Game Audio Industry
Survey 2015

The Game Audio Industry Survey tracks compensation, working conditions, contact terms and production information for the video game music and sound industry. Originally designed to provide a more detailed look into the industry than Gamasutra's annual salary survey, the goals of the survey are to collect information which:

- Reflects both the freelancer and employee aspects of our industry
- Covers the range of games produced, from AAA to Indy.
- Is relevant to the industry
- Has a high enough response rate to accurately reflect the industry

The survey ran from July 15 to August 13, 2015 and was promoted via social media and other game or music industry web sites. We received 622 responses, 591 of which were deemed usable. 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.

New for 2015 are questions covering
- How respondents got their current job
- Music budgets
- Education
- Hourly music/sound design rates

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 title. 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.

Format of Survey Reporting

1/ Compensation

2/ Work and Environment

3/ Additional Compensation

4/ Use of Live Musicians & Middleware

5/ Contract Terms

6/ Education

1/ Compensation:

Game Audio is a highly diverse field, and as a result has a lot of variation in compensation. Although it is convenient to talk about "average" game audio compensation (and we will report that as the "mean")[1], the median and compensation distribution may be 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, which are reported on separately.

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. 59 of the 591 respondents (10%) declined to answer the question on compensation.

To calculate compensation, we broke respondents into four categories:

- Salaried Employees
- Hourly 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, as were entries we determined to be obviously anomalous.

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.

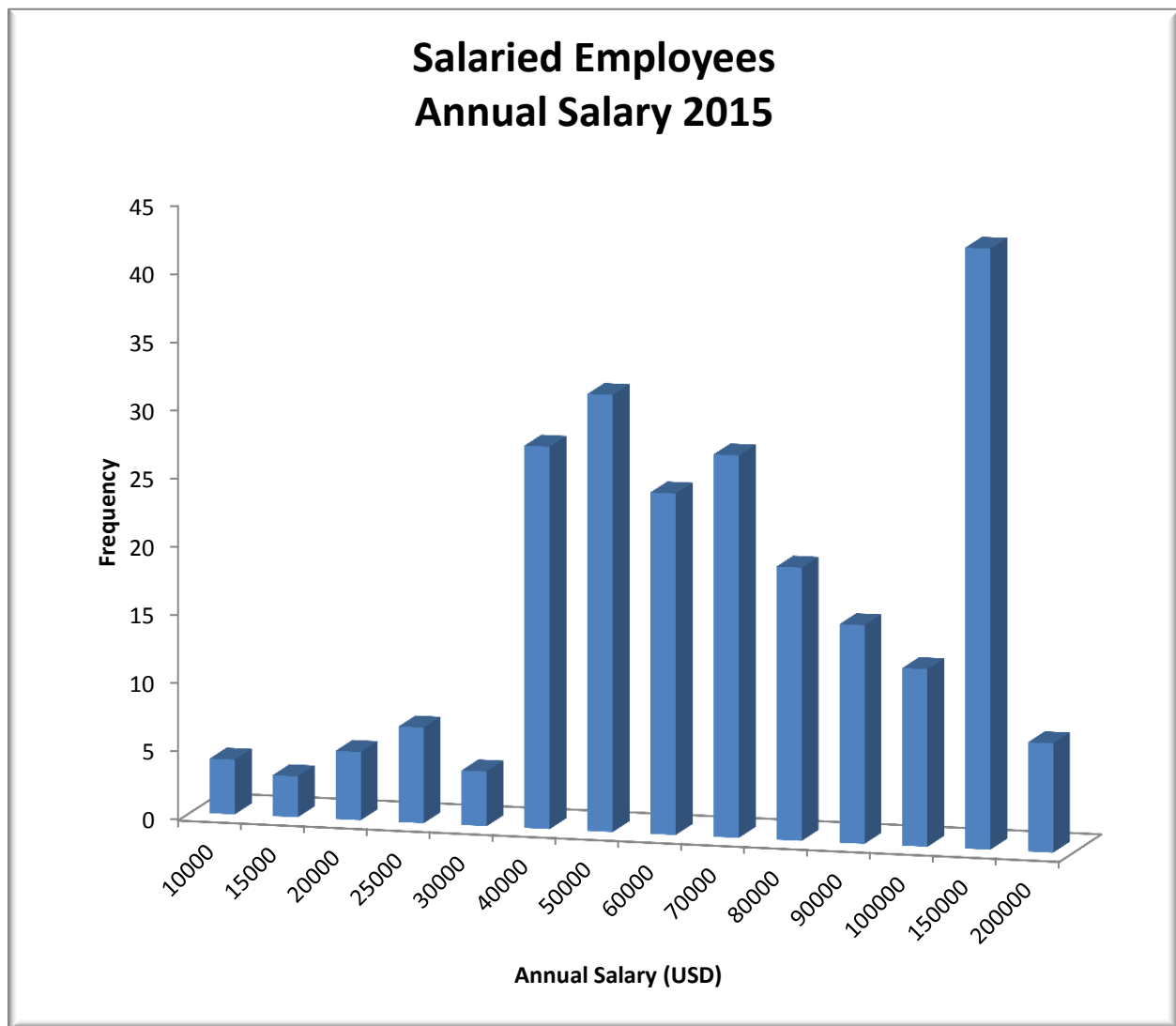## Compensation: Salaried Employees:

Mean Yearly Salary: $80,546
Median Yearly Salary: $65,000
Mean Years in Industry: 9.2
Median Years in Industry: 8
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 3.5

Salaried Employees Annual Salary 2015

Salaries have two main peaks, one at around 60,000, and one around 150,000. Higher salaries tended to be correlated with descriptions such as "management" or "Audio Director" This latter peak may explain why the Gamasutra Salary survey generally reports a relatively high average "game audio" salary ($95,682 for 2014).

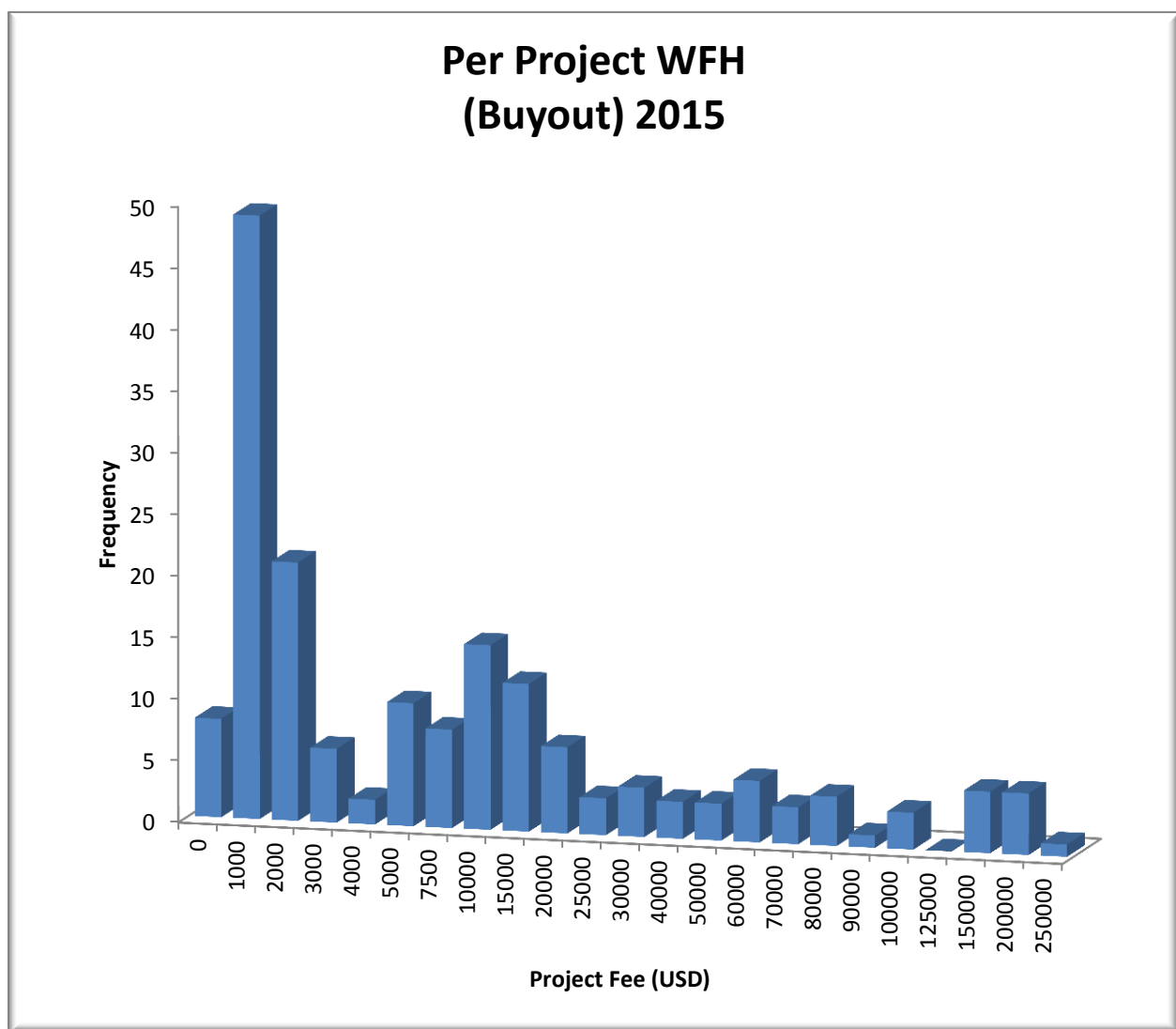# Compensation: Freelance under Work for Hire:
All Games

Mean Project Fee: 24,298
Median Project Fee: 5000
Mean Years in Industry: 7.9
Median Years in Industry: 5
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 5.2

Per Project WFH (Buyout) 2015

Frequency vs. 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.

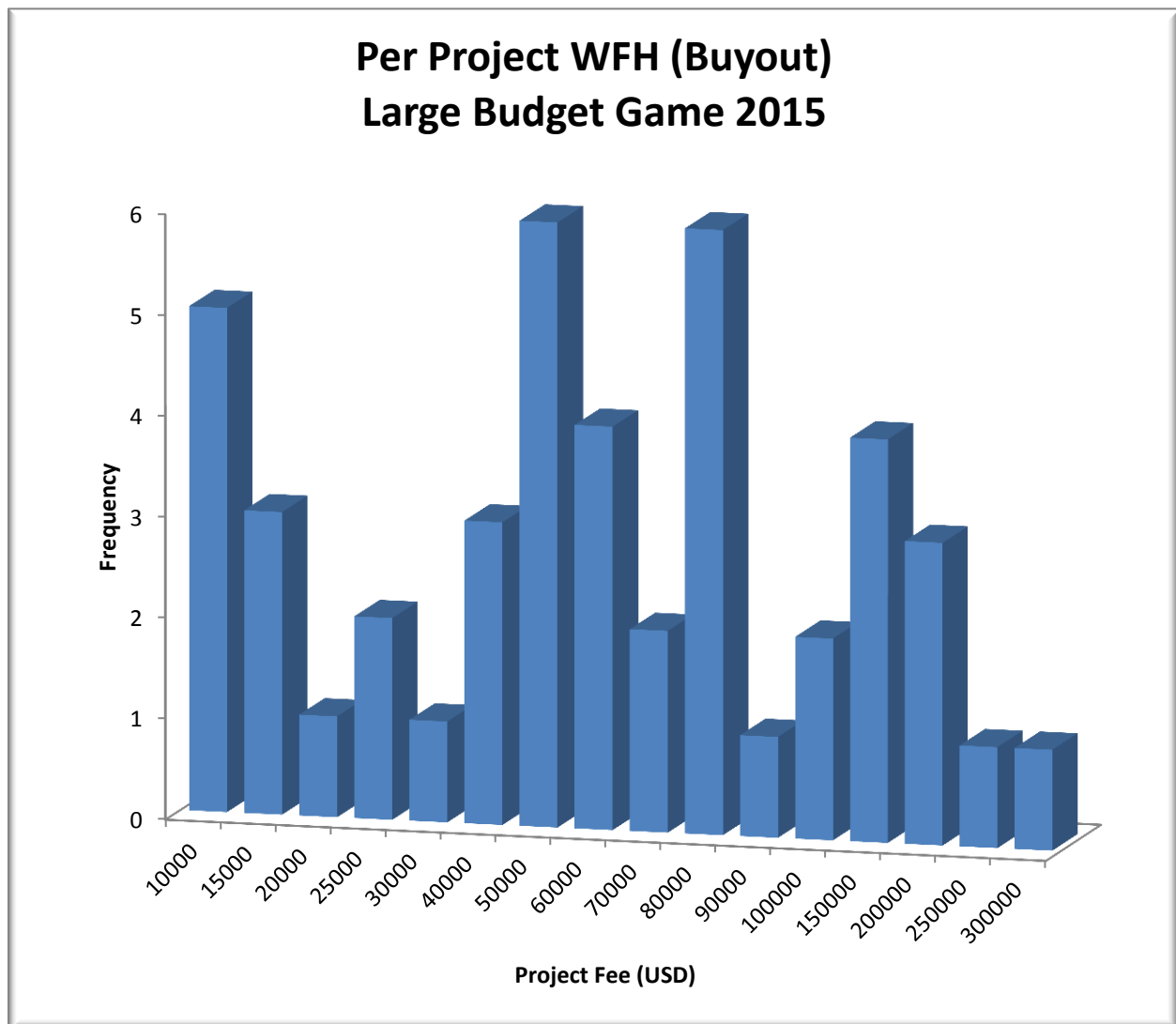# Compensation: Freelance under Work For Hire:
Large-budget Game

Mean Project Fee: $73,493
Median Project Fee: $60,000
Mean Years in Industry: 11.5
Median Years in Industry: 11
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 5.6

Per Project WFH (Buyout)
Large Budget Game 2015

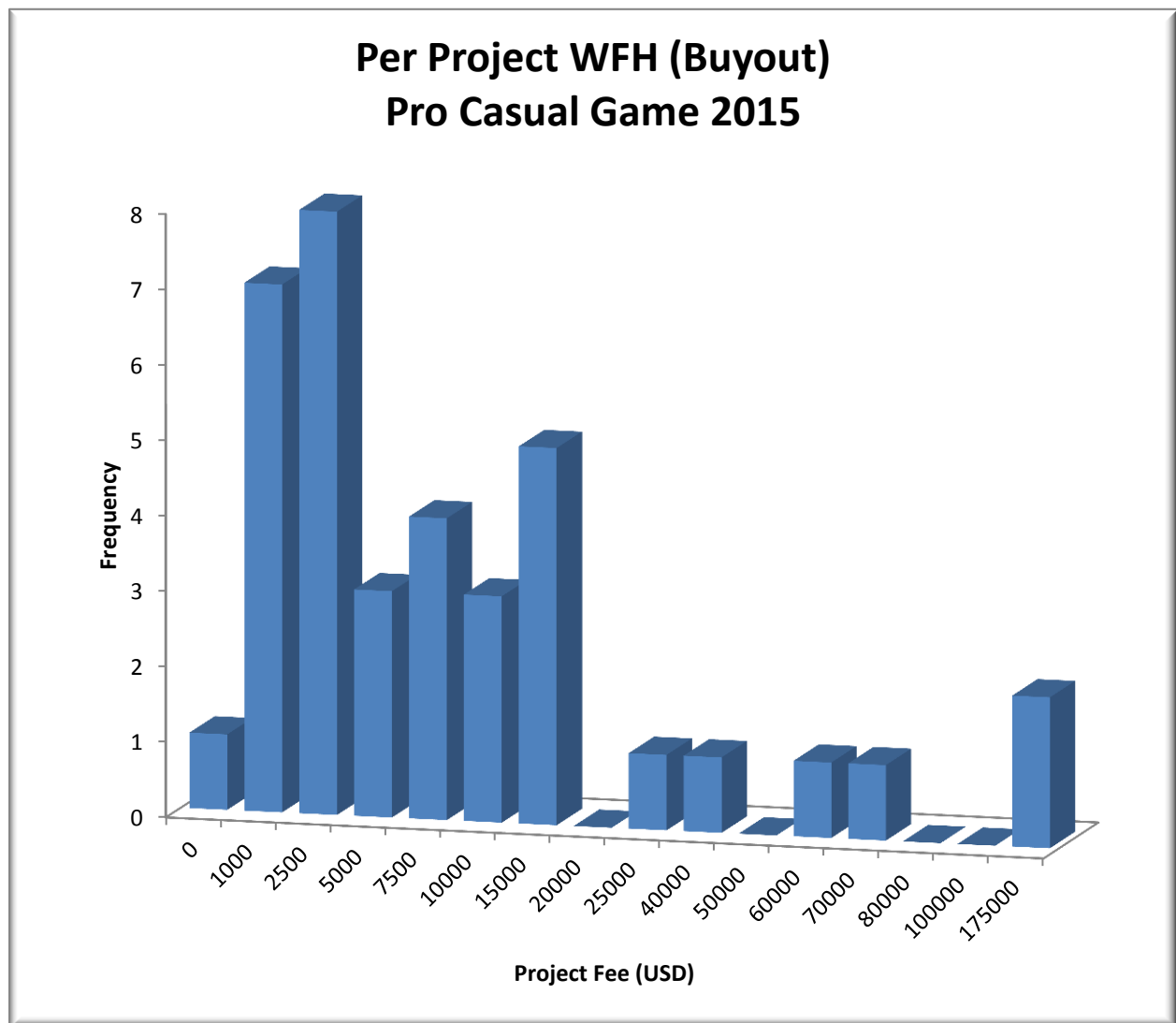# Compensation: Freelance under Work For Hire: Professionally Produced Casual Game

Mean Project Fee: $18,177
Median Project Fee: $5,000
Mean Years in Industry: 9.7
Median Years in Industry: 8
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 6.9

Per Project WFH (Buyout)
Pro Casual Game 2015

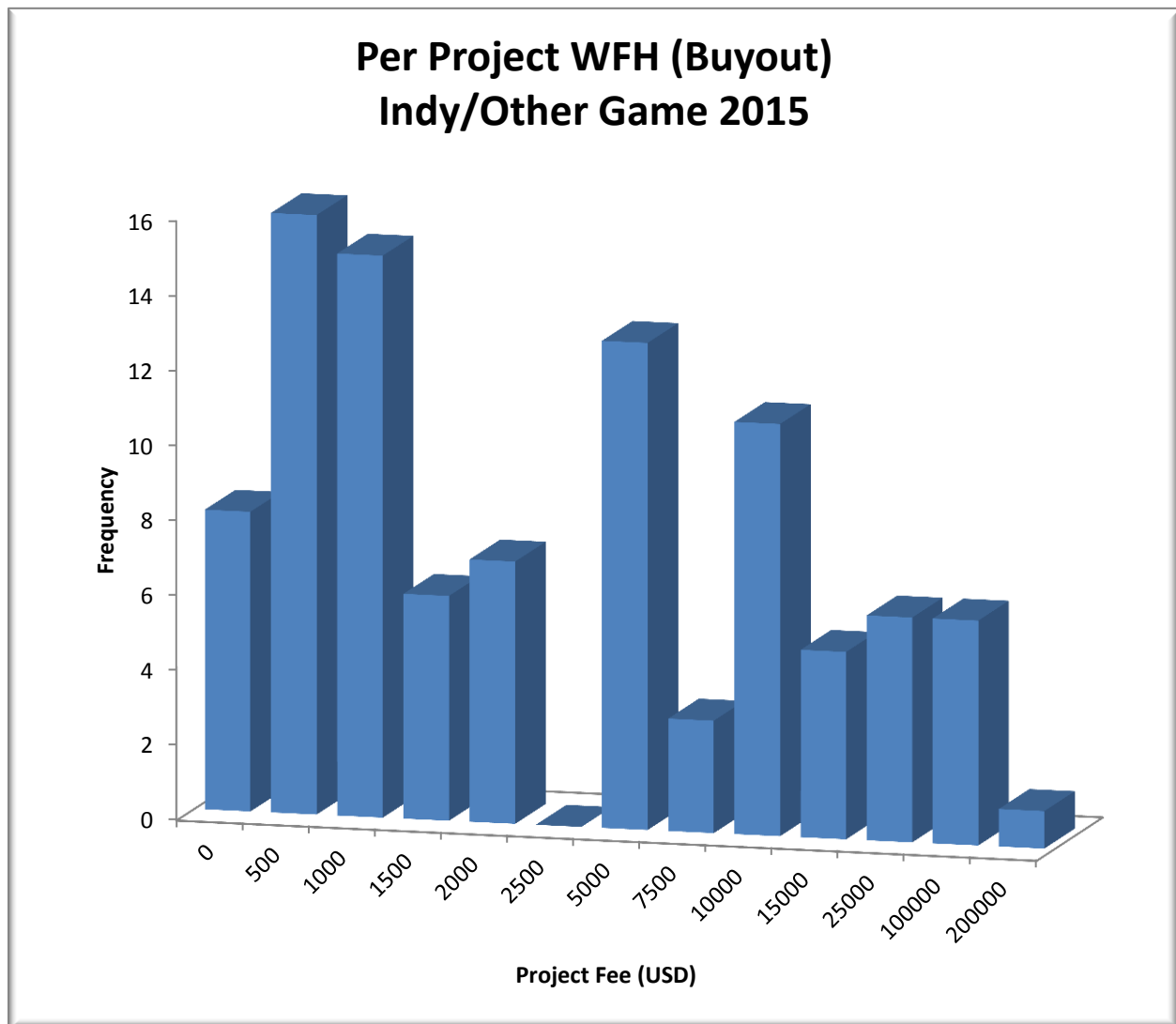# Compensation: Freelance under Work For Hire: Indy/Other

Mean Project Fee: $8,399
Median Project Fee: $2,000
Mean Years in Industry: 5.3
Median Years in Industry: 3
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 3.6

Per Project WFH (Buyout)
Indy/Other Game 2015

Compensation: Freelance under License Agreement (Contractor retains rights, All Games):
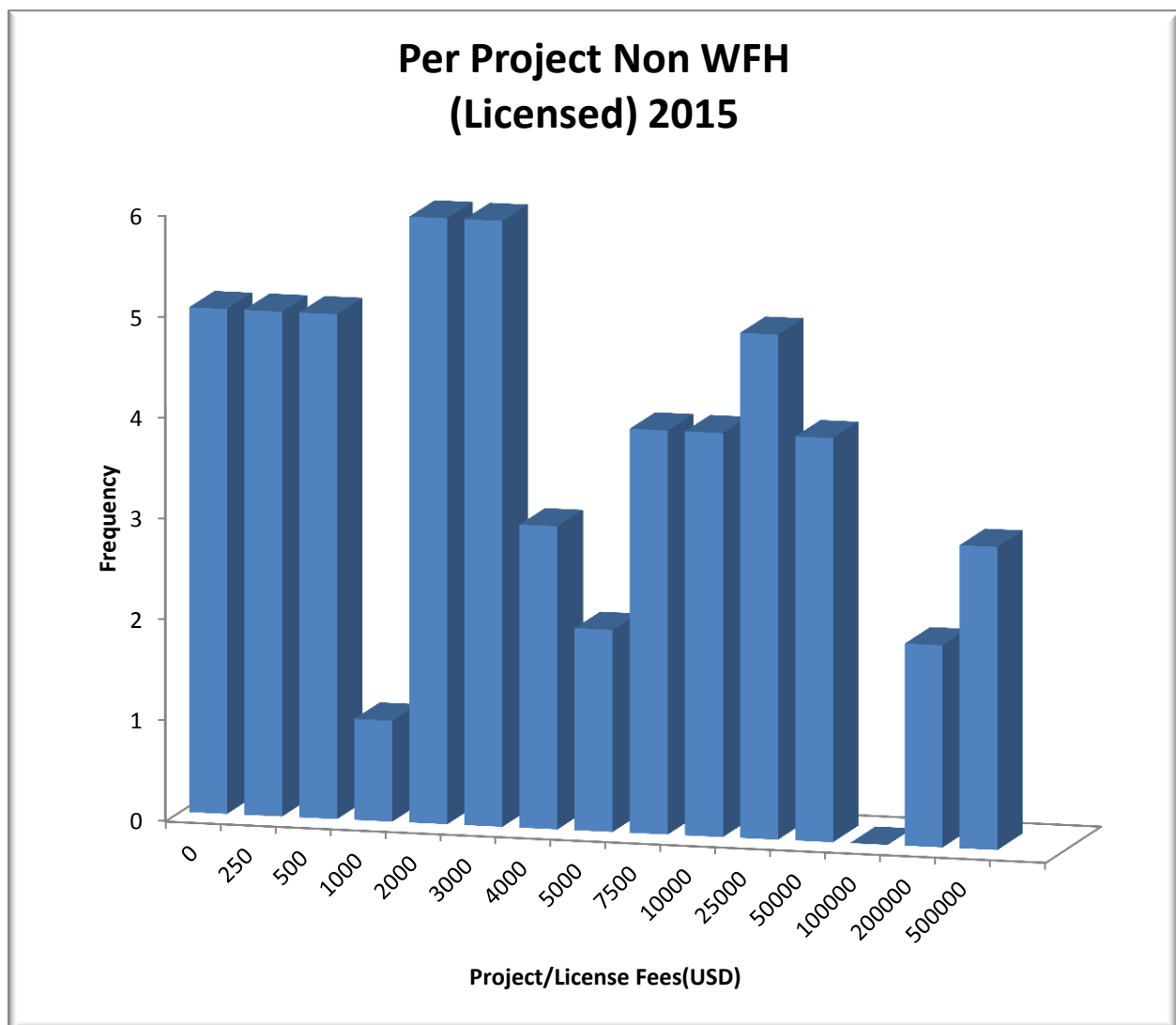
Mean Project Fee: 29,616
Median Project Fee: 3,000
Mean Years in Industry: 5.3
Median Years in Industry: 3
Mean # of games worked on in past year: 3.1

Per Project Non WFH (Licensed) 2015
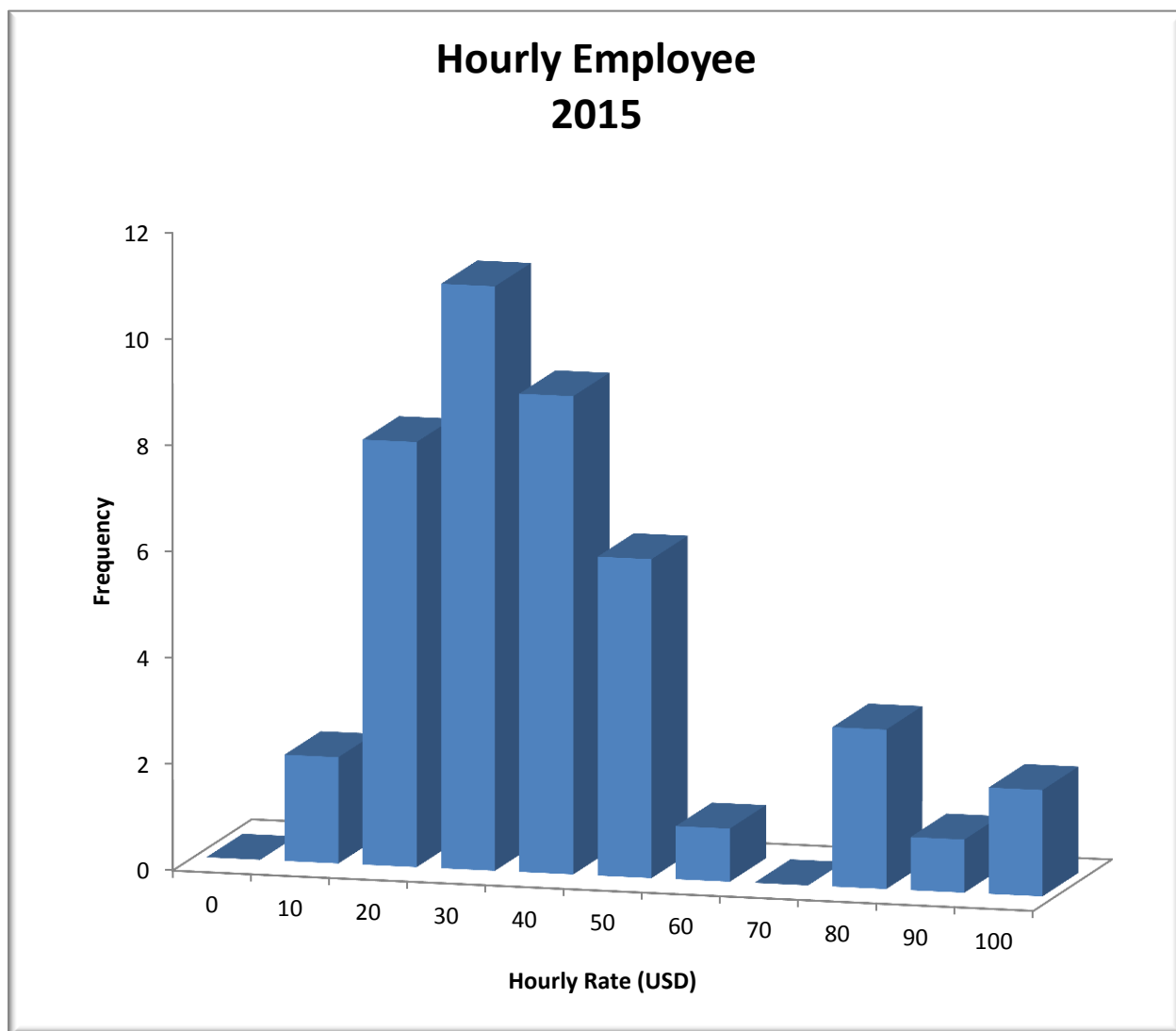
Frequency vs Project/License Fees(USD)

As with the freelance Work for Hire, there is a large discrepancy. A couple very large (>200,000) license fees skewed the mean up. Removing the three highest reduces the mean to $12,889. Note that the "0" bar indicates games for **between** 0 and 250 (not games done for $0)

Compensation: Hourly employees

Hourly employees are non-salaried employees either of a game developer/publisher or (more frequently) for a contract service provider.

Mean Hourly wage: $36.79/hour
Median Project Fee: $32/hour

**Hourly Employee
2015**

X-axis: Hourly Rate (USD) — 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100
Y-axis: Frequency — 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12

2/ Work and Environment

Game Audio professionals are split between freelancers and employees

Almost 46% of respondents replied they were freelance or contractors, with 46% salaried employees of a company.

Most game composers also deliver SFX

80% of all composers who delivered music for a game also delivered at least some sound effects.

70% of "AAA" composers also did some sound design

83% of non-AAA composers also did sound design

Integration, programming, by freelancers

45% of freelancers also did either integration work or some programming or both.

21% of freelancers also provided scripting or programming to the project.

Almost 1 in 4 game composers also do scripting

23% of all composers also provided scripting or programming services.

At least some "Integration" is done by 1 in 2 composers

48% of composers also reported doing integration.

1 in 8 game audio jobs is hourly

13% percent of respondents said they were paid by the hour.

Game Audio professionals are predominantly male

93% of all respondents were male (down from 96% in 2014)

2a/ Work: Getting Gigs

Like many other music/sound jobs, networking and referrals is one the largest ways game composers and sound designers found either their job with their employer or their last freelance gig. That said, more than one in five (22%) sound/music employees of a game company got their job through a job posting. Another 28% were recruited by the company or employer.

Company Employee: How Got the Position

- Previous Project
- Job Posting
- Referral
- Recriuted
- Other
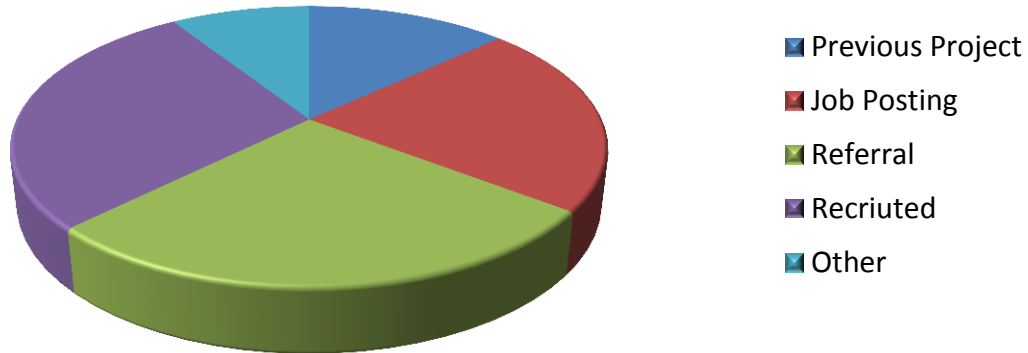
Among freelancers, almost 2/3 of composers and sound designers got the last gig either through someone they had worked with before, or via a referral.

Important for freelancers, almost one in five (18%) answered "other." In the detail of "other" the most frequent details were directly related to networking: meeting at conferences, game jams, networking events, "GANG event", "GDC", etc.

Freelancer: How Got Last Gig

- Previous Project
- Job Posting
- Referral
- Recriuted
- Other
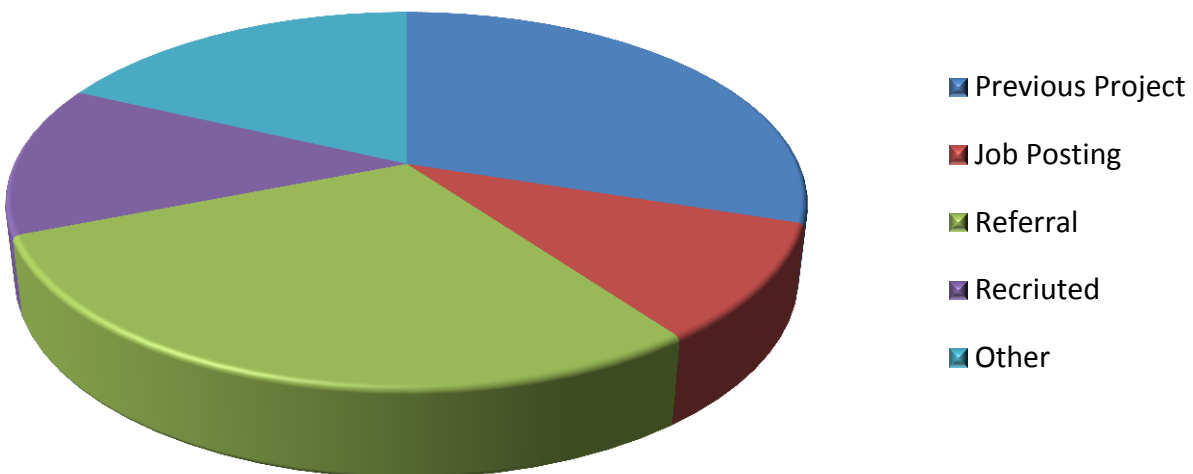
3/ Additional Compensation

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

Only 3.8% of composers of large-budget games reported receiving payment based on unit sales. For casual or indy games, this number increases significantly to 17.3%

Additional payments "per sku" are very rare

Only 1.7% of composers of large-budget games reported receiving payment based on unit sales. For casual or indy games, this number increases slightly to 3.6%

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, 23% of small games provide for composer compensation for game soundtracks.

4/ Music Recording & Use of Live Musicians & Audio Middleware

Most game music is performed by the composer alone, although slightly more than half large budget games are predominantly recorded by live musicians.
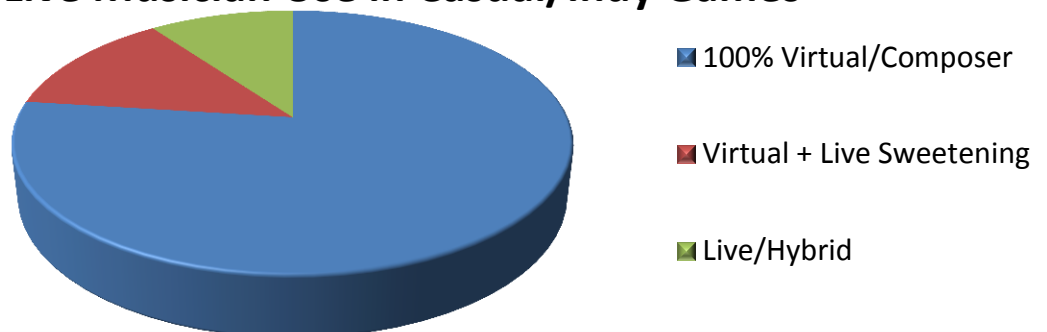
Among all respondents who delivered music, the overwhelming majority of the music was created by the composer alone. 63% of music was delivered either as completely virtual or as virtual with any real instruments played by the composer personally.

Among professionally developed large titles (AAA), 54% music is fully live or hybrid score. 30% of the music was created by the composer alone, 16% being created by the composer "virtually" with 4 or fewer live musicians to sweeten the score.
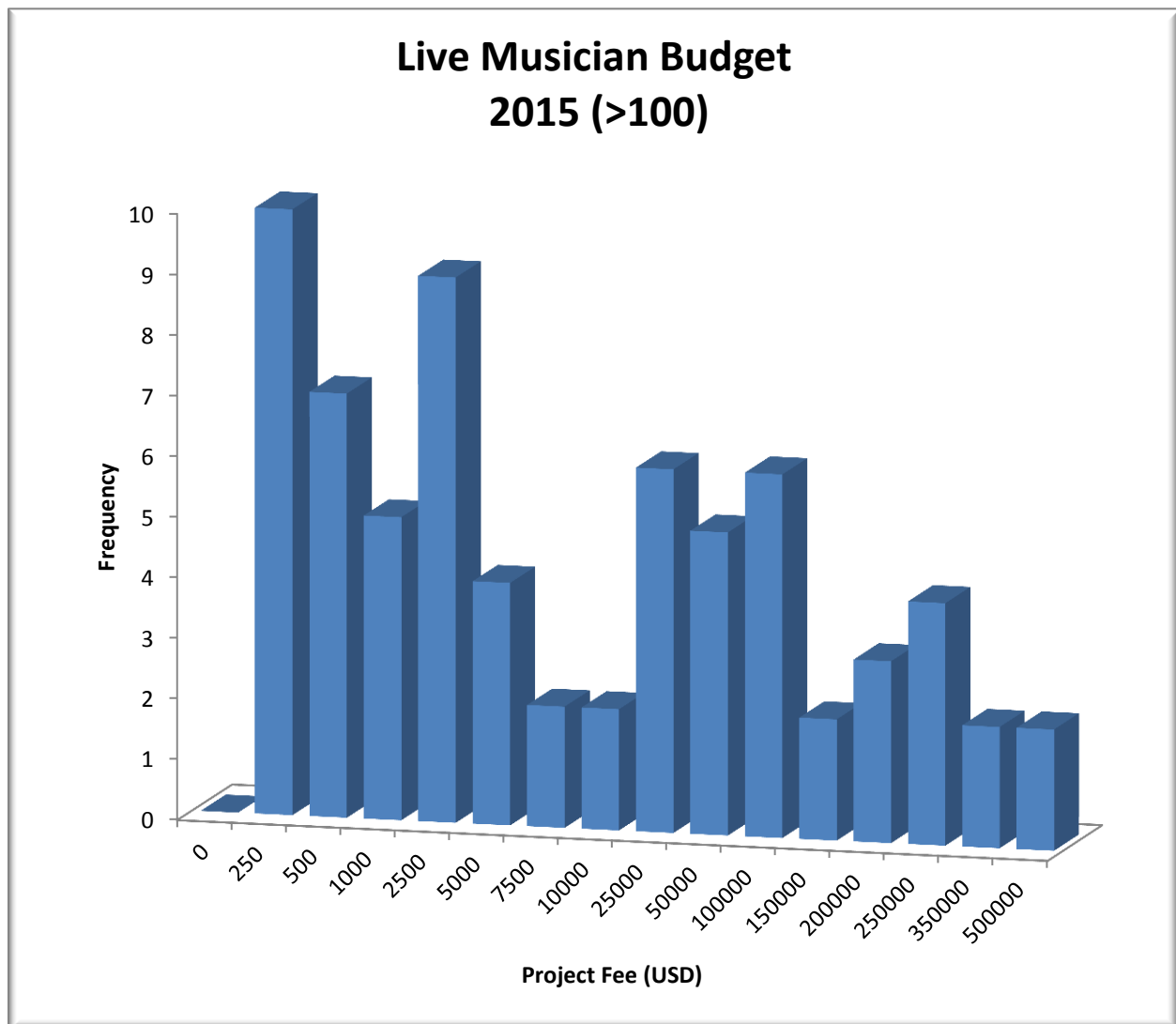
Live Musician Use in Large-budget Games

■ 100% Virtual/Composer

■ Virtual + Live Sweetening

■ Live/Hybrid
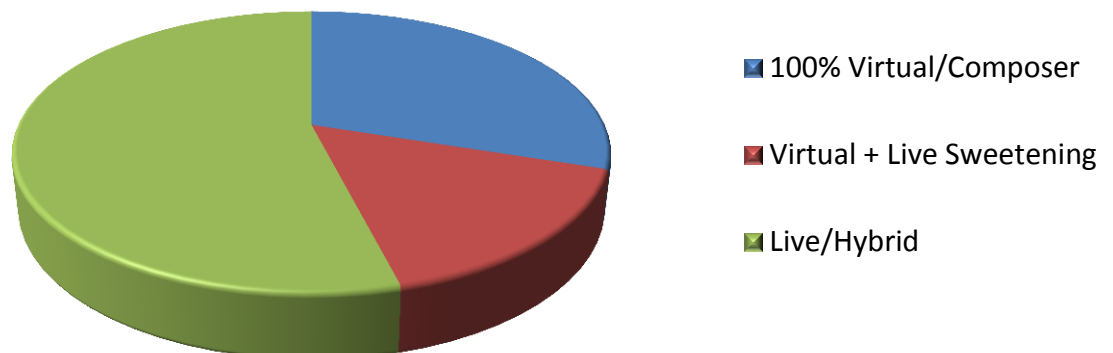
Live Musician Use in Casual/Indy Games

■ 100% Virtual/Composer

■ Virtual + Live Sweetening

■ Live/Hybrid

Live Musician Budgets (>$100)

21% of games where music was delivered had a budget specifically to hire live musicians. The mean budget was $61,586, with a median budget of $5,000.
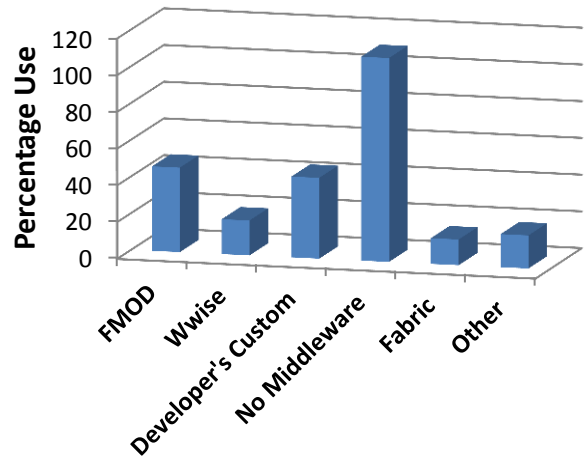

Live Musician Budget
2015 (>100)

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

Middleware Use in Large-Budget Games
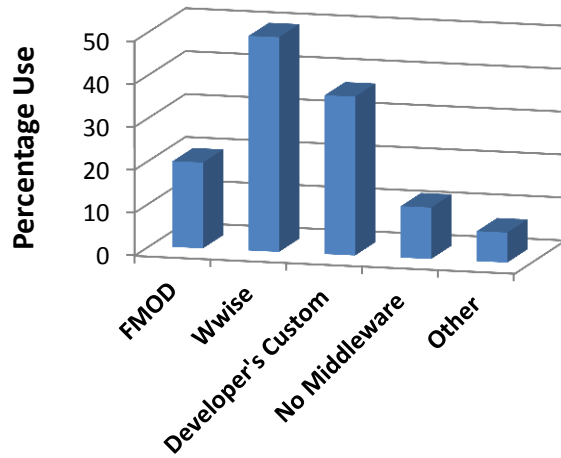
Middleware Use in Casual and Indy Games

5/ Contract Terms

Big Companies require "Work for Hire"

97% 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 (18%) composers licensed their music for their project, keeping publishing rights. That number drops to 8% when looking at professionally produced small scale games.

Large games more likely to register music with a PRO than smaller games

For large budget games, 45% of music was registered with a PRO.

For indy and professionally produced casual games, that drops to 21% of music registered with a PRO.

Note that any game music may registered with the PRO, if the publisher (typically the game developer or publisher) so desires.
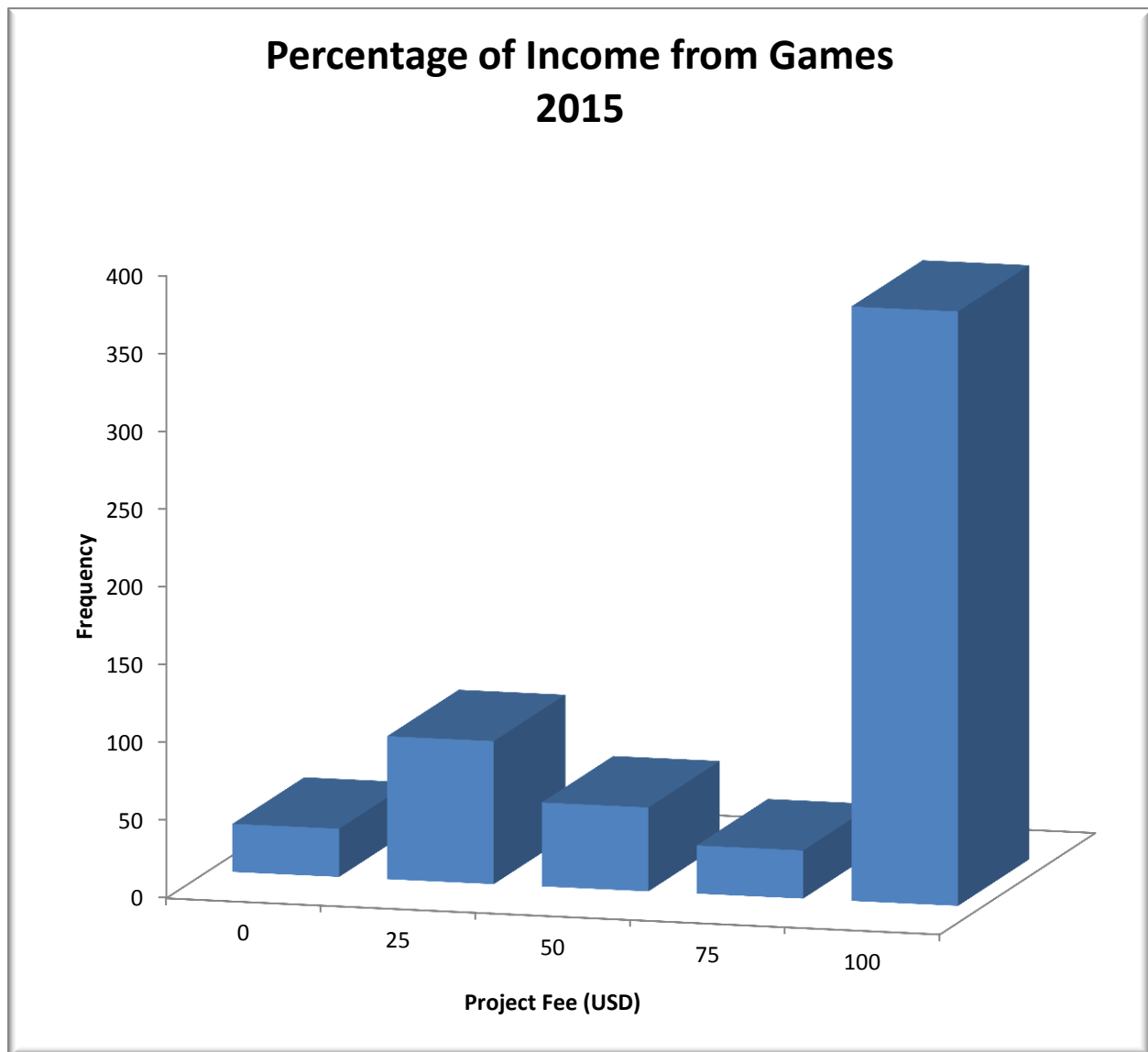
6/ Education

Approximately half of respondents reported having a bachelor's degree, approximately ¼ reported having had some college or an associate's degree; 19% reported one or more graduate degrees
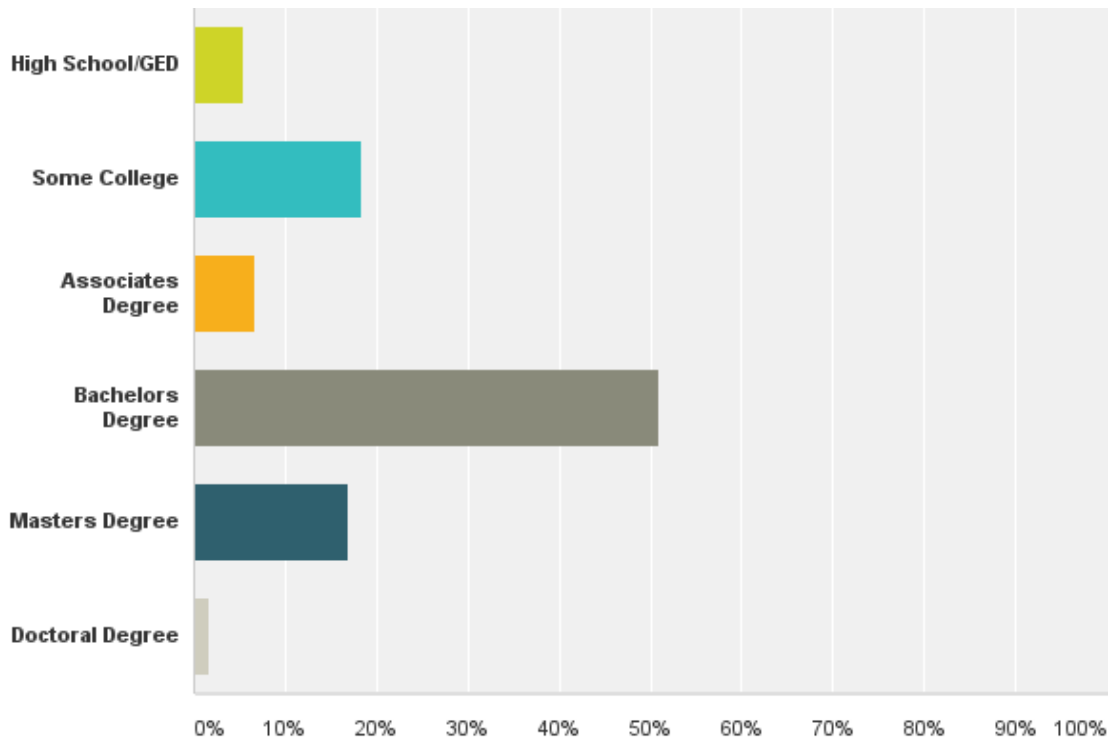
7/ Percentage of Income

We also asked respondents what percentage of their annual income they make directly from working in the game industry. Of the respondents, 65% reported games as their only source of income, with another 15% reporting it is at least half. Less than 5% of respondents reported that games represented less than ¼ of their income.

This information is provided primarily to inform you of the makeup of the survey respondents.

Percentage of Income from Games
2015

Chart: Frequency (y-axis, 0 to 400) vs Project Fee (USD) (x-axis: 0, 25, 50, 75, 100)

A bit on statistical validity

The 2015 Game Audio Survey, like any survey, has inherent limits and biases. These include, but not limited to:

- The survey was publicized via social media and email networks and known audio groups. 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.

Thank you to the Game Audio Network Guild

For assisting in the survey.

Contact

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