Embracing the Paradigm Shift

Converting a Premium Team to an Enthusiastic Freemium Team

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My name is Damion Schubert, and I have almost 20 years design experience, mostly working on premium massively multiplayer titles.

I am a relatively new to F2P design, though. Star Wars: The Old Republic was my first foray into this design space.

The effort was highly successful, doubling revenue, 2M new downloads quickly, massively increasing DAU, significantly increasing subscriber numbers.

I want to talk instead about the journey, and how a team was led kicking and screaming into embracing free to play.

In mid 2012, it was clear that SWTOR was not matching expectations, and that EA expected a course correction into Free to Play.

We began heavy research – talking to anyone who would give us the time of day, learning what we could about what had come before.

Along the way, on some of these other teams, we saw a couple of troubling trends – warning signs that might affect team morale.

The first was unbridled greed – developers who were uncomfortably ecstatic about the massive earnings potential of microtransactions.

The second was despair– developers who were incredibly depressed about having to monetize their games.

They'd say things like 'I'm witnessing the death of the games industry – and I'm part of it."

It's worth noting that neither of these attitudes were usually attached to success stories. They were the teams that were struggling.

The success stories tended to be about respecting your customers, and ensuring design works seamlessly with monetization.

And that's when I had my epiphany. Well, a series of them.

Free is good!

Free is good – for the CONSUMERS. We're doing it because the market demands it, not because the publishers want it.

Big publishers like Electronic Arts and Activision would have been happier if things had never changed – they were winning that game.

Gamers from my generation also look at 'free' suspiciously –it's too good to be true. They see it as cheap, bargain basement stuff that's likely a ripoff.

The kids today don't see it that way. They are used to get absolutely everything for free, from music to movies and everything in between.

Many of them were introduced to gaming on free games, such as MMOs like Maple Story, Runescape or Wizard 101.

With the advent of *League of Legends* and *Tribes: Ascend* (among others), this now also includes highly polished AAA game experiences.

There is so much free entertainment available that there is no reason for someone to pay money unless they decide to emotionally commit.

SUMMER SALE

Daily Deals   New deals in 23:45:38

DIVINITY ORIGINAL SIN
-20%   £29.99   £23.99

DEMOCRACY 3
-66%   £18.99   £6.45

DAYZ
-15%   £19.99   £16.99

THE WITCHER 2 ASSASSINS of KINGS ENHANCED EDITION
-80%   £14.99   £2.99

FARCRY 3
-75%   £14.99   £3.74

Sins of a Solar Empire REBELLION
-80%   £29.99   £5.99

Don't Starve

PRE PURCHASE DEADRISING 3

XCOM

Digital distribution has created a near-infinite competitive landscape, and some entries are always competing on price.

-75%   £10.99   £2.74

-25%   £39.99   £29.99

-67%   £14.99   £4.94

Epiphany #2: Things are going to get 'more free'.

Can you imagine someone releasing a MOBA with a box price now? This will happen to other genres one by one.

And genres will feel pressure from competitors to push prices down and get rid of bad experimentation, such as DOTA 2 not charging for heroes..

So if free is inevitable. How do you get a team on board? By reminding them that they are giving away the gift of gameplay to millions of fans.

Shadowbane went F2P before they closed it down. So many players surged in that Ubisoft kept it open another two years – with no monetization plan!
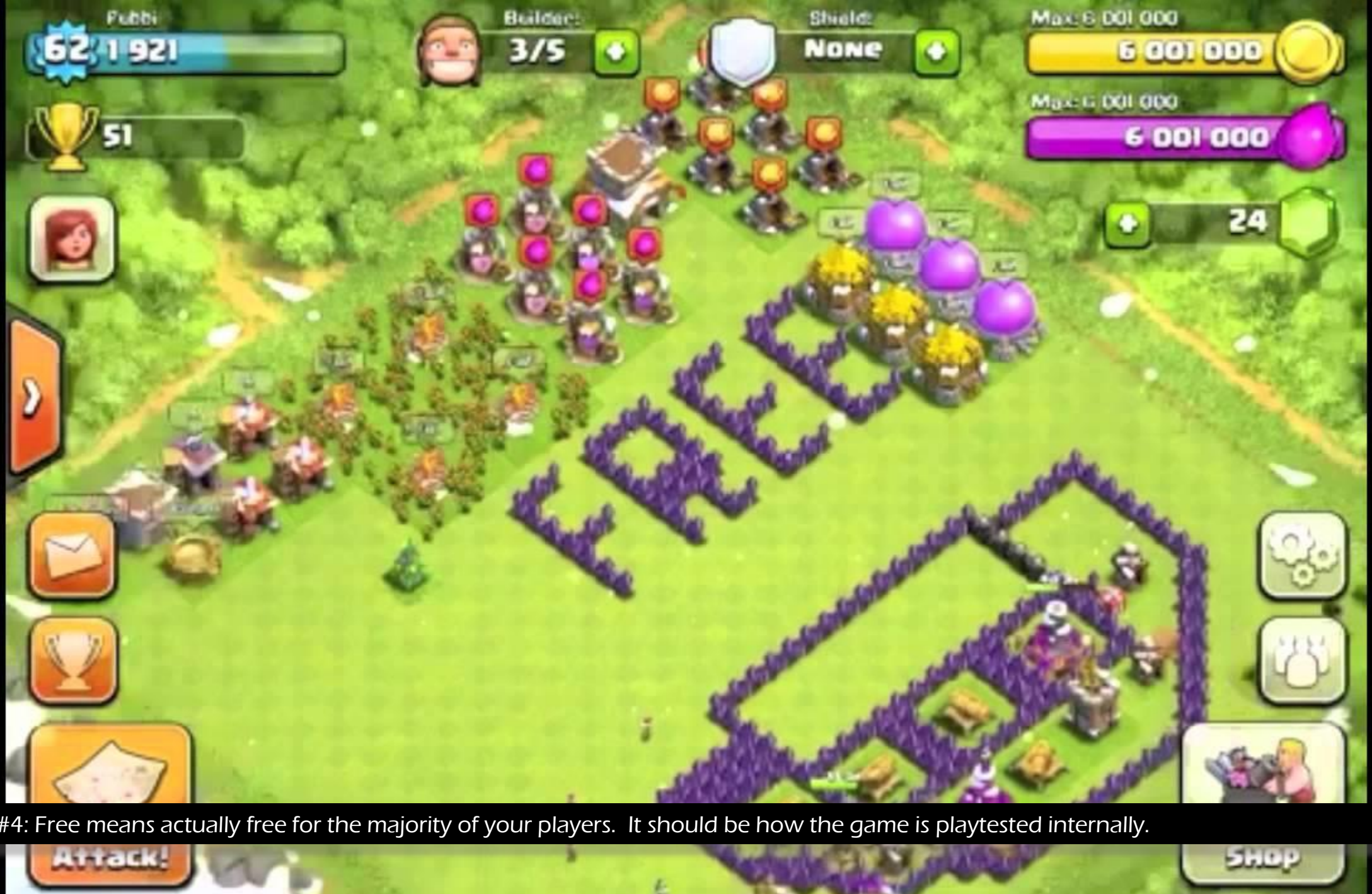
Epiphany #4: Free means actually free for the majority of your players. It should be how the game is playtested internally.

In *Candy Crush Saga*, 70% of all customers who finish all levels do so without spending a dime.

One thing most Free to Play blockbusters have in common is a high level of generosity, especially early.

When converting SWTOR, we left the opening planets (first 5 hours) untouched – so they'd fall in love with the game before we asked for money.

BUILD A LAIR

WITH DEVIOUS TRAPS!

By comparison, many F2P games ask for money too soon, or lock the core game loop behind an immediate energy purchase.

How free a game is actually is core to that game's virality – how much hardcore fans will evangelize it to cheapskate friends.

So we have the team embracing 'free'

How do we make money?

I think we all can agree that it's pretty important for game developers to be able to pay their rent.

Also, the companies that fund us are not doing this out of charity.

EXCLUSIVELY ON Uplay SHOP

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY

GUILLOTINE COLLECTOR'S CASE

Collector's Box

Artbook

Framed Canvas Print

Secret Paris Map

Official Soundtrack

Music Box

FuturePak™ case

Arno Guillotine Figurine
Height: 41cm

Customised Tarot Game

And hopefully we can agree that the $60 price point and $100 collector's edition model ALSO has opportunities for exploitation.

People WANT to spend money on their favorite hobbies. Your job, as the designer, is to make something they can love enough to invest in.
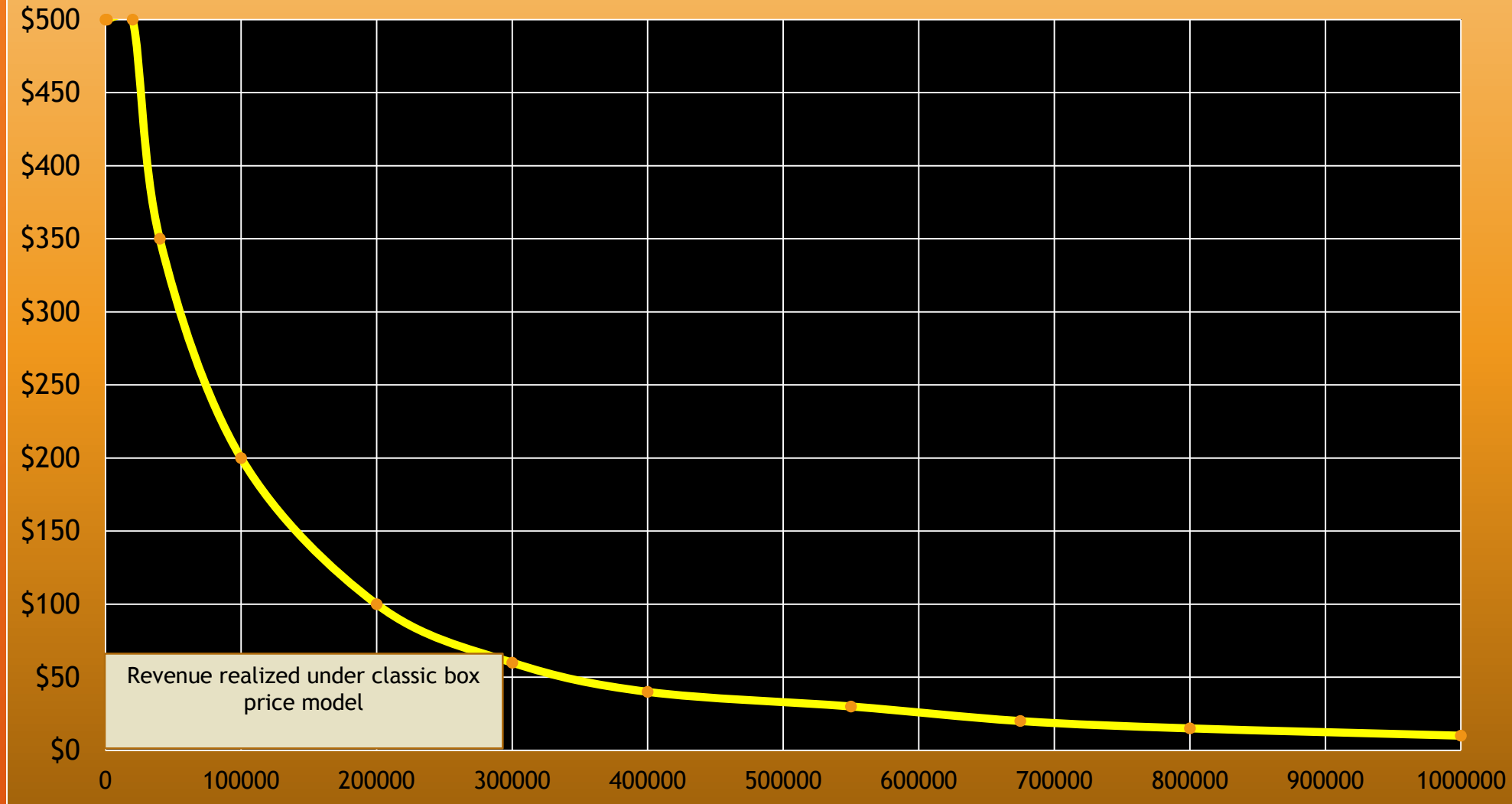
WARHAMMER
40,000

Charging money for games is fine – hell, MONEY games are fine – as long as you have a transparent value proposition the player can understand..

"UNTIL THE DAY WE DIE"

Customers Sorted by Amount Happy to Spend
(Heavy spending capped at $50)

Revenue realized under classic box price model

Designers need to know the classic 'willingness to spend' chart, and how F2P massively increases players & potential revenue.

Epiphany #5: Designers need to see the numbers. Designers who know what sell will better capitalize on available resources.

Monthly Card $2.99

120 Daily Gems for 30 days

HOT! Golden Package of Gems $99.99

18200 Gems(One Time Offer)

HOT! Silver Chest of Gems $49.99

8800 Gems(One Time Offer)

HOT! Bronze Box of Gems $19.99

3390 Gems(One Time Offer)

HOT! Iron Case of Gems $9.99

1630 Gems(One Time Offer)

HOT! Cloth Sack of Gems $4.99

811 Gems(One Time Offer)

Games should have an 'obvious first purchase' – "If I spend only 5 bucks on this game, clearly this is where I spend it".

BUNDLES NOW AVAILABLE!

VIEW G BUNDLES

HERO PACKS

MARVEL HEROES
PRESALE

10% OFF!

$9.99 - $49.99

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TEAM PACKS

MARVEL HEROES
ADVANCE

$39.99 - $59.99

VIEW TEAM PACKS
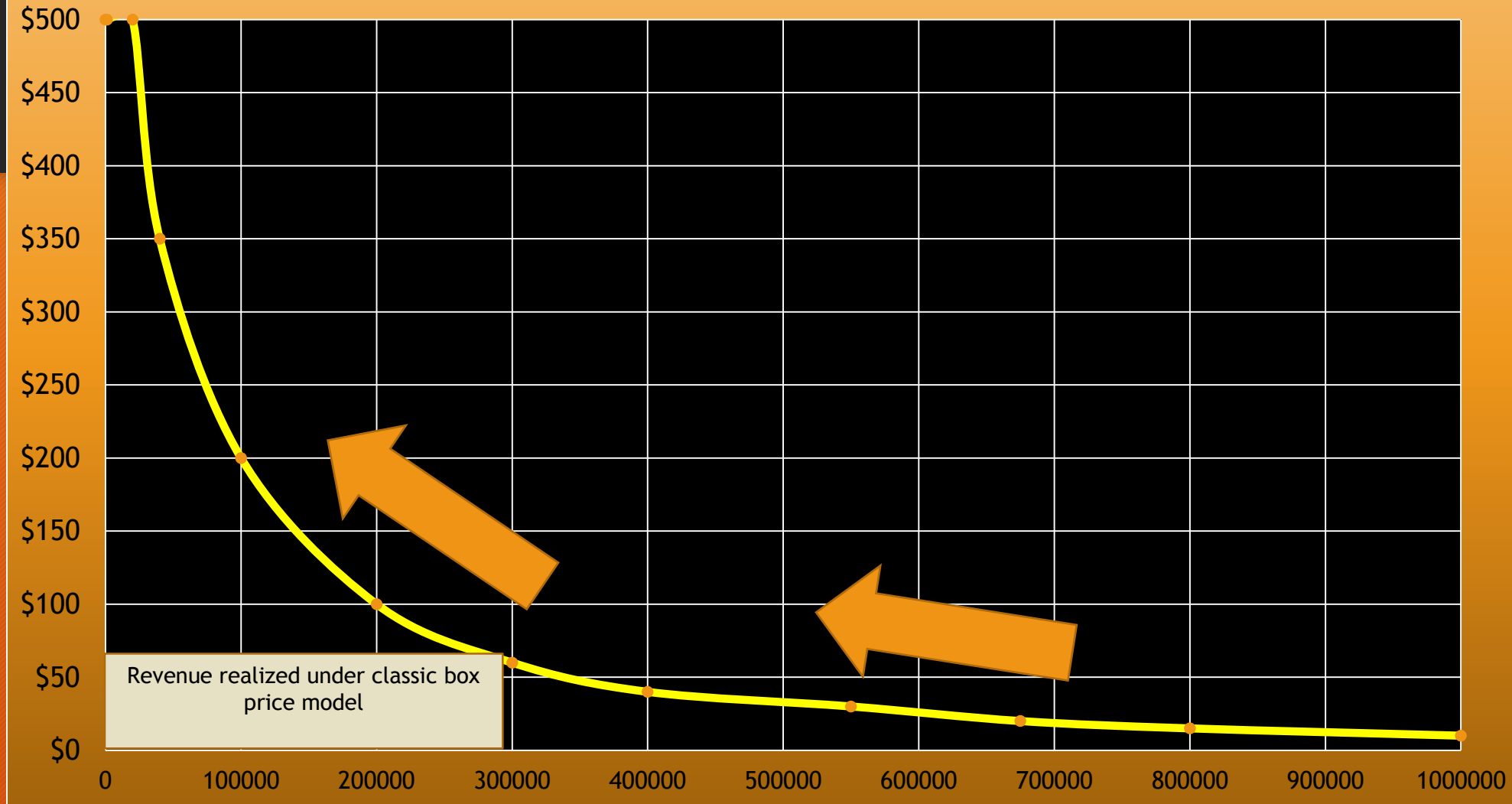
MEGA PACK MK II

MARVEL HEROES

$199.99

VIEW MEGA PACK

Designers should imagining that everyone could become a whale and instead talk about what a 'reasonable person' would spend.

Customers Sorted by Amount Happy to Spend
(Heavy spending capped at $50)

Revenue realized under classic box price model

In this way, you start to look at how to move players up the 'happy to spend' chart. Can you do that by making them happier?

We need to think of whales as Patrons – generous benefactors who subsidize gameplay for hundreds of free players.

WARHAWK
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

TIMBER WOLF
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

STORMCROW
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

ADDER
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

DIRE WOLF
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

SUMMONER
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

NOVA
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

KIT FOX
$500
BUY
LIMITED QUANTITY

THE WAR
OF THE CLANS
HAS BEGUN

And designers need to be extremely wary of how attempts to reach the 1% are seen by the other 99%.

Heavy spending should culturally be a point of pride and celebration, not one of shame.

Last Epiphany: It falls on designers also need to protect the customers. Someone in that room needs to be their advocate.

In Conclusion

◊ Embrace 'free' as preferred by the marketplace.

◊ Ensure the game is free enough for players to fall in love with it.

◊ Understand the idea of willingness to spend variance.

◊ Treat and celebrate whales like cherished patrons.

◊ Defend the players from the forces of evil.

Questions?