

PAY TO WIN

How Video Game Developers Use Microtransactions
to Hack Our Brains & Wallets.

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How to Lose 3 Billion Dollars Overnight: A Lesson From EA

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Chapter 1

How to Lose 3 Billion Dollars Overnight: A Lesson From EA

T The day Star Wars Battlefront II was announced, it all changed. Gamers saw the upcoming shooting game set in the Star Wars universe as a thrilling opportunity to live out a desire to run around shooting blasters as a Clone Trooper, to fight as the insidious Darth Maul and cause terror in the enemy ranks, to fly high with spaceships, and all kinds of other exciting things. The game promised players that all their Star Wars dreams could come true, so naturally, the moment the trailer launched on YouTube, it spread like wildfire all across social media and the internet as a whole. It was all that the gaming community seemed to be talking about. As more trailers

were released and more information about the content was shared, the excitement only grew.

Electronic Arts, the company putting it out, put their feet up and watched the predicted sales skyrocket. All signs pointed to this game being the game, the one that everyone would play and that would propel EA to another huge profit. If you had ever watched a Star Wars movie and had anything you'd liked about it, you would love this game. It had everything: great graphics, plenty of characters, vehicles, everything.

And, unfortunately, it also had loot boxes and microtransactions, the system designed to get consumers to pay more for in-game items like

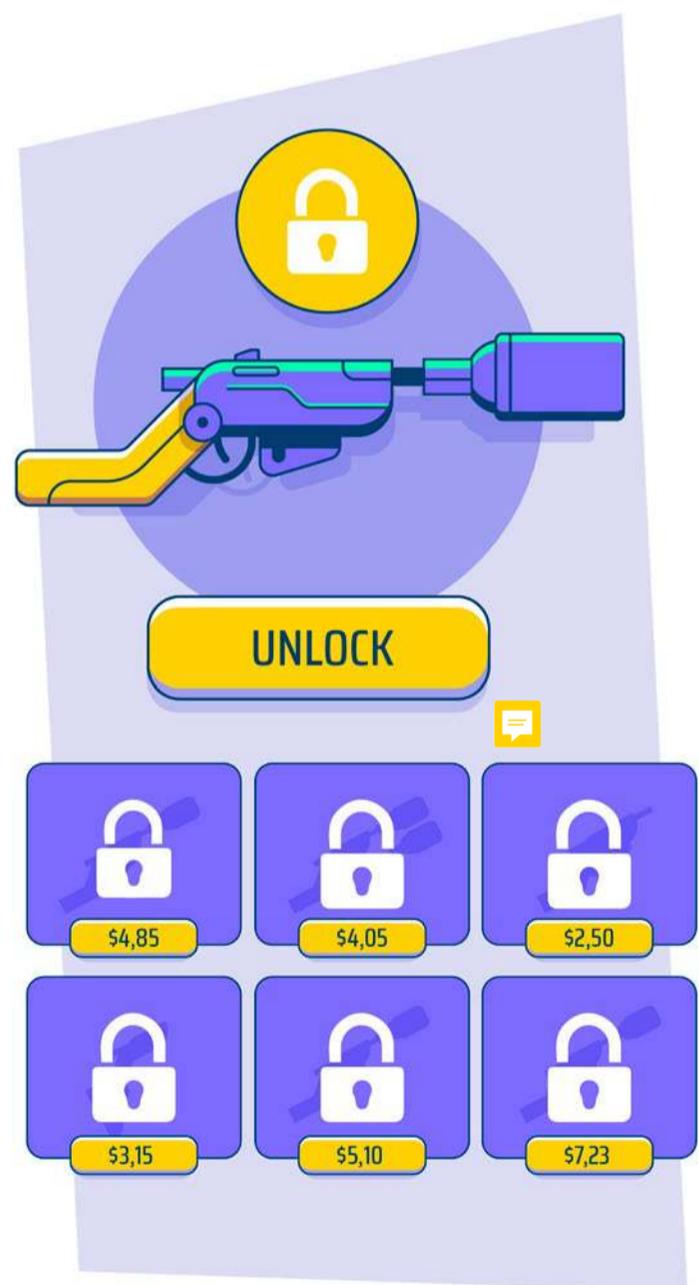
weapons, powers, and characters. Loot boxes and microtransactions seemed, to the producers, like a great idea. They'd charge a base price of \$60 to \$80 on the regular game, but a lot of the things that people wanted the most wouldn't be included in that.

You want to play Darth Vader? Did the trailer show him in action and make it seem like you, too, could be playing him immediately? Well, too bad.

Many of the fan favorites ended up being not included in the price, meaning that players had a couple of options: pay more money to buy something in game (microtransactions) [PA1] [A02] that many people thought were already included, or play enough to where their level unlocked the desired character or item. On paper, this might have seemed like something that would be accepted with open arms. EA would bring in some more money for people who were impatient and wanted to play Luke Skywalker the day it came out and boom, everything would be sunshine and rainbows as stockholders gasped in awe that EA had done it again.

Unfortunately for EA, this wasn't the case. Once their greatest weapon, social media became their

worst nightmare. People who discovered what they considered a clear exploitation of players felt tricked and used. They cracked their knuckles, fired up their social media of choice, and shouted their injustice to the world. A firestorm of complaints flooded everywhere. Memers got in on the action, coming up with funny ways to express their frustration, images and gifs that spread far and wide. Popularity dropped but, even worse, a movement rose.



Virtually overnight, Battlefront II went from the most anticipated game launch in years to one of the biggest laughingstocks. Thousands and thousands of people, fed up with a trend of game producers leeching every last drop of their hard-earned money for less and less content, made it their mission to make EA regret bringing in microtransactions and loot boxes. They wanted the product they'd been promised and now EA seemed to be jerking the rug out from under them. It was handing someone a great big delicious heaping pile of nachos they wanted, then at the last second pulling it away and saying no, no, you just get the chips without cheese and meat after they were hungry and ready to eat.

Wait, you say. Hold on. Hooold up. What's the big deal? So, it's pricier than some people want to pay right off the bat... and? Why not just quit complaining and play some with a regular character until you get enough XP to play everyone? That's what EA thought.

With the internet in the brink of declaring all-out war with EA for being just another example of throwing consumers under the bus for more profit, EA went out and declared that they had created this

system to “provide players with a sense of pride and accomplishment for unlocking different heroes.”

<https://www.intelligenteconomist.com/economics-of-microtransactions>



Bad idea.
Very, very bad idea.

People reported having to play upwards of 40 hours to get to a character they wanted, meaning they had two options: sitting there and grinding for hours and hours and hours, or fork over around \$80 extra for Darth Vader alone. The tedious system of getting XP ruined much of the game, even making some players hook up rubber bands on their controllers so they wouldn't be kicked for inactivity, then doing something else and letting experience build up. It was no fun for them but it was less fun for the other players who were trying, since trying to play when other characters weren't even present is not that great. I was put into lobbies where over half the lobby was AFK. Even though there was an option to play for free and eventually get what you wanted, it was about as genuine as telling

someone that you would let them stay at a luxury condo in Paris even though they lived in America and all they had to do was swim the ocean to get there... or pay through the roof for a plane ticket. What was the point of renting the condo if you had to work so hard and pay so much to get there? It was clear that the game was designed to make people hand over more and more money.

The gamers didn't see EA's response as a helpful comment. They saw it as EA trivializing them, confident that a few angry people wouldn't do much to hurt a massive company like Electronic Arts. That was their big mistake—ignoring their fan base and thinking it would all die down.

Battlefront II was officially released on November 17 2017 to underwhelming responses. Underwhelming in the sense that the giant asteroid of excitement and anticipated sales hit with the force of a pebble tossed from a second-story building. Underwhelming in the sense that EA's stock dropped 8.5% month to date. Underwhelming in the sense that 3.1\$ billion of shareholder value evaporated. Underwhelming in the sense that many players swore off EA forever, even while competitors Take-Two and Activision Blizzard enjoyed more success for

less-anticipated games.

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/28/eas-day-of-reckoning-is-here-after-star-wars-game-uproar.html>

The message was clear—people were sick of game producers trying to nickel-and-dime them and they weren't going to stand for it anymore. EA, a giant in the gaming community, was left reeling and startled by the fierce kickback. It was more than a single localized scenario. It was a message to all the companies using microtransactions and psychology to leech every penny from their consumers. A shockwave was sent out, scaring many companies to their core with an intimidating point: enough is enough.

Enough.

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