- ◆ Gather up tins and cans of different sizes and an old piece of wooden board. Play around a bit to find the perfect arrangement and use super glue to fix them on the board. Then, it is a simple matter of unleashing spray paint on every inch of the arrangement, using multiple coats if necessary. As the paint dries, use the smaller cans to stow pins and clips and the taller ones for pens. Experiment with different colours or go with classy monochrome gold.

- ◆ The completely useless tissue rolls can be covered and glued with stacks of old bangles which refuse to fit you anymore. To seal the bottom off, use a circular cardboard cut-out and presto! You've got a pen holder.

As you're almost done moving everything

out of your way to getting a clean workstation, you might as well make a few new additions to help you get more organised:

- ◆ Use a bit of spray paint to revive any old photo frame and place a white paper inside the frame, placing the glass over it. Then simply use a white board marker to write daily memos on your brand new dry erase board perfect for the desk.

- ◆ If you're more of a chalkboard person, just take the glass of the frame and coat it with chalkboard paint which you can easily stir up with 2/3rd cup black paint and 1/3rd cup baking soda. Use sandpaper for finishing.

- ◆ If you have some space above your desk, wrap some boldly patterned fabric around some thermocol and secure with duct tape at the back. Now you've got a bulletin board which you can adorn with a juxtaposition of photos, inspirational quotes and daily memos. Your desk will never be the same again (that's a good thing).

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TRASH TO TREASURE
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