Non-Fungible Tokens

Anthony Lee Zhang

May 10, 2024



\$1,800,000





\$22,400,000

\$2,800,000

Non-fungible Tokens: Overview

- Intro and basics
- "Digital Veblen Goods"
- Market Design
- Misc topics

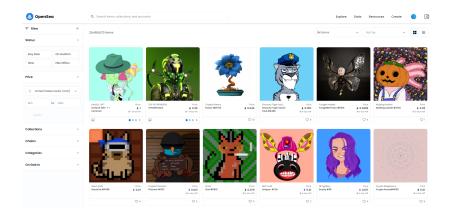
Non-fungible Tokens

- Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are digital assets held in blockchain wallets
- Wallet public address allows verifying ownership
- Private key allows buying, sending, trading NFTs
- In contrast to other crypto-assets, NFTs are <u>unique</u> and <u>indivisible</u>

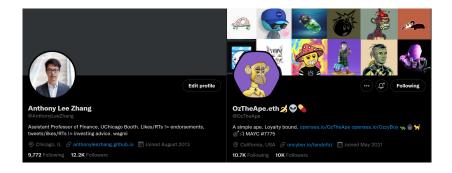
NFT Primary Markets

- NFTs we study are sold by creators in collections of 5,000-10,000
- Primary market purchases (referred to as "mints") coincide with the creation of the NFT on the blockchain
- Public sales advertised through social media and websites

NFT Trading Platforms



Why Do People Buy NFTs?



Why Do People Buy NFTs?

NFTs are "art", and also durable digital status goods

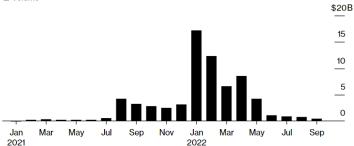
- Verifiably signals wealth
- Private chat groups for NFT owners
- Some convey rights/powers within videogames or virtual "metaverse" worlds
- Returns have also been very high, so attracts many speculative investors

NFT market growth has been explosive (though volumes fell substantially)

Volume Drop

NFT monthly volume has dropped 97% from 2022 highs

Volume



Source: Dune Analytics; Dashboard by @hildobby

Note: Cumulative data from OpenSea, NFTX, LarvaLabs, LooksRare, SuperRare, Rarible, Foundation

Source

Digital Veblen Goods (Oh, Rosen, Zhang 2023)

- NFTs as "Veblen" goods => a large social aspect to their value
- Key empirical findings confirming model predictions:
 - NFT primary market outcomes are strikingly bimodal
 - NFTs are systematically underpriced in primary markets ("mint premium")
 - "Scalpers" exploit issuers' pricing strategies to systematically extract profits
- Aside: story of this paper...

A Note on Restaurant Pricing and Other Examples of Social Influences on Price

Gary S. Becker

University of Chicago

This note tries to explain why many successful restaurants, plays, sporting events, and other activities do not raise prices even with persistent excess demand. My approach assumes that demande by a typical consumer is positively related to quantities demanded by other consumers. This can explain not only the puzzle about prices but also why consumer demand is often fickle, why it is much easier to go from being "in" to being "out" than from "out" to "in," and why supply does not increase to reduce the excess demand.

Bank Runs, Veblen Goods, and "Strategic Complementarities" in Economics and Finance

Recall how bank runs work:

- If no one withdraws, everything is good. If everyone withdraws, the bank is insolvent
- Diamond: "Fear of fear itself". Fear is a <u>self-fulfilling</u> prophecy: if everyone thinks everyone else will withdraw, everyone wants to withdraw
- "Social goods" are similar but in reverse!
 - If nobody buys bored apes, they're uncool, and nobody wants to buy them
 - If everyone buys, I want to buy too! Demand begets demand!
 - Here, success is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if everyone thinks everyone else will buy, everyone will buy...

- Markets, generically, are settings with strategic substitutes
 - When lots of people want to ski, ticket prices go up, so I'm less likely to ski
 - When lots of people study finance, wages go down...
- Substitutes naturally lead to unique equilibria

- Markets, generically, are settings with strategic substitutes
 - When lots of people want to ski, ticket prices go up, so I'm less likely to ski
 - When lots of people study finance, wages go down...
- Substitutes naturally lead to unique equilibria
- Bank runs, and Veblen goods, display strategic complementarity
 - When everyone withdraws, I want to withdraw
 - When everyone buys an NFT/Hermes bag/Rolex, it's cool and I want one too

- Markets, generically, are settings with strategic substitutes
 - When lots of people want to ski, ticket prices go up, so I'm less likely to ski
 - When lots of people study finance, wages go down...
- Substitutes naturally lead to unique equilibria
- Bank runs, and Veblen goods, display strategic complementarity
 - When everyone withdraws, I want to withdraw
 - When everyone buys an NFT/Hermes bag/Rolex, it's cool and I want one too
- Strategic complementarities lead to multiple equilibria
 - Banks with equal fundamentals can be solvent, or run on
 - "A Rolex by any other name..."

- Markets, generically, are settings with strategic substitutes
 - When lots of people want to ski, ticket prices go up, so I'm less likely to ski
 - When lots of people study finance, wages go down...
- Substitutes naturally lead to unique equilibria
- Bank runs, and Veblen goods, display strategic complementarity
 - When everyone withdraws, I want to withdraw
 - When everyone buys an NFT/Hermes bag/Rolex, it's cool and I want one too
- Strategic complementarities lead to multiple equilibria
 - Banks with equal fundamentals can be solvent, or run on
 - "A Rolex by any other name..."
- What are other examples of strategic complementarities?

- Markets, generically, are settings with strategic substitutes
 - When lots of people want to ski, ticket prices go up, so I'm less likely to ski
 - When lots of people study finance, wages go down...
- Substitutes naturally lead to unique equilibria
- Bank runs, and Veblen goods, display strategic complementarity
 - When everyone withdraws, I want to withdraw
 - When everyone buys an NFT/Hermes bag/Rolex, it's cool and I want one too
- Strategic complementarities lead to multiple equilibria
 - Banks with equal fundamentals can be solvent, or run on
 - "A Rolex by any other name..."
- What are other examples of strategic complementarities?
- Is blockchain adoption, on the whole, more strategic substitutes or complements? Why?

Testing the Social Goods Hypothesis

How would we test the hypothesis that "social effects" are important in NFT markets?

1. Bimodal outcomes

- With social effects, something can be "in" or "out", but not in-between
- We should see collections either sell very well, or very poorly, but few in between!

Testing the Social Goods Hypothesis

How would we test the hypothesis that "social effects" are important in NFT markets?

1. Bimodal outcomes

- With social effects, something can be "in" or "out", but not in-between
- We should see collections either sell very well, or very poorly, but few in between!

2. Underpricing in primary markets

- With social effects, demand is <u>fragile</u>: if an "in" collection collapses to "out", it'll go from crowded to empty!
- Hermes/Rolex purposefully sets prices "too low", so items are "overdemanded" in primary markets
- This is never optimal if there aren't social effects

Testing the Social Goods Hypothesis

How would we test the hypothesis that "social effects" are important in NFT markets?

1. Bimodal outcomes

- With social effects, something can be "in" or "out", but not in-between
- We should see collections either sell very well, or very poorly, but few in between!

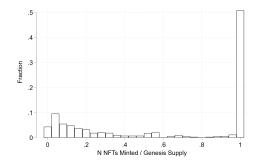
2. Underpricing in primary markets

- With social effects, demand is <u>fragile</u>: if an "in" collection collapses to "out", it'll go from crowded to empty!
- Hermes/Rolex purposefully sets prices "too low", so items are "overdemanded" in primary markets
- This is never optimal if there aren't social effects

3. Scalping

- Due to underpricing, even if you don't want an Hermes bag, if you get one at retail, you can flip it for profits
- If we see underpricing, we should also see "scalpers" try to exploit issuers' underpricing

Prediction 1: Outcomes are Bimodal



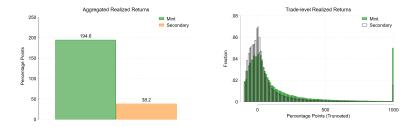
Prediction 2: Mint Underpricing

Goal: show that NFTs are systematically underpriced at mints

- Implication: mint trades earn higher profits than secondary market trades
- Realized returns:

$$r_{i,j,c,t,\tau}^{\text{realized}} \equiv \frac{\text{Price}_{i,j,c,t}^{\text{Sold}} - \text{Fees}_{i,j,c,\tau} - \text{Price}_{i,j,c,\tau}^{\text{Purch}} - \text{Gas}_{i,j,c,\tau}}{\text{Price}_{i,j,c,\tau}^{\text{Purch}} + \text{Gas}_{i,j,c,\tau}}$$

Prediction 2: Mint Underpricing



- Aggregated returns from mints substantially higher
- Within the distributions of returns, substantially more mass at larger returns for mints compared to secondary market trades

Prediction 2: Mint Underpricing

$$r_{i,j,c,t,\tau}^{realized} = \beta \times \textit{IsMint}_{it} + \gamma X_{i,j,c,t,\tau} + \epsilon_{i,j,c,t,\tau}$$

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Last Trade Was Mint Dummy	1.138***	1.970***	2.227***	1.520***	2.029***	1.017***
	(230.70)	(355.83)	(368.80)	(216.55)	(239.76)	(197.85)
In(Days to Realize)			0.213***		0.260***	
			(208.77)		(151.81)	
Collection FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
NFT FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
BuyDate-SellDate FE	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
R ²	0.022	0.205	0.222	0.399	0.415	0.337
N	2,131,225	2,131,218	2,131,216	1,424,834	1,424,832	2,123,630

- Mints over 100% more profitable than secondary market trades!
- Primary market returns systematically exceed secondary market returns =>> systematic underpricing in primary markets as model predicts

Prediction 3: Existence of Scalpers

 "Scalpers": no fundamental utility for holding NFTs but purchase in primary markets to profit from underpricing

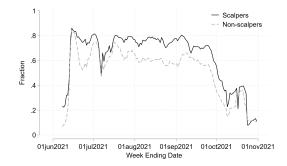
▶ We identify traders in the data that behave like "scalpers"

- More likely to trade in primary markets
- Short holding periods after minting
- Higher returns explained by minting propensity => no preferential access or superior information

Defining "Scalpers"

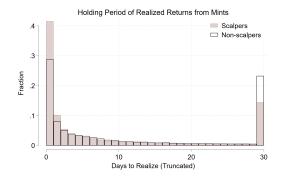
- \blacktriangleright pprox 540,000 unique wallets in our GC-based sample
- Minting/trading activity is very concentrated:
 - $\blacktriangleright~\approx$ 50% of txns by wallets with 99 + txns
- **Scalpers:** wallets above 50% cutoff prior to given date
 - As-of prior date => time-varying, backwards-looking classification
 - Using full sample, \approx 13,000 (2.4%) of wallets are "scalpers"

Mint Propensity



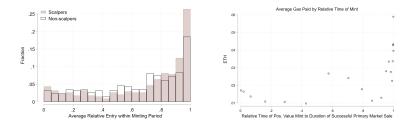
 Scalpers perform a substantially larger fraction of trades in primary markets compared to non-scalpers throughout our sample

Differences in Holding Period from Mint



Sclapers flip their mints in secondary market at higher rate

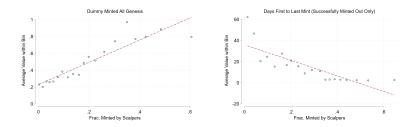
Mint Entry Timing



Scalpers tend to purchase later in minting period

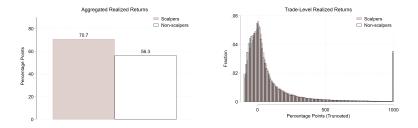
Relatively late mints have much higher gas fees

Scalper Participation and Mint Success



- Scalpers appear to pick more successful collections: more likely to mint out, and mint out faster
- However, don't actually do better on mints!

Scalper Return Outperformance



- In aggregate, scalpers earned higher realized returns
- Scalpers appear to earn higher realized returns at trade level on average

Scalper Return Premia

$$r_{i,j,c,t,\tau}^{realized} = \delta \times Scalper_{i,t} + \gamma X_{i,j,c,t,\tau} + \epsilon_{i,j,c,t,\tau}$$

	Reti	urn Including	Fees	Return Before Fees			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Scalper Seller Dummy	0.056***	0.186***	0.128***	0.474***	0.535***	0.417***	
	(9.87)	(32.17)	(26.18)	(57.41)	(63.12)	(56.72)	
In(Days to Realize)		0.136***			0.064***		
		(133.11)			(42.17)		
BuyDate-SellDate FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	
R ²	0.000	0.008	0.324	0.002	0.002	0.293	
Ν	2,131,225	2,131,223	2,123,630	2,131,225	2,131,223	2,123,630	

- Controlling for buy/sell date FEs, scalpers attain 12.8pp higher returns per trade
- Outperformance similar when controlling for holding period vs buydate-selldate FEs

Role of Mints in Scalper Performance

 $r_{i,j,c,t,\tau} = \delta \times Scalper_{i,t} + \beta \times IsMint_{i,t} + \gamma X_{i,j,c,t,\tau} + \varepsilon_{i,j,c,t,\tau}$

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	All	All	All	Mints	Secondary
Scalper Seller Dummy	0.186***	-0.042***	-0.006	-0.025***	0.055***
	(32.17)	(-7.27)	(-1.16)	(-3.81)	(9.73)
Last Trade Was Mint Dummy		1.355***	1.028***		
		(248.70)	(196.28)		
In(Days to Realize)	0.136***	0.187***	0.111***	0.108***	0.032***
	(133.11)	(173.10)	(45.10)	(30.06)	(14.89)
BuyDate-SellDate FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.008	0.037	0.337	0.407	0.324
Ν	2,131,223	2,131,223	2,123,628	1,193,226	924,271

- Mints fully explain scalper premia: controlling for mint dummy and holding period, scalper premium is zero
- Underperform 2.5pp in mints, outperform 5.5pp in secondary markets

Mints: Decomposing Returns

To decompose performance, estimate:

$$\log(Y_{i,j,c,t}) = \beta \times Scalper_{i,t} + X_{i,j,c,t}\gamma + \epsilon_{i,j,c,t}$$

▶ $log(Y_{i,j,c,t})$: mint price, gas fees, sale price, or sale fees

▶ Scalpers pay higher gas fees on average ⇒ lower returns

	In(Mint Price)		In(Gas from Mint)		In(Sale Price)		In(Fees from Sale)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Scalper Seller Dummy	-0.003***	-0.003***	0.067***	0.004***	-0.035***	-0.006***	-0.041***	-0.012***
	(-16.17)	(-19.20)	(62.28)	(5.14)	(-20.47)	(-4.80)	(-24.00)	(-10.38)
Collection FE	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Collection-BuyDate FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Collection-SellDate FE	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
R ²	0.963	0.981	0.804	0.883	0.553	0.820	0.569	0.831
Ν	1,199,924	1,198,701	1,199,722	1,198,499	1,199,924	1,184,704	1,199,924	1,184,704

Summary of Scalper Returns in Primary Markets

► No evidence of preferential access OR private information

- If scalpers had preferential access to or private information about collections in primary markets, why do they follow lower-return strategy of entering enter mints later and paying higher gas fees?
- We cannot prove that scalpers do not have access advantages in primary markets: our results only suggest that preferential access does not appear to be a quantitatively large driver of scalpers' excess returns

Secondary Markets

 Scalpers outperform in secondary markets both before and after fees

Consistent with earning spreads from market making

	Return fro	m Secondary	Before Fees	Return from Secondary Including Fees			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Scalper Seller Dummy	0.061***	0.061***	0.051***	0.055***	0.047***	0.041***	
	(8.17)	(8.57)	(8.33)	(9.62)	(8.65)	(8.97)	
BuyDate-SellDate FE	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	
Collection FE	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	
BuyDate-SellDate-Collection FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	
R ²	0.308	0.383	0.786	0.324	0.410	0.801	
N	924,273	924,235	710,453	924,273	924,235	710,453	

Secondary Markets: Better Execution

► To test execution, consider "synthetic returns":

Sold Paid, Sold Index, Index, Index Index

Scalpers buy at slightly higher prices, sell at even higher prices

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Sold/Paid	Sold/Index	Index/Paid	Index/Index	In(Sold b4 Fees)	In(Fees in Sale)	In(Paid b4 Fees)	In(Gas in Purchase)
Scalper Seller Dummy	0.041***	0.088***	-0.030***	0.000	0.036***	0.023***	0.016***	0.032***
	(8.97)	(16.43)	(-11.80)	(0.00)	(22.32)	(14.73)	(11.61)	(34.15)
BuyDate-GC FE	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
SellDate-GC FE	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
BuyDate-SellDate-GC FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
R ²	0.801	0.767	0.869	1.000	0.860	0.854	0.872	0.743
Ν	710,453	710,453	710,453	710,453	920,551	920,551	923,301	923,301

Implications: Market Design

Some authors' explanation for "underpricing":

Crypto founders must not know how to run auctions!! Money left on the table!!

Implications: Market Design

Some authors' explanation for "underpricing":

- Crypto founders must not know how to run auctions!! Money left on the table!!
- Our explanation:
 - NFT issuers don't run auctions for the same reason Rolex/Hermes doesn't!
 - Auctions don't work for social goods: "demand begets demand"
 - The appearance of scarcity is necessary, to create demand for the assets!

Implications: Market Design

Some authors' explanation for "underpricing":

- Crypto founders must not know how to run auctions!! Money left on the table!!
- Our explanation:
 - NFT issuers don't run auctions for the same reason Rolex/Hermes doesn't!
 - Auctions don't work for social goods: "demand begets demand"
 - The appearance of scarcity is necessary, to create demand for the assets!
- What do you think?

Implications: Asset Pricing

- Many papers look at trading data, and seem to show returns on NFTs are very high...
- But this is the same as saying the return on buying Hermes bags is high! Social goods are underpriced by design
- Sure, the trading strategy is profitable: but you can't necessarily do it, because you can't guarantee winning the mints
- Beware of crypto folks telling you about sure-win trading strategies!

Conclusion

- New framework for understanding NFT market: NFTs as "Veblen" goods
- Key empirical findings confirming model predictions:
 - NFT primary market outcomes are strikingly bimodal
 - NFTs are systematically underpriced in primary markets
 - "Scalpers" exploit issuers' pricing strategies to systematically extract profits
- Contributions to the literature:
 - Explain NFT markets from a social goods perspective
 - Empirical evidence for mint premium and scalper returns
 - Empirical evidence supporting Becker (1991)

Ownership and royalties

- NFT collections often pay a "royalty": % of all secondary market sale revenue goes to artist
- ► This is good!
 - Equity: artist makes profit if work blows up
 - Efficiency: artist/launcher has a stake in making collection continue to do well
- However, way that it's implemented discourages sale
- Solution: royalty paid regardless of whether sale occurs!
 - Each month, bidders bid in an auction to trade the NFT
 - Highest bidder wins, artist gets 2% of auction price, even if original owner keeps the NFT!
- See my paper on Depreciating Licenses

Other things

A few other NFT topics (all good topics for projects!):

- NFTs outside web3
- Fractionalization/financialization
- Rights management
- Ticketing
- Luxury goods

TICE \ CEPPIGERENCE \ NES \

Adidas sold more than \$22 million in NFTs, but it hit a few snags along the way

Adidas just did it

By Joy Peters | Stoppeters | Deo 17, 2021, 8:38pm EST If you day acception from a Verse Ink. You Media may earn a commission. See our ethics alabered

f 😏 🖓 sease



2022 ALL-STAF

NBA and Dapper Labs to launch 1st-ever NFT Auction on NBA Top Shot

The auction will include 30 unique NFTs, each complete with a VIP pass for the next 5 NBA All-Stars.

Official release

NEW YORK — The National Baskethall Association (NRA) and Dapper Labs, the company behind NBA Top Shot and the creater of the Flow blockshin, today annuouced the busnch of the NBA All-Star VIP Pass NFT Auction and Gineware, Hosted on NBA Top Shot, the auction will include 30 unique NFTs, one-of-one digital collectible respectivity of the Mark Top Shot, the auction will will all all shot will be appresenting new NBA theorem that the and that the advective the utilizate fail experiment at the next five NBA Al-Stars. One locky NBA fail will win an additional Al-Star VIP Pass NFT, representing the NBA through a givenavy that tips of floady.

British Museum banks on Turner NFTs after Hokusai initiative

Prices for Ultra Rare editions start at €4,999 but museum sales percentage remains under wraps



AO releases exclusive NFT's to celebrate iconic moments in history

ausopen.com

The Australian Open has teamed up with NFT and Digital Collectible platform <u>Reveals</u> to release the **AD Decoder Collection**, fecturing six commemorative NFT collections celebrating the local decades of the AO.

NFT Fractionalization and Financialization

Efforts to "fractionalize" NFTs

- Fractional
- Paradigm, a VC fund, introduced RICKS and Mortys
- Like "NFT REITs" in a sense
- Allows hedging NFT portfolio values
- I'm personally not very excited about these efforts
 - Much of the value is in ownership
 - Would you buy a REIT that invested in Ferraris?

NFTs for Rights Management

- Music rights
- For example: rights and book release party
- Generalized "oracle" problems (or, "right-click-save-as" problem)
- How to tie off-chain usage to the NFT?

NFT Ticketing

- NFTs seem like a perfect solution for event tickets!
 - Undercut the very high fees Ticketmaster, etc. charge...
- An older player is GET protocol
- A newer one is TravelX
- My view: not quite wide-scale adoption yet, but very promising
- However, entrenchment of the incumbents is a big issue

Digital ownership for luxury goods

- Idea I've had: what if Gucci/Ferrari/etc minted NFTs with their bags/cars?
- NFT could be verified and linkable to Instagram
- Essentially kills the secondary market: if you buy a used Ferrari, people on your IG can tell!
- Doesn't seem to exist yet, but I'm optimistic