Game Audio Industry Survey 2014

September 2014

When Gamasutra posted its 2014 Game Industry Salary Survey, many of us were surprised to see the results, which listed average annual salaries in a variety of game occupations:

Business and management:	$101,572
Audio professionals:	**$95,682**
Programmers:	$93,251
Artists and animators:	$74,349
Producers:	$82,286
Game designers:	$73,864
Quality Assurance:	$54,833

"Audio professionals" were reported to make more than game programmers, artists, producers, game designers and testers. Only Business and management, the category that includes company owners, was reported to make more.

But before all those game programmers decide to quit their jobs to become game "audio professionals," it's worth looking a bit more at the survey. I contacted Gamasutra, which was the first to admit that certain factors probably skew their numbers, particularly for audio.

First, the audio sample size was quite small. In 2014, there were only 33 respondents who listed "audio professional" as their field. Second, the salary survey is just that, a *salary* survey. The author—by design—focused on gathering information from full-time employees, not freelancers or other third party contractors which has become increasingly common in game audio. Finally, because the survey was sent to GDC attendees and Gamasutra members, the survey is biased to more senior audio people; a game developer isn't likely to send the 'new hire' to GDC over their senior audio director.

So with that in mind, we created a survey that attempts to more accurately capture the issues of contracts, terms and compensation in game audio. Our goals were to have a survey that

- Was more relevant to the industry
- Would receive a much larger response rate
- Reflected the freelancer segment of our industry

The survey ran from July 29 to August 13, 2014 and was promoted via social media and other game or music industry web sites. We received 518 responses. In addition to compensation numbers, we wanted to see what some of the business terms and creative issues were current in game music and sound design.

Format of Survey Reporting

1/ Compensation

2/ Work and Environment

3/ Additional Compensation

4/ Use of Live Musicians & Middleware

5/ Contract Terms

A Difficult to Define Industry:

Because the game industry (and therefor game audio) is such a wide and diverse business, we broke things down into three main categories:

- **Large Budget Games.** These are your typical console or well-funded PC titles. These games are available at retail, and also may be downloadable.
- **Professionally produced casual games**. These are smaller scale; smaller budget games than the "AAA" large budget games, but nonetheless are professionally developed, produced and marketed.
- **Indy games.** These are smaller scale games, which are often self-financed or financed through non-traditional means such as kickstarter.

Of course it is impossible to draw a sharp line between the three categories outlined above. Nevertheless, we believe it serves as a useful distinction so that we're not comparing the compensation from a blockbuster like Call of Duty with that of a part-time, 2-person dev company making an iPhone game in their basement.

1/ Compensation:

Game Audio is a highly diverse field, and as a result has large variation in compensation. Although it is convenient to talk about "average" (mean) game audio compensation, the median[1] compensation and compensation distribution are more meaningful, which we present in graphic histogram form. Note that all compensation numbers are guaranteed compensation, do not include any kind of bonuses, royalties, stock awards, etc.

In order to maximize participation in other areas of the survey, the question on compensation, which some are hesitant to report in a survey, was optional; in fact it was the only optional question on the survey. 64 of the 514 respondents (12%) declined to answer the question on compensation.

To calculate compensation, we broke respondents into three categories:

- Salaried Employees
- Freelancer projects under "Work for Hire" (buyout)
- Freelancer projects where content is licensed to game developer; the freelancer maintains ownership of the music/sound.

We further broke freelancer Work for Hire projects into:
- Large-budget Game Work for Hire
- Casual/Indy Work for Hire

Respondents who listed compensation numbers of 0 were filtered out of all compensation charts.

For salaried employees, we report the annual salary, not including bonuses or other compensation (health plan, retirement, stock purchase/options, etc.)

For freelance/contractors, we asked respondents to give us what their compensation is on a per-project basis, not including any potential or realized bonuses/royalties, etc.

All compensation information is in U.S. Dollars
Note that not all numbers add to 100% due to rounding and because some apparently anomalous respondent data was filtered out.

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[1] "Mean" is the average: the sum of all numbers divided by the number of entries. "Median" is the 'middle number'. There are as many salaries higher than the median as there are lower.
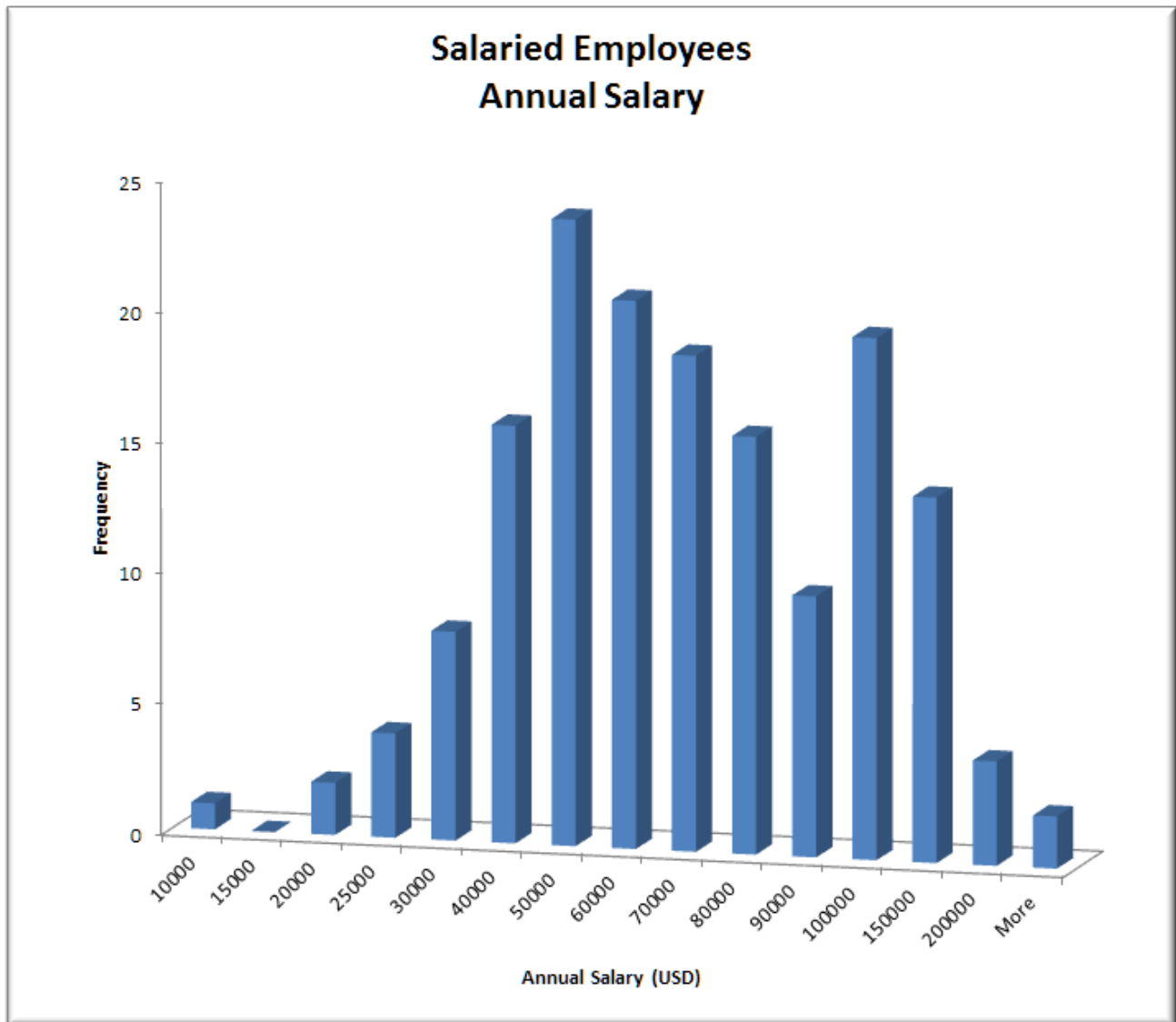
Compensation: Salaried Employees:

Mean Yearly Salary: $70,532
Median Yearly Salary: $63,000
Mean Years in Industry: 8.6
Median Years in Industry: 7
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 3.8

Salaried Employees Annual Salary

Salaries have two main peaks, one at around 50,000, and one around 100,000. Higher salaries tended to be correlated with descriptions such as "management" or "direction." This latter peak may explain the Gamasutra numbers.

Compensation: Freelance under Work for Hire:
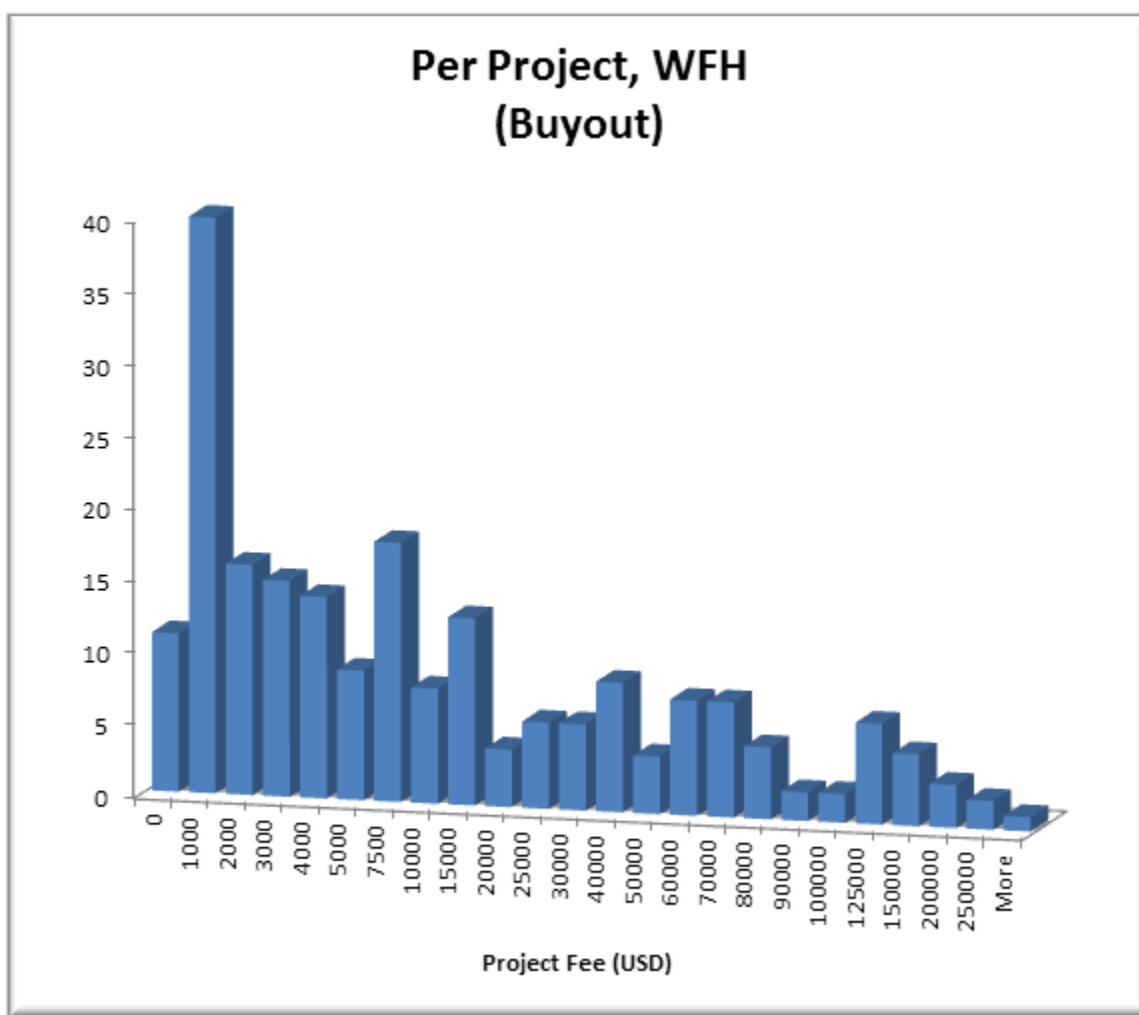# All Games

Mean Project Fee: 28,091
Median Project Fee: 5,918
Mean Years in Industry: 8.1
Median Years in Industry: 6
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 4.6

**Per Project, WFH
(Buyout)**

Project Fee (USD)

Per project fees varied tremendously, from a low of zero, to a high of over 250,000. Large budget games of course dominate at the higher end.

Compensation: Freelance under Work For Hire:
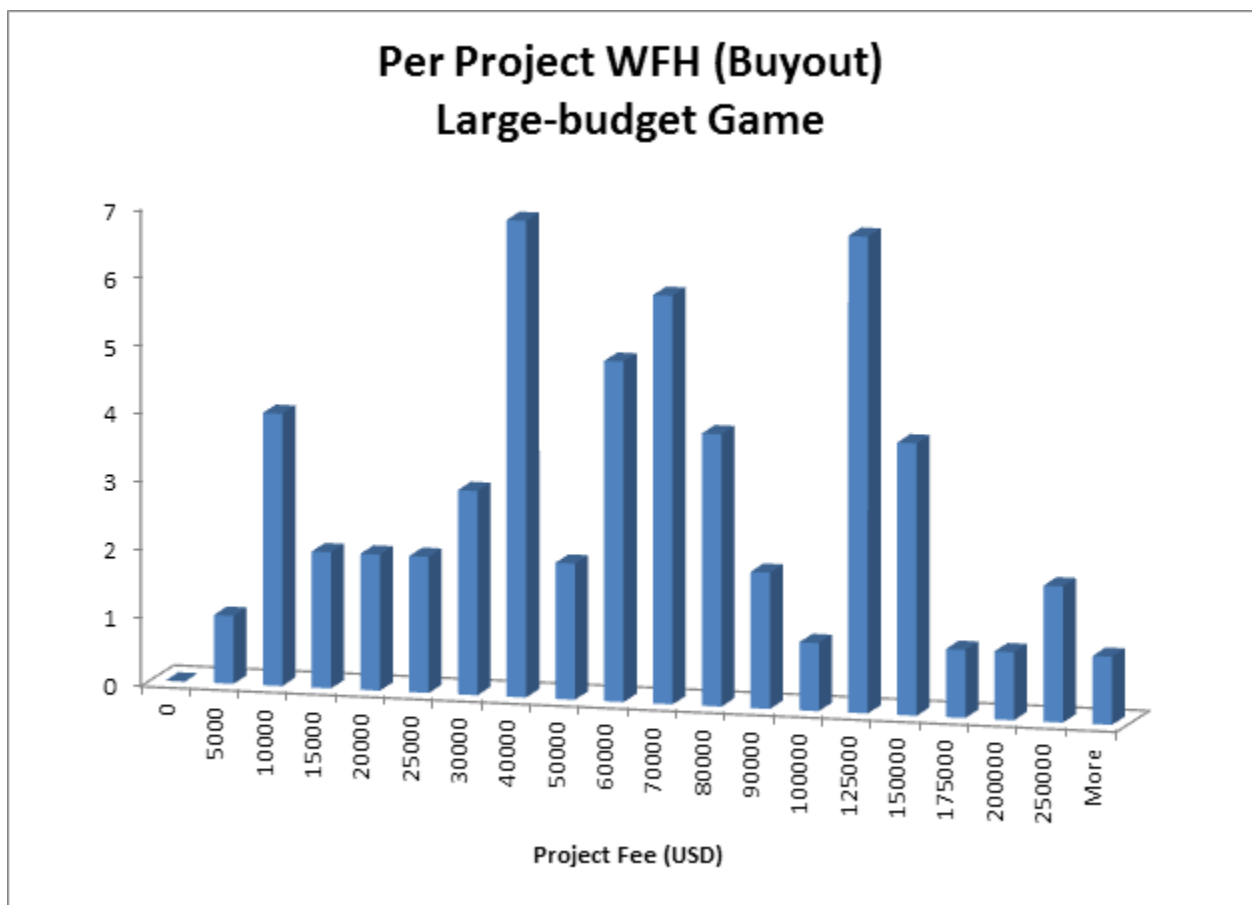# Large-budget Game

Mean Project Fee: $76,822
Median Project Fee: $64,000
Mean Years in Industry: 10.9
Median Years in Industry: 10
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 3.4

Per Project WFH (Buyout)
Large-budget Game
Project Fee (USD)

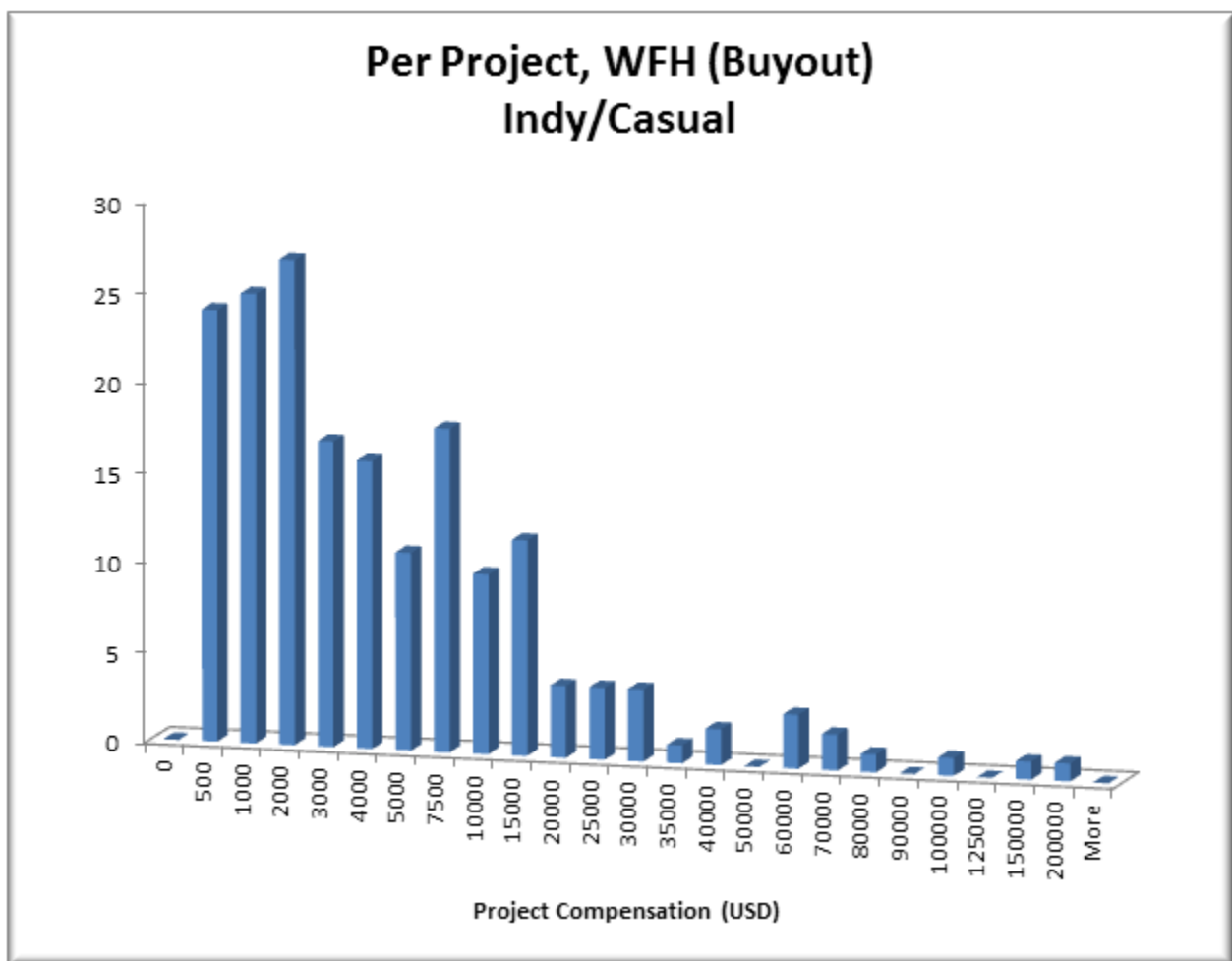# Compensation: Freelance under Work for Hire:
Indy or Casual Game

Mean Project Fee: $9,830
Median Project Fee: $3,000
Mean Years in Industry: 6.2
Median Years in Industry: 4
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 5.2

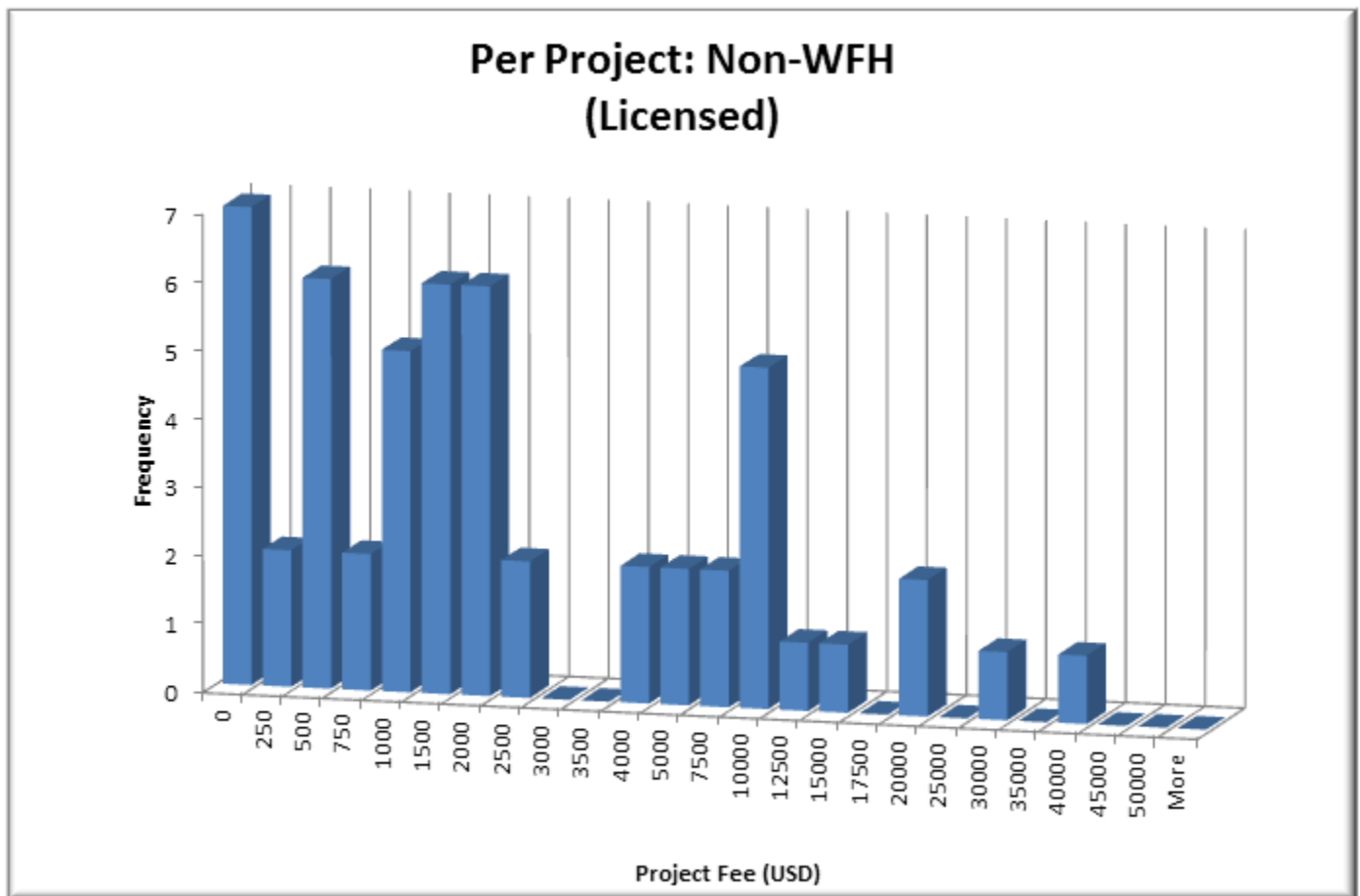# Compensation: Freelance under License Agreement (Contractor retains rights):

Mean Project Fee: 4,481
Median Project Fee: 1,500
Mean Years in Industry: 4.7
Median Years in Industry: 3
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 5.5

As with the freelance Work for Hire, there is a large discrepancy, but the highest amount for the project was significantly less than for the work for hire case. A large number of very low guaranteed payment games drove the mean project compensation down to under $5,000 and median to $1,500. Note that the "0" bar indicates games for **between** 0 and 250 (not games done for $0)

2/ Work and Environment

Game Audio professionals are predominantly freelance

Almost 60% of respondents replied they were freelance or contractors, with 37% salaried employees of a company.

Most game composers also deliver SFX

65% of composers who delivered music for a game also delivered at least some sound effects. Even after eliminating salaried positions, freelance composers delivered SFX 56% of the time. For "large budget" games, that number drops to 20%, a reflection of the specialization of larger budget projects.

At least some "Integration" is done by 1 in 5 composers

22% of freelance composers who delivered music for a game also did some integration, helping put the sounds into the game. Programming/scripting was not so common among freelance composers (4%)

1 in 8 game audio jobs is hourly

12% percent of respondents said they were paid by the hour/day or week.

Game Audio professionals are predominantly male

96% of all respondents were male

3/ Additional Compensation

"Per unit royalties" are very rare for the big titles

Only 2% of composers of large-budget games reported receiving payment based on unit sales. For casual or indy games, this number increases significantly to a still slim 17%
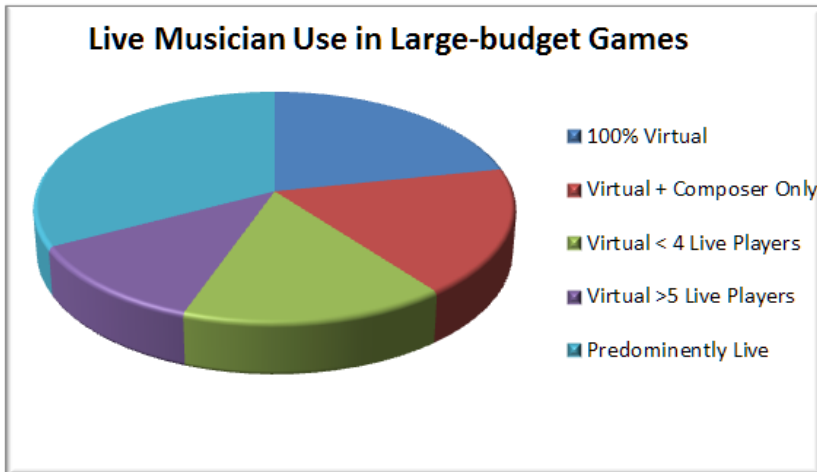
Additional payments "per sku" are very rare

Less than 2% reported additional compensation for additional 'skus' (Porting the same game to another platform).

Soundtrack clauses remain rare among large games, more common in smaller games

Only 5% of large-budget games provided a composer with payments for soundtracks. However, 18% of small games provide for composer compensation for game soundtracks.
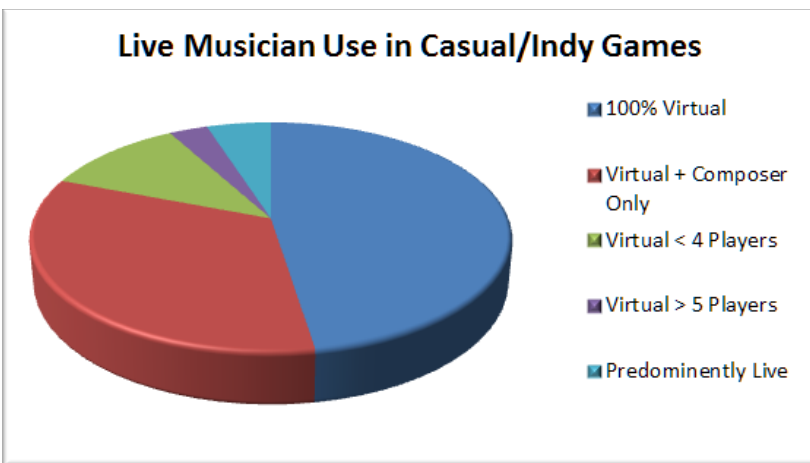
4/ Music Recording & Use of Live Musicians & Audio Middleware

Most game music is performed & recorded by the composer alone

Live Musician Use in Large-budget Games

- 100% Virtual
- Virtual + Composer Only
- Virtual < 4 Live Players
- Virtual >5 Live Players
- Predominently Live

Live Musician Use in Casual/Indy Games

- 100% Virtual
- Virtual + Composer Only
- Virtual < 4 Players
- Virtual > 5 Players
- Predominently Live

Among all respondents who delivered music, the overwhelming majority of the music was created by the composer alone. Over 70% of music was delivered either as completely virtual (41%) or as virtual with any real instruments played by only the composer (29%).
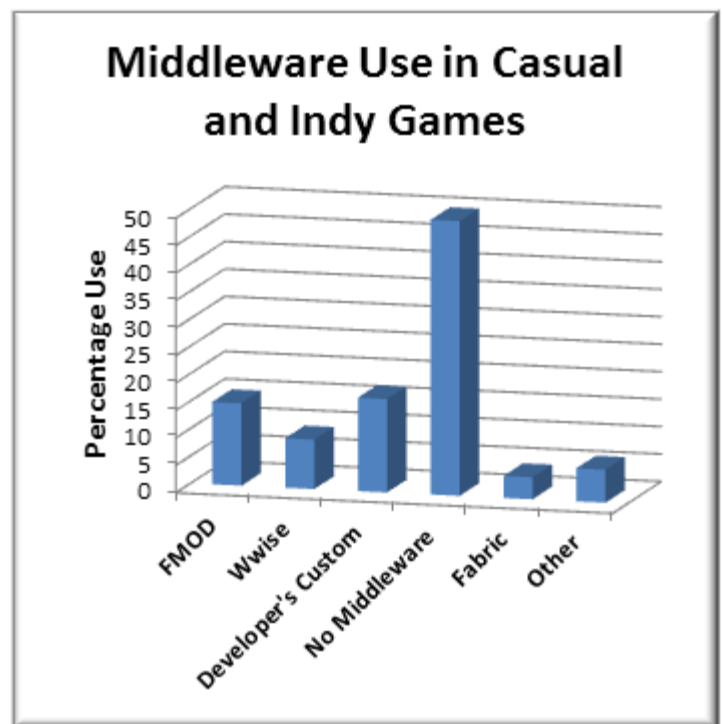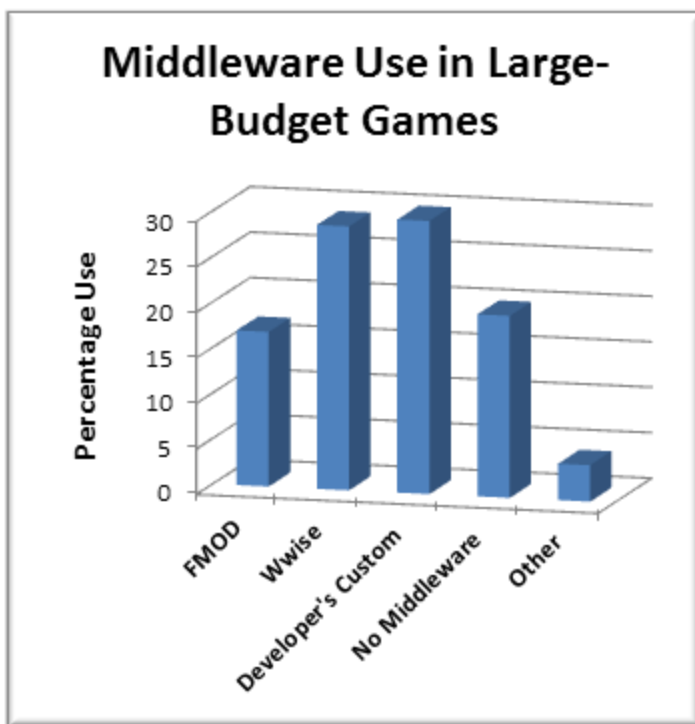
Even for professionally developed, large budget games, *only 46% of music was predominantly performed by live musicians or hybrid with 5 or more live musicians*. That leaves 54% of "large budget" games as mostly "virtual" with 4 or less non-composer players.

Indy/Casual games are dominated (91%) by virtual with 4 or less non-composer players

Use of 3rd party Middleware more likely to be used in large-budget games, but is by no means ubiquitous

Although use of 3rd party middleware such as FMOD or Wwise was more common in large-budget games, half of all large-budget games either used internal tools or no 3rd party middlware. For casual and indy games, well over half used custom tools or no middleware.

Middleware Use in Large-Budget Games

Middleware Use in Casual and Indy Games

Contract Terms

Big Companies require "Work for Hire"

95% of music for large-budget games is created under Work for Hire, either by a company employee or as a freelance composer working under a Work for Hire contract. Only 3% worked as a freelancer and licensed their music to large-budget games.

Small game companies somewhat more likely to let composers keep music rights

Although 72% of casual or indy games are done as Work for Hire, more than 1 in 5 (22%) composers licensed their music for their project, keeping publishing rights. That number drops to 12% when looking at professionally produced small scale games.

4 in 10 composers stated that there is a specific clause in their agreement allowing the score to be registered with a PRO

The ability for a game composer to register their work with a PRO varies with game size. For large-budget games, around 40% of composers have contract clauses that let them register their Work for Hire compositions (36%), or can have their work registered because they maintained ownership (4%).

For small games 40% of composers either have contract clauses that let them register their Work for Hire compositions (14%) or can have their work registered because they maintained ownership (24%)

It should be noted that all game publishers are able to register the game score with appropriate PROs at their discretion.

A bit on statistical validity

The 2014 Game Audio Survey, like any survey, has inherent limits and biases. These include, but are not limited to:

- The survey was publicized via social media and email networks and known audio groups and websites. This biases results towards the 'more connected' composers and sound designers in the industry, which likely biases numbers a bit high
- A small number of very anomalous looking responses were all or in part discarded. This may result in pre-conception bias.
- A very small number of responses were not self-consistent. These were analyzed manually to determine intent. This may result in pre-conception bias.
- As noted, the question on compensation was optional, which likely biases results low.

Thank you to the Game Audio Network Guild

For assisting in the survey.

Contact

Brian Schmidt

Executive Director, GameSoundCon

info@GameSoundCon.com

Facebook: Facebook.com/GameSoundCon

Twitter: @GameSound