

Reaching for the Stars: Discounts and Review Tier Transitions in the Video Games Market

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Economics of Attention

1-48 of over 5,000 results for "wine glasses"

Amazon Prime

☐ [✓prime](#)

Deals

☐ Today's Deals

Prime Wardrobe

☐ [prime wardrobe](#)

Department

Kitchen & Dining

Wine Glasses

✓ [See more](#)

✓ [See All 17 Departments](#)

Avg. Customer Review

★★★★☆ & Up

Buy it again

[See all and manage](#)



Economics of Attention

- Online consumer reviews help to simplify choice in many markets
 - Individual consumers leave reviews
 - Reviews are often aggregated into **review tiers** (★★★★☆)
 - Future customers rely on reviews
- Firms try to manage their reviews
 - Soliciting reviews from their buyers
 - Responding to the reviews they receive
 - Leaving fake reviews
- What firms can do to affect their reviews is important for market design
 - “Zero Reviews Trap” as a barrier to entry
- I study a new form of review management
 - Can firms use price promotions to upgrade their review tiers?
 - A link between discounts and review tier **transitions**

Why Discount?

- Consider a product that is a few reviews short of obtaining an extra star
- Would it be profitable for this product to launch a price promotion?
- The **selection effect**:
 - Customers who buy during a discount are potentially different
 - They could leave better or worse reviews
 - The sign of the selection effect is an empirical question
- The **variance effect**:
 - Randomness in the outcome of the discount
 - A good outcome catapults the product to the next review tier
 - A bad outcome might not affect the review tier
 - The opposite effect for a product close to a review tier downgrade

Stylized Model

► With Formulas



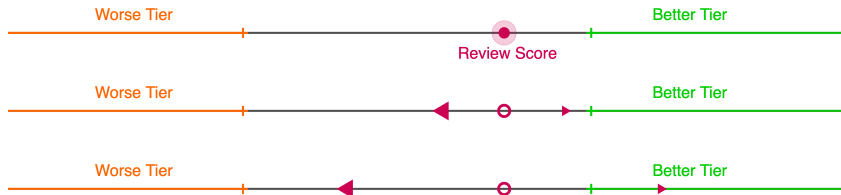
Stylized Model

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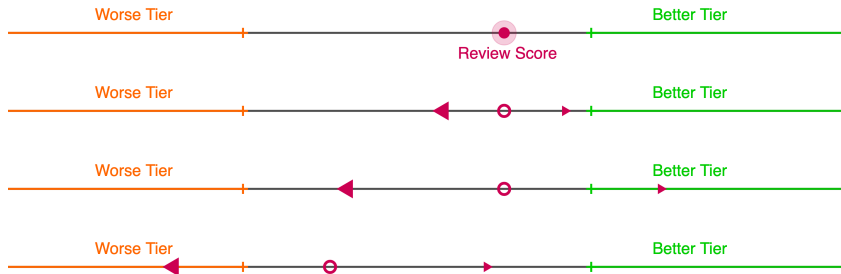
Stylized Model

► With Formulas



Stylized Model

► With Formulas



What I do

1 Model of demand and reviewing on Steam

- The best review tier increases sales by 23% compared the worst tier
- Discounts are followed by a 38% spike in sales

2 Discounting around transitions

- Products that are close to upgrading their review tier are 4-9% more likely to sell at a discount
- Evidence that proximity to a downward transition decreases the probability to sell at a discount by up to 4%

3 Selection vs. Variance

- The selection effect is small
- Controlling for the selection effect, proximity to a negative transition decreases the probability of a discount by 6%
- Consumers are more likely to leave reviews when they buy during a discount

Literature

- Regression discontinuity with review tiers: Anderson and Magruder (2012), Luca (2016), Sorokin and Stevens (2020)
 - How random is assignment around the cutoffs?
- Promotions: is the selection effect negative?
 - Ifrach et al. (2017), Acemoglu et al. (2019)
 - Byers et al. (2012), Li (2016), Zhu et al. (2019), Cabral and Li (2015)
- A negative selection effect poses a puzzle:
 - Zegners (2017): free pricing leads to bad reviews
- Design of recommendation systems in digital markets
 - Vellodi (2020): reviews as barriers to entry and pricing as a way to solve it

Roadmap for Today

- 1 Institutional Setting
- 2 Data
- 3 Empirical Model
- 4 Discounts Around Transitions
- 5 Selection vs. Variance

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- In 2018 the U.S. video games market revenue matched the one of the U.S. film industry: \$43.4 billion (Minotti 2019)
- *Steam* is the major online marketplace for selling video games
 - Think “App Store” for games on PC and Mac
 - 2013: 75% of all PC games sold online (Cliff 2013)
 - January 2018: over 47 million daily active users
- Until recently, virtually no competition
 - Developers: Steam is a powerful player that you can't ignore

Reviews on Steam

- Transparency and simplicity
 - Users give “thumbs up” or “thumbs down”
- A **Review Score** is the fraction of positive reviews among all reviews
 - A game with 6 good reviews out of 10 total reviews has a score of 60%
- **Review Bins** based on the score:






Review Bin	N. of Reviews	Score
No Score	$[0, 10)$	-
Negative	Any	$[0, 40)$
Mixed	Any	$[40, 70)$
Mostly Positive	Any	$[70, 80)$
Positive	$[10, 50)$	$[80, 100)$
Very Positive	More than 50	$[80, 100)$
Overwhelmingly Positive	More than 500	$[95, 100]$

Visibility and Reviews

- Labels better than “Negative” have a similar contribution to visibility
- The effect is through the information that reviews convey


New and Trending Top Selling What's Popular Top Rated Upcoming

Results exclude some products based on [your preferences](#)

	Astellia RPG, Massively Multiplayer, MMORPG, Fantasy \$29.99
	DRAGON BALL Z: KAKAROT Action, RPG, Anime, Open World \$59.99
	Vampire's Fall: Origins RPG, Indie, Vampire, Atmospheric -20% \$12.99 / \$10.39
	Temtem Early Access, RPG, Massively Multiplayer, Adventure \$34.99
	Divine Miko Koyori RPG, Indie, Anime, JRPG -15% \$19.99 / \$16.99

SPOTLIGHT

Astellia
Released: Jan 30, 2020



Overall user reviews:
Mixed (162 reviews)

User tags:
RPG Massively Multiplayer MMORPG Fantasy

New deals each Monday

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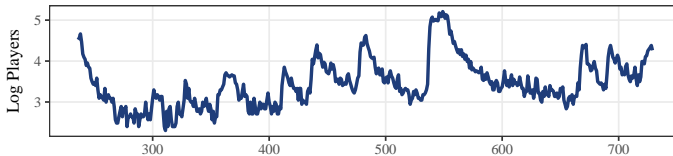
Data

- Main source: SteamDB.com, a third party website
- Player count: the maximum number of concurrent players on any given day
- Price history: daily observations of prices
- Review history:
 - Cumulative numbers of positive and negative reviews on any day
 - Review score and review labels are reverse-engineered

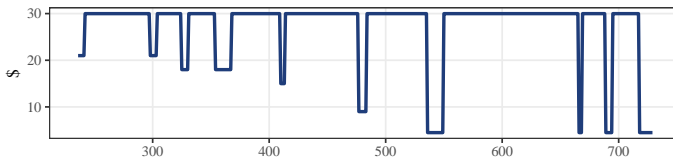
Example Game



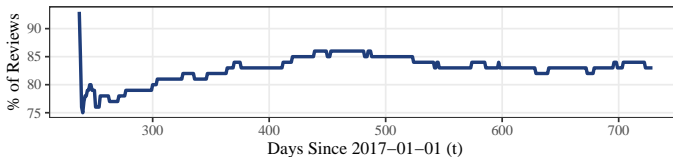
Player Activity For ID = 589530



Prices For ID = 589530



Review Score For ID = 589530



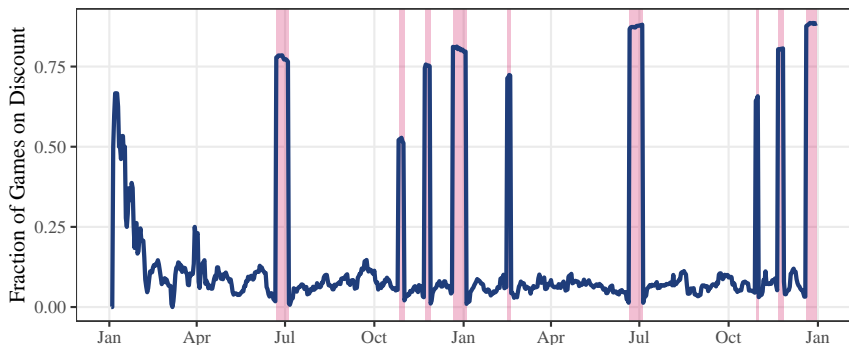
- Single player, not free-to-play games
 - Games with stable quality: no more than 5 small patches
- Released in 2017 or later
 - Stable review system
- At least 4 concurrent players on the median day
- This leaves us with 906 games, about 319,000 observations

- 596 games have transitioned, 1688 unique transitions
 - 1225 are followed by at least 7 days in the new bin
- Every tier is well-represented in the data

[Transitions Matrix](#)

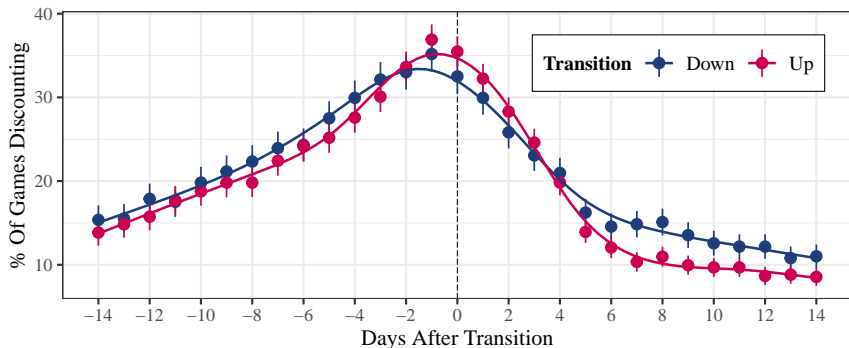
Discounts

- Nominal prices rarely change, but instead products go on discounts
 - 6331 discounts vs. 43 price changes
 - Consumers can set up discount notifications
- Custom and Curated discounts
 - Seasonal sale: 64% of the sample



Discounts Around Transitions

- Transitions between review bins are preceded by discounts
- Extra day closer to the transition \iff the probability of discount $\uparrow 3\%$
- Extra day after the transition \iff the probability of discount $\downarrow 7\%$



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Empirical Model of Demand and Gaming

- How impactful are discounts on Steam?
- How much do various review labels matter for sales?
- Data limitation: no sales data
 - I use the model to infer demand parameters from product usage
- Prerequisite for a model of reviewing

Arrival of Customers

- Game i on day t sells to B_{it} new buyers
 - $B_{it} \sim P(\lambda_{it})$, $\lambda_{it} = \lambda_i(1 + x'_{it}\beta)$
 - x_{it} : price, review information, age, seasonality
 - $Q_{it}^D(x_{it}) = \mathbb{E}[B_{it}] = \lambda_i(1 + x'_{it}\beta)$ is the demand function
- Active players, A_{it} : bought the game and keep playing
- Game i on day t forever loses E_{it} active players
 - $E_{it} \sim \text{Binomial}(A_{it-1}; 1 - \psi_i)$
- The evolution of A_{it} is then

$$A_{it} = A_{it-1} + B_{it} - E_{it} \quad (1)$$

Identification Challenges: Unobserved Buyers

- Both the number of buyers and the number of exiters are unobserved

$$A_{it} - A_{it-1} = B_{it} - E_{it}$$

- Key: entry is in absolute numbers, but exit is proportional to player count
 - Exit rates are identified from the spikes in the player count [Show me!](#)
 - Entry rates are identified from the level at which the player count settles
 - Crucial heterogeneity in ψ_i

Identification Challenges: Causal Effects

- Time varying unobserved demand shifters correlated with the observables
 - Sample selection \implies fixed quality
- Identifying assumption: conditional on the controls, the unobserved factors are not correlated with the review tier
 - Rely on the panel structure of the data
 - “Compare” sales between the periods spent in different review tiers

$$A_{it} = A_{it-1} + B_{it} - E_{it}$$

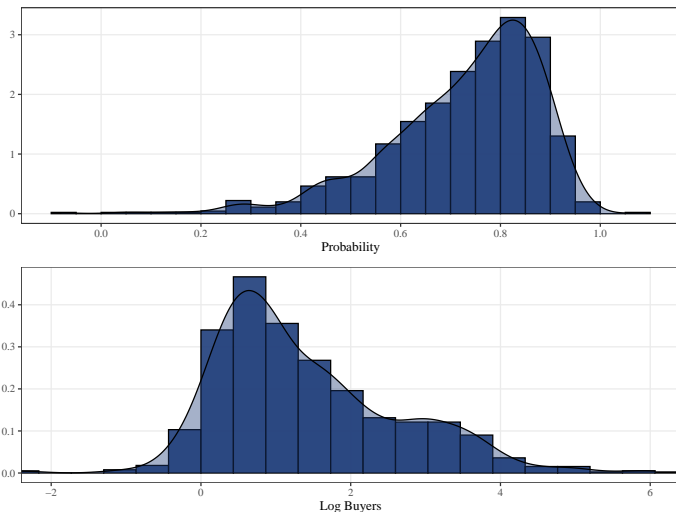
- $\mathbb{E}[A_{it} | A_{it-1}, x_{it}] = \psi_i A_{it-1} + \lambda_i(1 + x'_{it}\beta)$
- The model implies the following regression equation:

$$A_{it} = \psi_i A_{it-1} + \lambda_i(1 + x'_{it}\beta) + u_{it} \quad (2)$$

$$0 = \mathbb{E}[u_i | A_{it-1}, x_{it}] \quad (3)$$

- Parameters: $\theta = (\{\psi_i, \lambda_i\}_{i=1}^n, \beta)$, $\dim(\theta) = 2n + k$
- Conditional on β , ψ_i and λ_i could be obtained by OLS
- Minimize the concentrated sum of squares with respect to β

Results: Distributions of $\hat{\lambda}_i(1 + \bar{x}_i\hat{\beta})$ and $\hat{\psi}_i$



Results: Demand Parameters $\hat{\beta}$

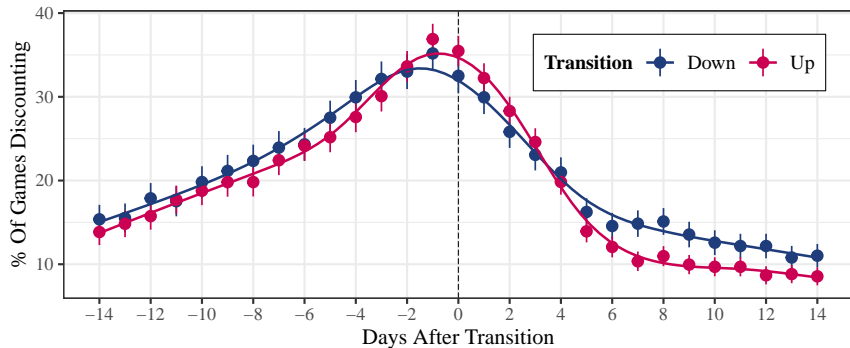
Price	−0.342*** (0.010)
New Discount	0.230*** (0.013)
Seasonal Sale	−0.006 (0.004)
No Score	−0.128*** (0.019)
Negative	0.005 (0.020)
Mostly Positive	0.019** (0.008)
Positive	0.054*** (0.010)
Very Positive	0.052*** (0.010)
Overwhelmingly Positive	0.100*** (0.013)
Observations	355900
R ²	0.850

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Discounts and Realized Transitions

► Regression



Discounts and Realized Transitions

- Realized transitions are preceded by discounts
- It is merely a correlation
 - Discounts could be causing transitions
 - In fact, they better be, for my story to hold up!
- Firms that give a discount, but do not transition, are not accounted for
 - Firms avoiding a bad transition and not making a good one
- Solution: **potential transitions**
 - Remember the stylized model!
 - How close the game is to a transition is a state variable
 - Discount today can not cause the potential of transition

Potential Transitions

- The goal is to see if proximity to a transition increases the probability of discounting
- Define a measure of proximity to a transition
- For each game:
 - How many positive (negative) reviews are needed for a positive (negative) transition
 - Calculate the speed of positive (negative) review arrival
 - Days to potential transition if only receiving one type of reviews
 - **Example**

Empirical Strategy

- One has to study proximities to positive and negative thresholds together
 - A firm close to an upgrade might be willing to give a discount
 - A firm close to a downgrade might be willing to stay put

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Empirical Strategy

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 - A firm close to an upgrade might be willing to give a discount
 - A firm close to a downgrade might be willing to stay put
- Let $T_{it}^+ \in \{0, 1\}$ indicate if proximity to a $+$ transition is less than 14 days
- Let $T_{it}^- \in \{0, 1\}$ indicate if proximity to a $-$ transition is less than 14 days
- Estimate

$$disc_{it} = \beta^+ T_{it}^+ + \beta^- T_{it}^- + X_{it}\beta + f_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (4)$$

- $disc_{it} = \mathbb{1}\{discount_{it} > 0\}$
- X_{it} : log proximities to transitions, log review count, score, review bin dummies, time without a discount, age
- f_i : game effect
- τ_t : day of the week and week effects

Results

- Close to an upgrade: 4-9% increase in the daily probability of a discount
- Close to a downgrade: 4% decrease in the daily probability of a discount

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Discount Probability	
	14 days	7 days
Close to Pos. Transition	0.015*** (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)
Close to Neg. Transition	-0.006** (0.003)	0.001 (0.004)
Observations	295,228	295,228
R ²	0.428	0.428

Note:

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

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- Attenuation of the effect of the proximity to a negative transition on the probability of the discount
 - Positive selection effect vs. negative variance effect

- Estimate the difference in review sentiment on and off a discount

$$\Delta score_i = \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Expected Score} \\ \text{on a Discount} \end{array} \right] - \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Expected Score} \\ \text{off a Discount} \end{array} \right]$$

- Using the estimates of the selection effect, check for the variance effect:
 - Products on the verge of a review slump should discount less

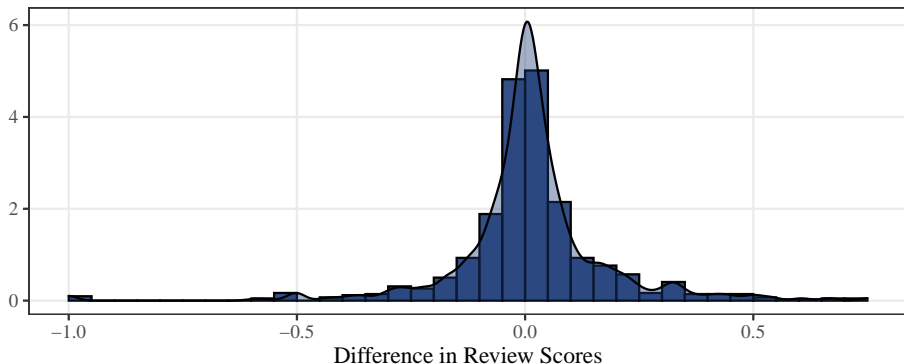
The Variance Effect

- Estimate

$$disc_{it} = (\beta_0^+ + \Delta score_i \beta_1^+) T_{it}^+ + (\beta_0^- + \Delta score_i \beta_1^-) T_{it}^- + X_{it} \beta + f_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- β_0^- measures the effect of proximity to a negative transition when the selection effect $\Delta score_i$ is zero
- Additional test: do consumers who buy during a discount leave reviews with a higher probability?

- Can not reject the hypothesis that the selection effect is negative ($p = 0.14$)
- Reject the hypothesis that users are less likely to leave a review during a discount ($t = 9.16$)
 - They are 24-40% more likely to do so



	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Discount Probability	
	Controlling for $\Delta score_i$	Not controlling for $\Delta score_i$
Pos. Transition	0.014*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Neg. Transition	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.006** (0.003)
Selection \times Pos. Tr.	0.009 (0.013)	-
Selection \times Neg. Tr.	0.019 (0.015)	-
Observations	290,628	295,228
R ²	0.434	0.428

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusion

- I estimate a model of demand and reviewing behavior
 - The best review tier increases sales by 23% compared to the worst tier
 - Discounts are followed by a 38% spike in sales
- Proximity to a review transition affects discounting
 - Review upgrade: 4-9% more likely to sell at a discount
 - Review downgrade: 4% more likely to sell at a discount
- Two major effects at play: the selection and the variance effects
 - The selection effect is small on Steam
 - The variance effect decreases the probability of a discount by 6% for products close to a negative transition

Game Sizes at 180 Days

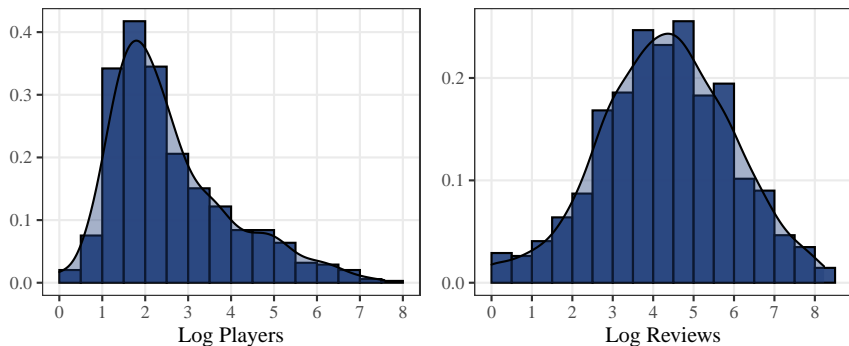
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Figure: Distribution Of the Number of Reviews and Players at 180 Days.

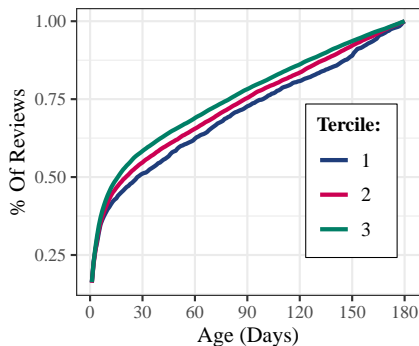
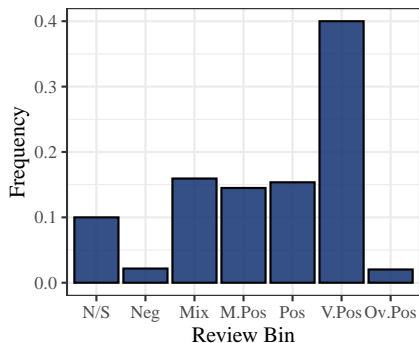


Figure: Distribution Of the Number of Reviews and Players at 180 Days.

Table: Average Discount, Age, and Review Count Two Weeks Before A Transition

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)
Mean Discount (%)	1,225	10	14	0	15.9
Age	1,225	142	157	8	226
Reviews	1,225	130	343	26	81

Transition Matrix

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Probabilities						Counts						
Neg	Mix	M. Pos	Pos	V. Pos	Ov. Pos		Neg	Mix	M. Pos	Pos	V. Pos	Ov. Pos
0	100	0	0	0	0	Negative	0	58	0	0	0	0
24	0	76	0	0	0	Mixed	60	0	189	0	0	0
0	43	0	25	33	0	M. Positive	0	245	0	141	188	0
0	0	40	0	60	0	Positive	0	2	207	0	310	0
0	0	84	0	0	16	V. Positive	0	0	220	0	0	43
0	0	0	0	100	0	Ov. Positive	0	0	0	0	25	0

Discounts Around Transitions

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Days to Transition	0.005*** (0.0005)
Days After Transition	-0.011*** (0.0005)
Negative	-0.007 (0.011)
Mostly Positive	0.005 (0.006)
Positive	0.044*** (0.009)
Very Positive	0.014 (0.009)
Ov. Positive	0.020 (0.016)
Score	-0.0005* (0.0003)
Log Reviews	-0.010*** (0.002)
Age	0.0003*** (0.00001)
Const	0.903*** (0.021)
Observations	32,112
R ²	0.396
Time Effects	Weekdays, Week
Game Effects	×
Polynomial(t W/O Discount)	$d = 2$

- Consider a game with 19 positive and 6 negative reviews
 - Score = 76%, “Mostly Positive”
 - Needs 5 positive reviews to transition to “Positive”: $24/30 = 80\%$
 - Needs 3 negative reviews to transition to “Mixed”: $19/28 \approx 67\%$
- If at age of 200 the game has 80 positive and 20 negative reviews, then
 - Average of 0.4 positive and 0.1 negative reviews per day
 - Needs $5/0.4 = 12.5$ days of only positive reviews
 - Needs $3/0.1 = 30$ days of only negative reviews

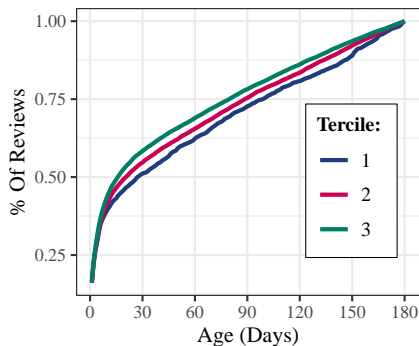
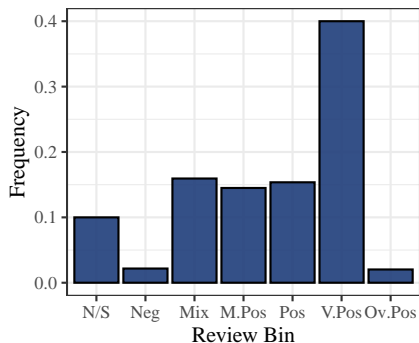


Figure: Distribution Of the Number of Reviews and Players at 180 Days.

Demand: Identification of β

- Goals: prediction of customer arrival and the effect of reviews on sales
- Unobserved factors \tilde{x}_{it} that are correlated with the observed ones can lead to the OVB

$$A_{it} = \psi_i A_{it-1} + \lambda_i (1 + x'_{it} \beta) + \lambda_i \tilde{x}'_{it} \beta + \tilde{u}_{it}$$

- Solution:
 - Sample selection ruling out changes in quality
 - λ_i controls for time invariant features
 - Time effects to account for day of the week seasonality and big seasonal sales
 - Other controls: age, price, number of reviews, review score
- Review labels don't exhibit enough variation within games
 - Extrapolate changes in customer inflow from games that switch labels

Demand: Estimation

- The NLLS estimator $\hat{\theta}$ is the solution to

$$\min_{\theta} \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{t=2}^{T_i} w_i (A_{it} - \psi_i A_{it-1} - \lambda_i (1 + x'_{it} \beta))^2 \quad (5)$$

- Conditional on β , the problem is OLS
 - Solve for $\hat{\lambda}_i(\beta)$ and $\hat{\psi}_i(\beta)$
 - Concentrate λ_i and ψ_i out
- Solve the concentrated out minimization problem

$$\psi_i : \sum_{t=2}^{T_i} (y_{it} - \psi_i y_{it-1} - \lambda_i (1 + x'_{it} \beta)) y_{it-1} = 0 \quad (6)$$

$$\lambda_i : \sum_{t=2}^{T_i} (y_{it} - \psi_i y_{it-1} - \lambda_i (1 + x'_{it} \beta)) (1 + x'_{it} \beta) = 0 \quad (7)$$

$$\beta : \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{t=2}^{T_i} w_i (y_{it} - \psi_i y_{it-1} - \lambda_i (1 + x'_{it} \beta)) \lambda_i x_{it} = 0 \quad (8)$$

- A product has of a review status $s \in (0, 1)$ can give a discount at cost c
- Status goes up by x with prob. p , down by x with prob. $1 - p$
 - Upgrade: s exceeds 1. Downgrade: s goes below 0.
- Payoffs from downgrade, no change, or upgrade: $u^L < 0 < u^H$
- Give the discount if $\mathbb{E}[U(s + X)] = pU(s + x) + (1 - p)U(s - x) - c > 0$
- If $s > 1/2$, then

$$\mathbb{E}[U(s + X)] = \begin{cases} -c & x < 1 - s \\ pu^H - c & x \in [1 - s, s) \\ pu^H + (1 - p)u^L - c & x \geq s \end{cases} \quad (9)$$

- A buyer at $t - k$ leaves a positive (negative) review with probability r_{it}^+ (r_{it}^-)
- Good reviews $G_{it} \sim P(\cdot; r_{it}^+ \lambda_{it-k})$, bad reviews $B_{it} \sim P(\cdot; r_{it}^- \lambda_{it-k})$

Review Arrival

- The **like rate** and the **dislike rate** are linear functions of observables

$$r_{it}^+ = w_{it}' \rho_i^+ \quad r_{it}^- = w_{it}' \rho_i^- \quad (10)$$

- $w_{it} = [1, disc_{it-k}, \dots]'$, $\rho_i^+ = [\rho_{i0}^+, \rho_{i1}^+, \dots]$

The Selection Effect

- Probabilities of a like and a dislike off a discount: ρ_{i0}^+ and ρ_{i0}^-
- During a discount: $\rho_{i0}^+ + \rho_{i1}^+$ and $\rho_{i0}^- + \rho_{i1}^-$
- Review score: probability of a like conditional on a review
- Measure the selection effect by the difference between the expected scores on and off a discount

$$\Delta score_i := \frac{\rho_{0i}^+ + \rho_{1i}^+}{\rho_{0i}^+ + \rho_{1i}^+ + \rho_{0i}^- + \rho_{1i}^-} - \frac{\rho_{0i}^+}{\rho_{0i}^+ + \rho_{0i}^-}$$

- Test

$$H_0 : \frac{\rho_0^+ + \rho_1^+}{\rho_0^+ + \rho_1^+ + \rho_0^- + \rho_1^-} - \frac{\rho_0^+}{\rho_0^+ + \rho_0^-} \leq 0$$

$$H_1 : \frac{\rho_0^+ + \rho_1^+}{\rho_0^+ + \rho_1^+ + \rho_0^- + \rho_1^-} - \frac{\rho_0^+}{\rho_0^+ + \rho_0^-} > 0$$

- Turns out, G_{it} and B_{it} are independent
 - We can estimate the like and dislike rates separately
- The lag between a purchase and review k is set to be the max of the impulse response function of review count to discounts Regression
- Estimation is by maximum likelihood, using the estimates $\hat{\lambda}_{it}$ in place of λ_{it}

$$\mathbb{P}(G_{it} = g) = \frac{(r_{it}^+ \hat{\lambda}_{it-k})^g}{g!} e^{-r_{it}^+ \hat{\lambda}_{it-k}}$$

- If discount is a dummy, a closed-form solution can be derived

$$\hat{\rho}_{0i}^+ + \hat{\rho}_{1i}^+ = \frac{\sum_t \text{disc}_{it-k} g_{it}}{\sum_t \text{disc}_{it-k} \hat{\lambda}_{it-k}} \quad (11)$$

$$\hat{\rho}_{0i}^+ = \frac{\sum_t (1 - \text{disc}_{it-k}) g_{it}}{\sum_t (1 - \text{disc}_{it-k}) \hat{\lambda}_{it-k}} \quad (12)$$

Reviews: Estimates

	(1)	(2)
Constant (Like)	0.074*** (0.002)	0.067*** (0.001)
Discount (Like)	0.032*** (0.003)	0.017*** (0.001)
Constant (Dislike)	0.015*** (0.001)	0.013*** (0.000)
Discount (Dislike)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)
Young (Like)		0.296*** (0.015)
Old (Like)		-0.045 (0.001)
Young (Dislike)		0.067*** (0.006)
Old (Dislike)		-0.008 (0.000)
Observations	355077	355077

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	New Reviews	New Reviews(%)	Score (0-100)
Discount 0 Days Ago	1.094*** (0.122)	1.801*** (0.135)	-0.159 (0.152)
Discount 1 Day Ago	3.254*** (0.276)	4.282*** (0.228)	-0.557*** (0.184)
Discount 2 Days Ago	1.377*** (0.139)	1.969*** (0.100)	-0.470*** (0.176)
Discount 3 Days Ago	0.743*** (0.110)	1.197*** (0.072)	-0.370** (0.170)
Discount 4 Days Ago	0.622*** (0.096)	0.847*** (0.066)	-0.401** (0.166)
Discount 5 Days Ago	0.418*** (0.104)	1.023*** (0.125)	-0.395** (0.161)
Discount 6 Days Ago	0.071 (0.086)	0.396*** (0.063)	-0.368** (0.159)
Discount 7 Days Ago	-0.120* (0.072)	0.254*** (0.076)	-0.336** (0.155)
Weekdays + Week Effects	✓	✓	✓
Game Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	350,819	350,819	350,819
R ²	0.059	0.105	0.154

Note:

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$