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How SpaceX could become the most valuable company in the universe

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Elon Musk's plans to colonise Mars may sound far-fetched, but he has already achieved most of what he set to do. But in order to make science fiction a reality, we need to make sure companies are rewarded for taking risks in space, says Rainer Zitelmann

SpaceX is aiming to go public in June setting the stage for what is expected to be the biggest IPO of all time. Elon Musks company occupies a unique position. Between January 1 and May 12, 2026, the company launched 55 rockets into space. All 55 launches were successful. The rest of the world combined launched 46 rockets during the same period. That means China, Russia, Europe, India, Japan, and all other U.S. companies together conducted fewer launches than the private company SpaceX.

The same was true in 2025 as a whole: Of 324 global rocket launches, 165 were carried out by SpaceX. If SpaceX were a country, it would rank as the world's number one space power — far ahead of China with 88 launches.

The private company SpaceX alone carried out 20 times more rocket launches in 2025 than all of Europe with its state-organized space program combined. And more than ten years ago, it built the world's first truly reusable rocket — something that no single government space agency anywhere in the world has achieved to this day. Compared with the Space Shuttle, Musk's company has reduced launch costs by 95 per cent! And of the roughly 15,000 active satellites currently in orbit, more than 10,000 are Musk's Starlink satellites.

Who owns space

Yet this is only the beginning. Musk has enormous ambitions, such as building data centers in space. Google is currently in talks with SpaceX and other launch providers for an exciting project called Project Suncatcher. The goal is to deploy solar-powered data centers in orbit. This initiative plans to use satellites that feature Google's unique tensor processing units, which would help create a cloud for artificial intelligence in space. These orbital data centers could provide nearly constant solar energy while alleviating some of the land and energy limitations that traditional data centers face.

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But the truly grand objective is the colonization of Mars. The goal of colonizing our neighboring planet is how Musk intends to transform humanity into a multi-planetary species. His aim is to settle 1m people on Mars. To achieve this, he would need to launch 1,000 Starships, each carrying 100 colonists, to Mars during every launch window, which occurs approximately once every 26 months. SpaceX's board approved a compensation package under which Musk could receive up to 200 million Class B shares if SpaceX reaches a valuation of $7.5 trillion and establishes a human colony of one million people on Mars.

For many people, this sounds like science fiction. But so far, Musk has achieved most of what he set out to do. Of course, that is no guarantee for the future. Still, there is one scenario that could make SpaceX by far the largest company in the world. I am talking about Space REITs. What does that mean?

Under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, states are prohibited from claiming ownership of celestial bodies or land on celestial bodies. State ownership in space is forbidden. For SpaceX, this is not bad news — it is good news. But what about private ownership by companies or individuals? The treaty says nothing about that, because in 1967 nobody could imagine companies like SpaceX dominating spaceflight. At the time, people thought only in terms of nation-states.

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It is obvious, however, that governments will never be able to finance projects such as large-scale settlements on the Moon or Mars. Yes, perhaps a small lunar base for scientific research — but certainly not the construction of cities on the scale Musk envisions. If such projects are ever realized, they will have to be privately financed. And that, in turn, requires allowing private companies to claim ownership of land on the Moon, Mars, or asteroids.

So who should have the right to acquire property in space? Those who have the financial means and are willing to take the risk to get there, develop the land, and put it to productive use. Space squatters could play a role in the conquest of space similar to that played by the historical squatters in the settlement of the American West.

For instance, if SpaceX succeeds in reaching Mars and begins building permanent settlements on the Red Planet, then ownership rights should initially go to SpaceX. Not ownership of the entire planet, of course, but of a practical area — perhaps the size of Singapore. The surface area of Mars is 200,000 times larger than Singapore, so SpaceX would initially own only 0.0005 per cent of Mars. That would be sufficient to develop multiple settlements while still leaving enormous opportunities for others.

SpaceX could finance its transportation and development costs by placing Martian land into a real estate investment trust (REIT). The value would then be determined by the market. Most people would buy shares not because they plan to live there themselves, but because they expect the value to appreciate. Future colonists could also receive preferential access to shares or land rights as an incentive to settle and remain on Mars for several years. In this way, private ownership would become a mechanism for attracting pioneers willing to take extraordinary risks.

If SpaceX were allowed to claim land on other celestial bodies, it could spin off subsidiaries as publicly traded REITs. A Moon REIT or a Mars REIT would become the greatest real estate story in history. SpaceX itself will not talk openly about such plans. I am sure Musk's advisers told him the exact opposite: the IPO prospectus should not sound like science fiction, because that could scare off investors. Even without the Space REIT vision, SpaceX has the potential to become the largest company in history.

But consider that the following scene took place less than three decades ago — as Walter Isaacson recounts in his biography of Elon Musk: At a meeting with some former employees of PayPal, the company Musk had founded and later sold, becoming rich in the process, Musk was sitting by the pool, engrossed in a tattered manual for a Russian rocket engine. When one of his friends asked what his plans were for the future, Musk answered: "I'm going to colonize Mars. My mission in life is to make mankind a multiplanetary civilization." His former colleague's reaction? "Dude, you're bananas."

Less than three decades later, his space company dominates the entire space industry and is preparing for the largest IPO in history. Who would have thought that possible back then?

Rainer Zitelmann is a successful real estate investor and historian, as well as the author of the book "New Space Capitalism", which will be published by Skyhorse Publishing https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781510788213/new-space-capitalism/