

State of Freelancing in the Game Development Industry

2025 | Global & Europe



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Introduction

Game production is undergoing a notable shift, as studios are leaning more and more on external talent. According to Mellow, Europe experienced a 24% increase in the number of freelancers and contractors engaged by gamedev studios in 2025. Concurrently, budgets allocated to contract work are expanding, and freelancer earnings are rising.

Everyone's been talking about layoffs in gamedev, which is a huge thing. But our data tells a different story – the industry isn't shrinking, it's restructuring.

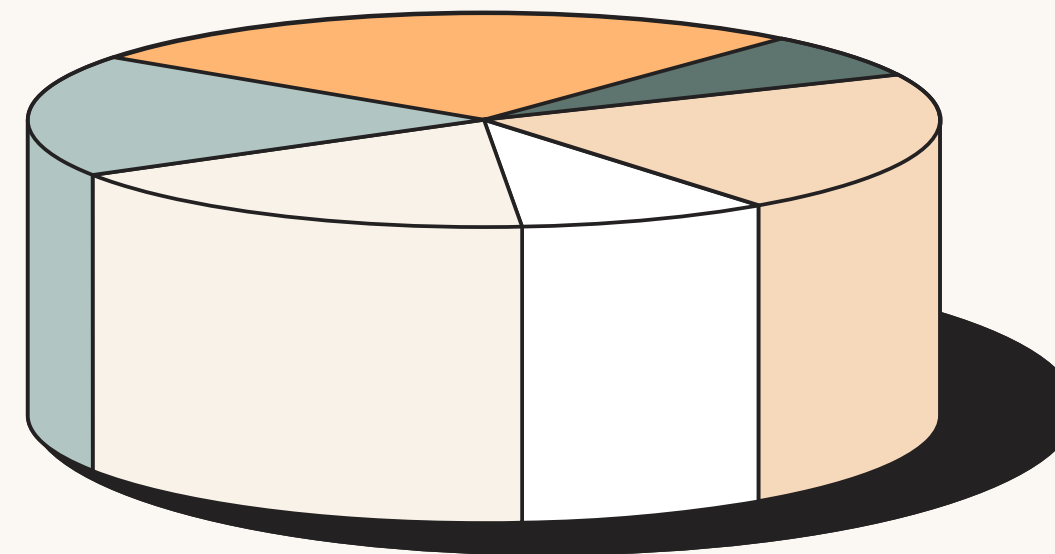
In 2025, European studios spent 63% more on external talent than the year before. The talent and the budgets are still there, just flowing differently.

We built this report to make that shift visible – because at Mellow, we help studios hire and manage this talent every day, and we think the rest of the industry should see what we see.

Methodology

The analysis draws on Mellow's 2025 platform data. The sample includes freelancers and clients active in the gamedev industry, including over 2,000 contractors and more than 150 businesses in total.

The report presents figures both globally and for the European region specifically. Global figures include European companies.



Key Takeaways

✔ Gamedev freelancer workforce grew by a quarter in 2025

European studios engaged 24% more freelancers year-over-year, with global growth at 21%. The industry is restructuring away from large permanent teams toward flexible, project-based talent models driven by economic, technological, and production pressures.

✔ Freelancer earnings are climbing across roles

Average monthly freelancer income in gamedev rose 19% globally to €1,900. Management roles led the gains at +37%, followed by UX specialists (+27%) and artists (+23%). In Europe, illustrators saw the strongest jump at +68%.

✔ Studio spending on contractors surged over 50%

European gamedev studios paid freelancers 63% more in 2025 compared to the previous year; globally, spending rose 55%. The average studio now works with 10 contractors, and freelancers are shouldering a growing share of production workload.

✔ Short-term contracts are growing the fastest

Contracts of 1–3 months grew by 33–44%, outpacing longer engagements. Specialists are increasingly brought in for specific development stages rather than sustained work – signaling a shift toward modular, elastic production pipelines.

“The 63% spending increase isn’t a budget anomaly. It’s a structural signal. Studios don’t just start hiring fewer people. They’re hiring differently. Ten contractors per studio as a baseline tells you project-based staffing is no longer a workaround. It’s the model.

Our own Big Games Industry Employment Survey data shows the same shift from the demand side: studios are building leaner permanent teams and filling capability gaps with specialists on demand. What AI tools and automated processes cannot give is acquired on an hour or project basis.”

Tanja Loktionova

Values Value, InGame Job, initiator of the Big Games Industry Employment Survey, now in its 10th edition

Glossary

01 Freelancing is a mode of professional engagement in which an individual operates independently, taking on project-based work across a diverse portfolio of clients.

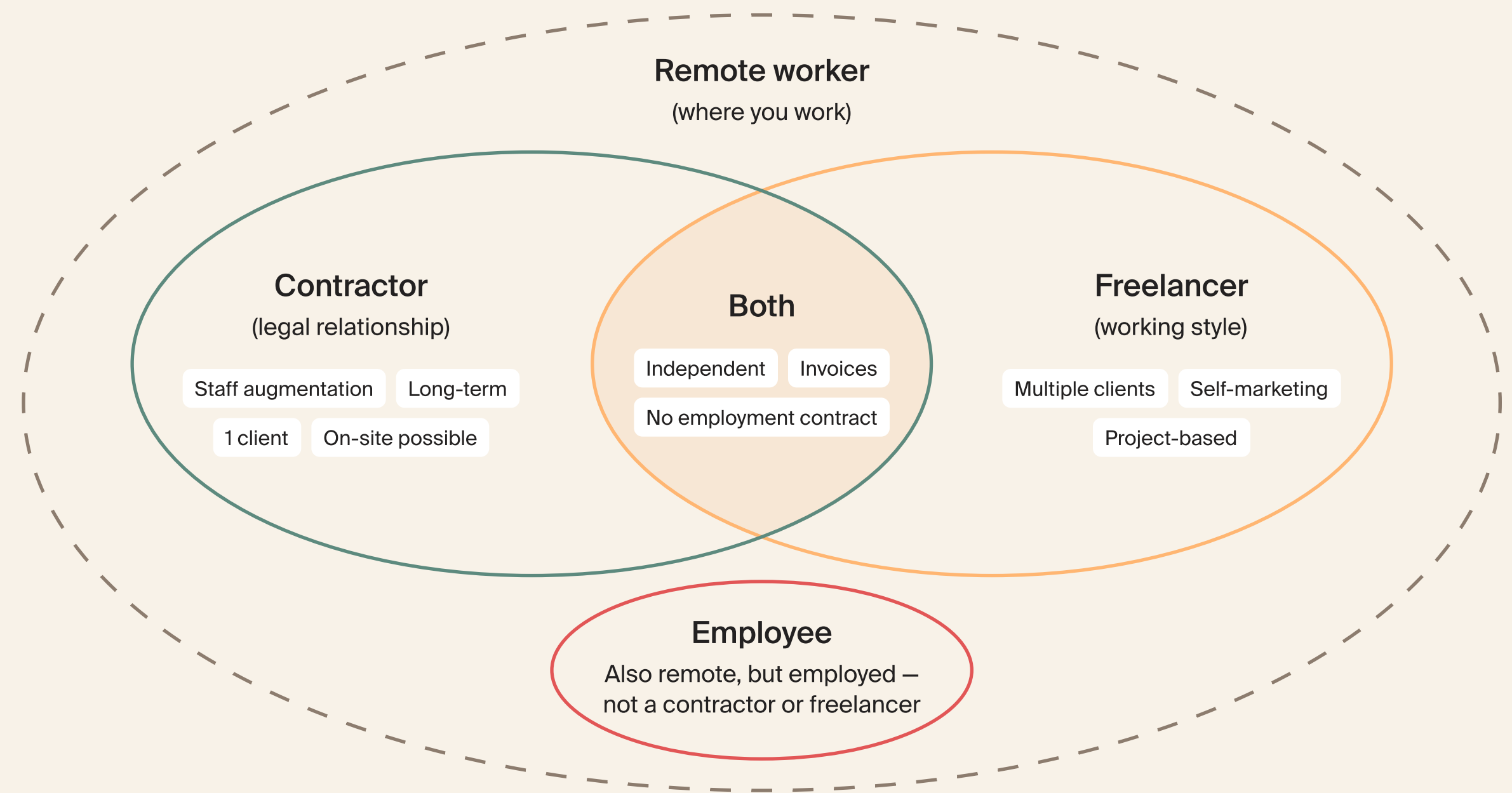
The freelancer manages client relationships either through formal contractual agreements or on an informal basis without a written contract. Their employment status may likewise vary – ranging from a structured contractual arrangement to alternative, non-traditional forms of engagement.

02 Contractor is a self-employed individual or entity contracted to perform work for or provide services to another entity as a non-employee.

They are responsible for their own taxes, insurance, and benefits, unlike employees. Contractors are often hired for their specialized skills or to complete specific projects, providing businesses with flexibility and expertise without the long-term commitment of hiring a full-time employee. See also: 1099 Worker, Casual Worker, Freelancer, Gig Worker.

03 Contingent Workforce is a labor pool consisting of people who work for an organization on a non-permanent basis.

A contingent workforce consists of freelancers, independent contractors, and consultants who are not on the company’s payroll because they are not employees of the organization. These workers are typically hired for specific projects, tasks, or periods, providing businesses with flexibility and the ability to scale their workforce according to demand without the long-term commitment of permanent employees.



The Number of Freelancers in Gamedev Grew by a Quarter in 2025

The industry is increasingly shifting toward an external talent model.

According to Mellow, the number of freelancers working with European gamedev studios grew 24% year-over-year in 2025, and the global figure was just slightly lower at 21%.

This trend reflects a broader restructuring of the games market that has been building for several years after and throughout the Mass Video Games Industry Layoffs (2022–2026) and is driven by economic, technological, and production factors.

A combination of many factors has led to the market entering a period of turbulence. The industry overexpanded during COVID because of the natural rise of the demand for video games during lockdown. However, overall, this turbulence, which has persisted for 4–5 years already, signals much more systemic and serious industry structural issues.

+24%

Freelancers in Europe

+21%

Global Freelancers

Budgets for triple-A games have swelled over the past decade, while sales and audience response remained unpredictable in a hit-driven business with a few winners, but many failures. Making games is expensive, to say the least, and there are very moderate chances of succeeding in a saturated market. Video games are an extraordinary field: half content business and half engineering endeavour.

Often, whether a game will succeed or not becomes clear in the later stages of development, when most of the budget has already been burnt. It's hard to imagine that, under these circumstances, projects wouldn't be shut down and teams laid off. This results in a boom-bust hiring cycle.

Meanwhile, service-based entertainment and the accelerating rise and development of new forms of media are creating fierce competition for the traditional game production model, where a team of three hundred or several thousand people spends 5–10 years making a game, and then consumers pay \$70.

In recent years, this has also been accompanied by the fact that the AI tech shift is driving a reduction in team sizes. This all leads to the fact that the traditional game development model has stopped working smoothly (if it ever was a smooth ride), especially for the studios with bold bets and long production cycles.

“It comes down to risk and cost – companies want flexibility, the ability to scale teams without long-term commitments. As for what they're willing to pay for: real expertise. Systems design and architecture skills are becoming much more valued now, and increasingly, people who understand how to actually integrate AI into a company's workflow.”

Ivan S.
(technical lead)

Studios' Spendings & Freelancers' Earnings

Naturally, the growth in freelancer numbers is accompanied by rising contractor budgets. Thus, European game development studios paid freelancers 63% more in 2025 than the year before; globally, the figure rose by 55%. Freelancers are shouldering more of the workload and becoming a central part of how games get made.

Our data shows that in 2025, the average gamedev studio worked with 10 contractors. Some contractors work with multiple clients simultaneously:

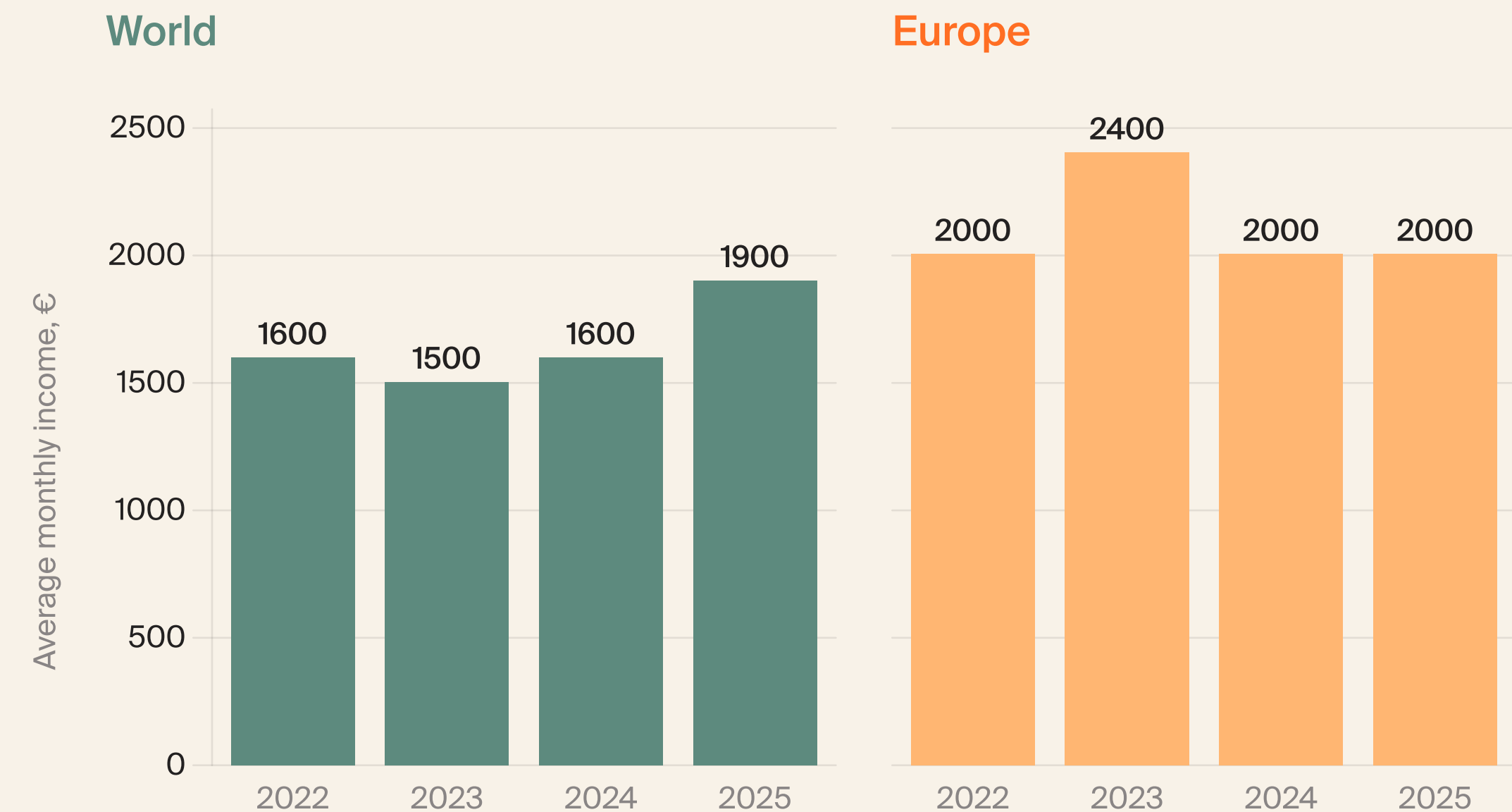
13% of freelancers worked with at least two clients in 2025, and 1% with at least three.

It's not just the number of freelancers that is growing, but also their pay.

Globally, the average monthly income of freelancers working in the gamedev industry rose by nearly 19% in 2025, reaching an average of €1,900. In Europe, the average held steady at €2,000.

There are several possible explanations for this growth at the global level. First, studios may simply be willing to pay more for contract work. Second, as trust in freelancers grows, they may be handed more complex and therefore better-paid tasks. Third, the share of senior-level specialists among freelancers may be increasing.

Average monthly freelancer earnings in gamedev, 2022–2025

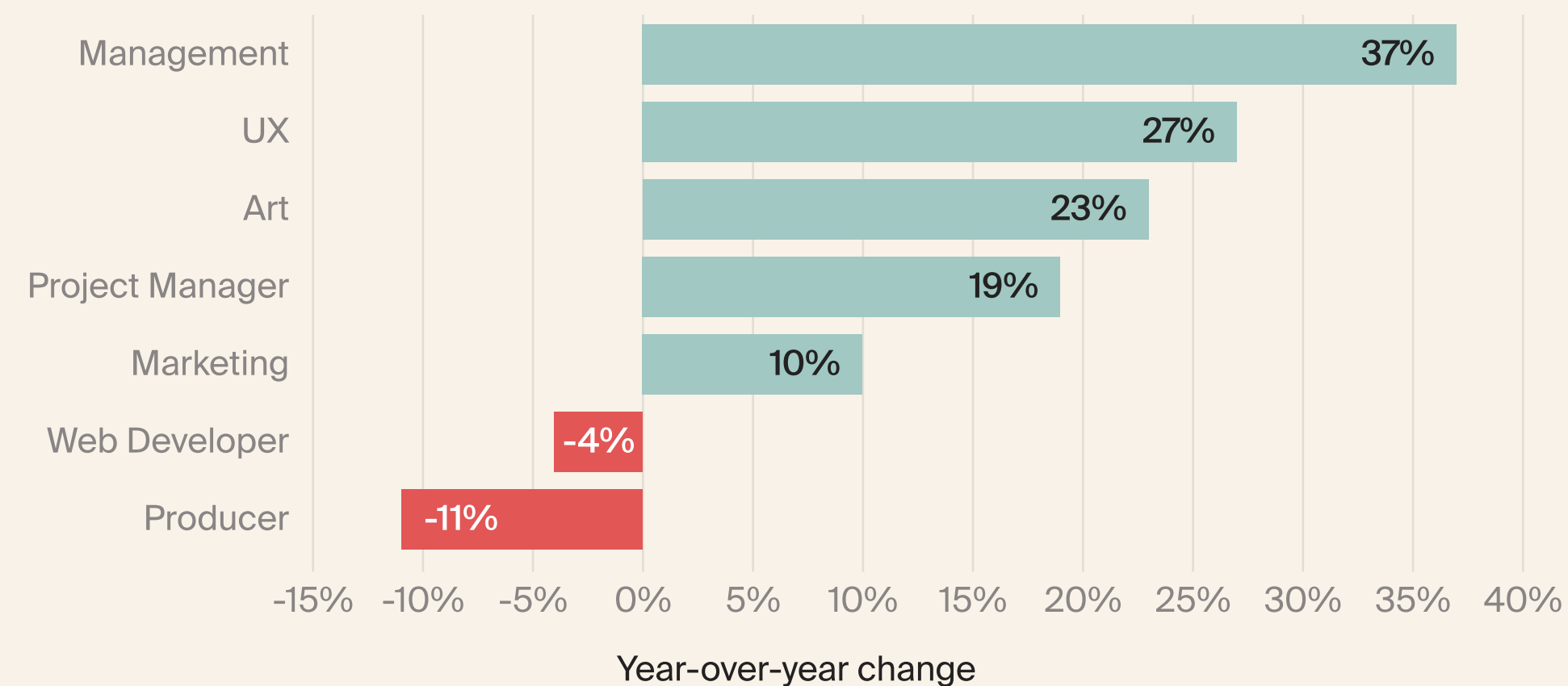


Source: [Mellow](#)

Management Roles Show the Strongest Income Growth

Globally, product managers, lead managers, and development managers earned 37% more in 2025, averaging €2,600 per month. UX specialists also saw notable gains, with earnings rising from €1,100 to €1,400, up 27% year-over-year.

Monthly freelancer earnings in gamedev, change in 2025



Source: [Mellow](#)

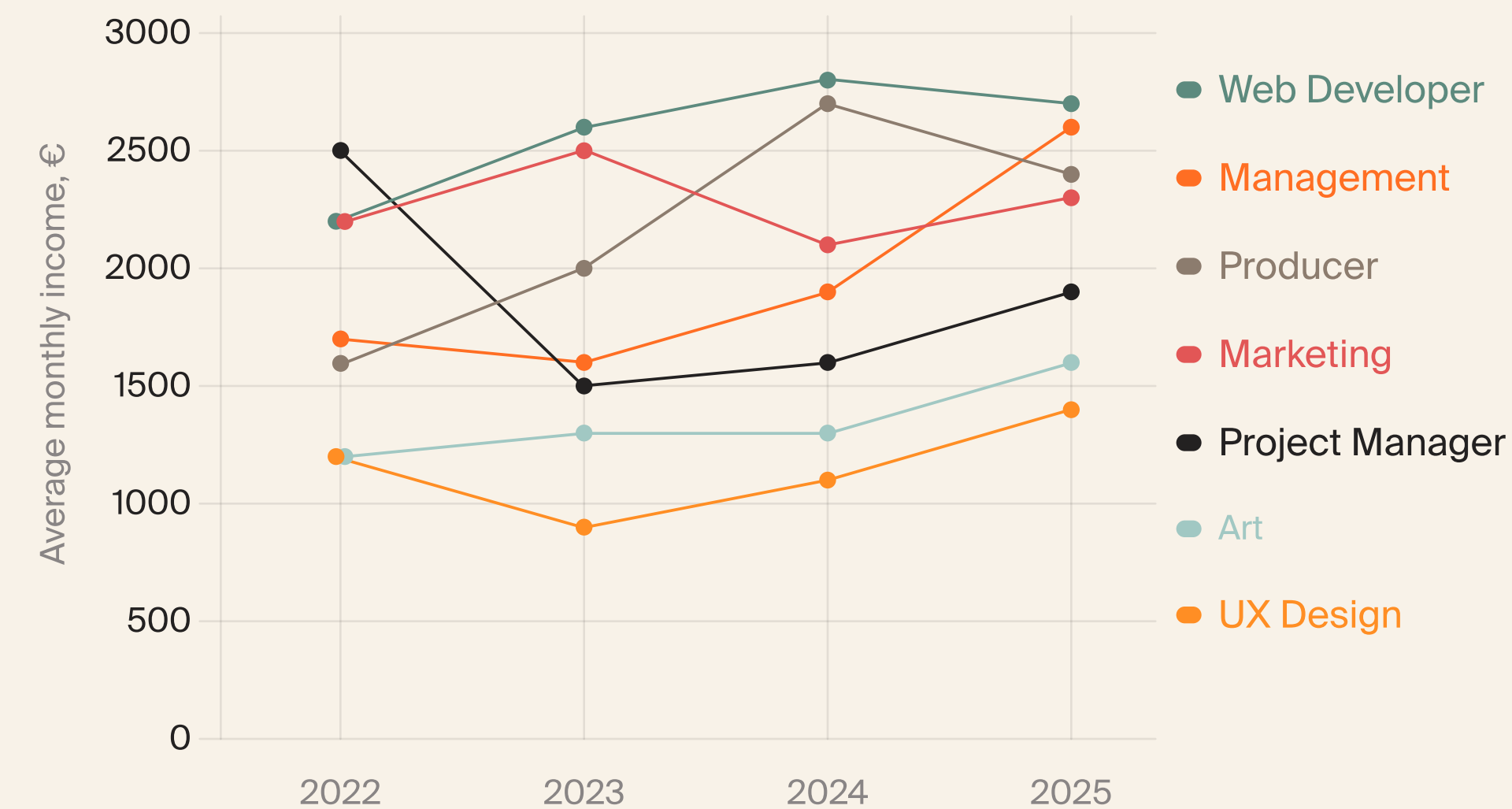
Artists also felt growth. Average monthly earnings for artists worldwide rose from €1,300 to €1,600 in 2025, up 23%. This is one of the most common roles in the industry, with an average of 7 art specialists per studio.

Marketing roles were up 10% year-over-year, reaching around €2,300. Web developers, however, saw a slight dip, from €2,800 to €2,700.

In Europe, the strongest monthly earning gains went to illustrators, up 68% to €989, followed by QA testers, up 34% to €1,400, and artists, up 16% to €1,600.

Broadening the scope a bit, looking at the longer 2022–2025 period, management roles remain among the top earners. Compared to 2022, their average monthly income grew 53%, from €1,700 to €2,600. Producers and game designers show comparable growth over the same period, with earnings up 50%, from €1,600 to €2,400.

Average monthly freelancer earnings in gamedev, 2022–2025



Source: [Mellow](#)

“Companies no longer pay for “nice design” – they pay for measurable results: CTR, CPI, and the ability to scale winning approaches. What’s valued is testing speed and systematic performance work, not one-off production.

That’s why top earners are those who shifted from creative production to working with metrics and built deep expertise in a narrow niche (e.g., ad creatives for mobile games globally).”

Chingiz Rafikov
 Founder, Performance Creative Studio for Mobile Games

Contract Durations are Changing

Beyond headcount, the nature of freelance work is changing too. The fastest growth is in short-term contracts. The number of freelancers working with a company for just one month grew by 33%; the 2–3 month segment was up 44%, and the 4–6 month segment was up 36%.

Longer contracts are growing too, but more modestly: the 7–12 month segment expanded by 26%.

Some roles are becoming more project-based. Among producers, for instance, the share working for up to six months is growing, while the number working for 13 months or more has stayed flat. This suggests specialists are being brought in for specific, discrete stages of development rather than sustained, ongoing work.

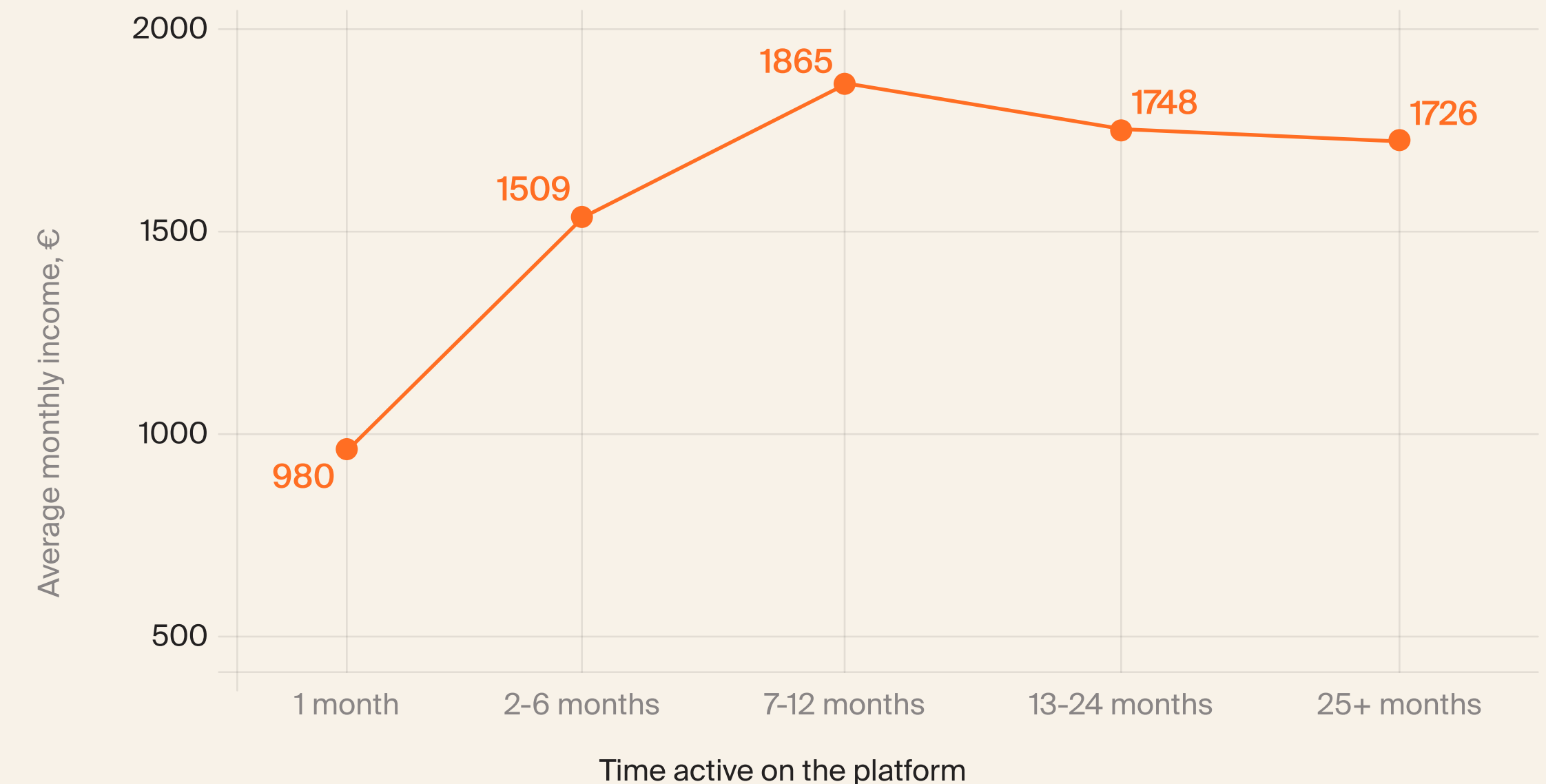
Creative roles are also moving toward shorter contracts: the number of active freelancers in the 1–3 month range for this role grew by nearly half in 2025.

Freelancers who stick around longer tend to earn more

On average, freelancer income grows with accumulated experience on the platform.

Newcomers, defined as those with roughly one month of work, averaged €980 in 2025, up 7% year-over-year. In the 2–6 month group, that rose to €1,500, up 14%. Earnings peak in the 7–12-month group at around €1,900, up 13%. After that, figures dip slightly: the 13–24 month segment averaged around €1,700, up 3%, and the 25+ month group came in at roughly €1,700 as well, up 10%.

How does the average income change with project experience



Source: [Mellow](#)

Summary: Why there are more freelancers engaged in game production

Game development production pipelines have always relied on freelancers. The need for certain teams and specialists changes as the game is being developed, which likens the field of game development to film production, where nearly 40% of the workforce operates on a contract basis. A similar trend is apparent in the game development industry.

Largely due to the COVID era, which has sparked the remote-first services revolution – the friction to work with freelancers from abroad is less than ever, and, in this way, to reduce game production costs. The software infrastructure and workflow tools have been completely reimaged over the past decade, and all intermediate layers, from regulators to services, have adapted to remote-first operations.

In 2025-2026, game companies are increasingly leaning toward elastic teams and on-demand development: bringing people in precisely when their work becomes the bottleneck, having much more accurate control over the budget. This approach is fundamentally rooted in contract-based relationships rather than full-time hiring.

Economic, technological, and production factors are driving game studios to outsource an increasing portion of game development and work with freelancers, which allows them to manage headcount and keep a closer track of their budget during turbulent times for the industry.

The game development industry is embracing a more flexible production model, with external talent taking on an ever-larger share of the work. This is reflected in the growing number of freelancers, rising studio budgets for contract work, and higher earnings for the specialists themselves. Demand is growing for both high-volume roles and more specialized management positions.

New contractors are entering the market in large numbers, while the pool of those working freelance for more than six months remains stable. Bringing in freelancers is no longer an occasional practice; it has become a systemic one, and it continues to expand into businesses quite fast.



“ The biggest shift in game development isn't a new engine or platform — it's how teams are built.

Our research confirms what many of us sense on the ground: project-based work is becoming the default operating model in games. The reasons hold up on both sides. Studios spent over 55% more on contract talent this year — not because budgets are loose, but because elastic teams give them honest control over headcount instead of the hire-and-layoff cycle that devastates morale overnight. Professionals get autonomy: freelancer earnings are up 19% — people are choosing focused, high-impact engagements more often.

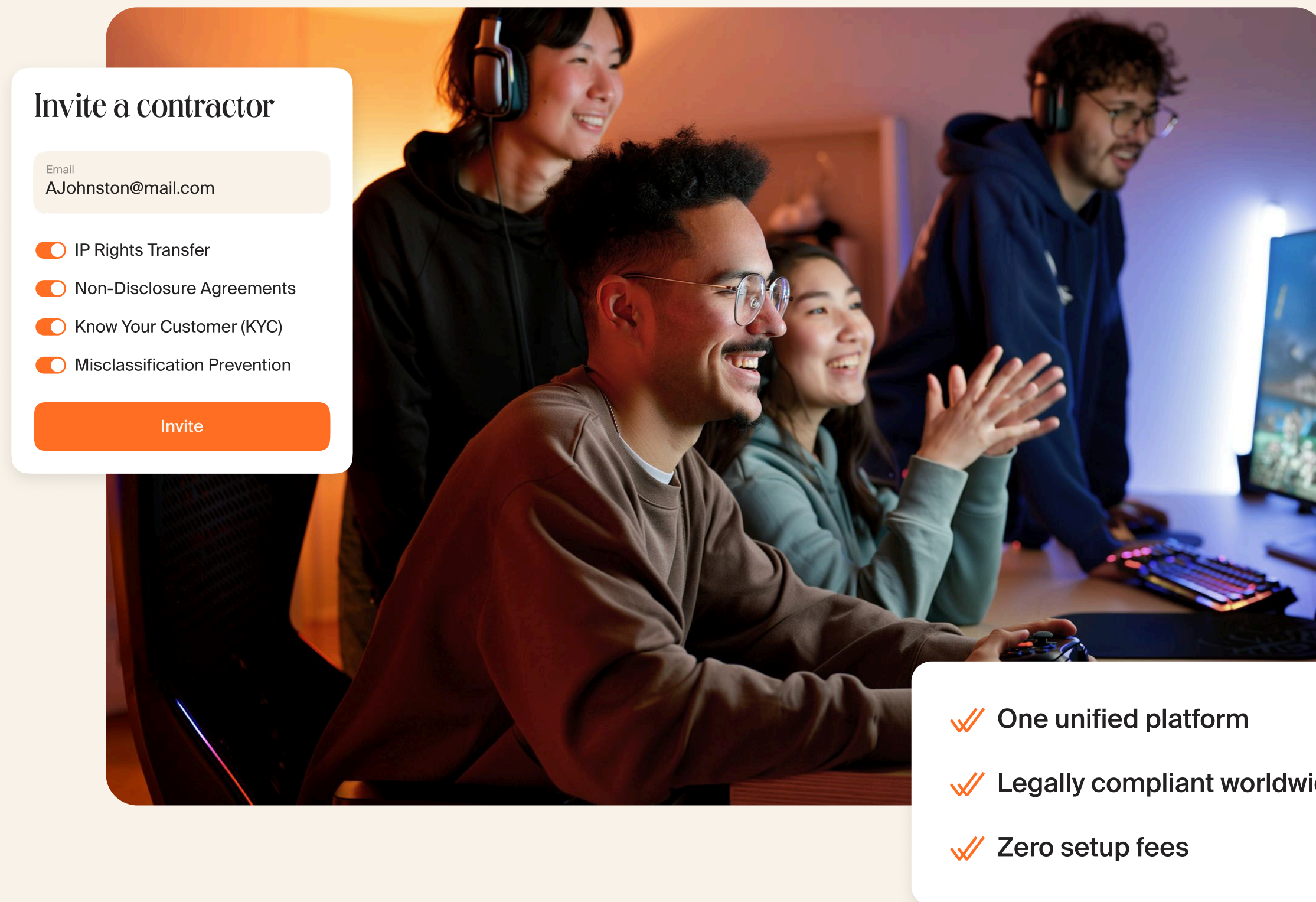
We plan to keep this research going — there's too much we haven't uncovered yet. How is AI reshaping team sizes and freelancer rates? Where is the talent migrating geographically? What makes some contractors stay for years while others rotate after a single milestone? | The market is moving fast. We hope these insights help you to keep up.



Alexander Norovyatkin

Head of PR & Brand, Mellow

About Mellow



Invite a contractor

Email
AJohnston@mail.com

- IP Rights Transfer
- Non-Disclosure Agreements
- Know Your Customer (KYC)
- Misclassification Prevention

Invite

- ✔ One unified platform
- ✔ Legally compliant worldwide
- ✔ Zero setup fees

Mellow is a contractor management platform powering how companies and freelancers work together, automating contracts, compliance, and payments across 100+ countries.

It removes barriers between companies and talent, allowing people and businesses to work together globally, transparently, and at scale.

The platform works is used by more than 300 gamedev companies, including GDEV, Gaijin Entertainment, Scorewarrior.

Mellow operates globally with offices in Cyprus, Hong Kong, and New York.