GDC | March 20-24, 2023 San Francisco, CA

# Building Audio Careers, Together

**ZW Buckley**
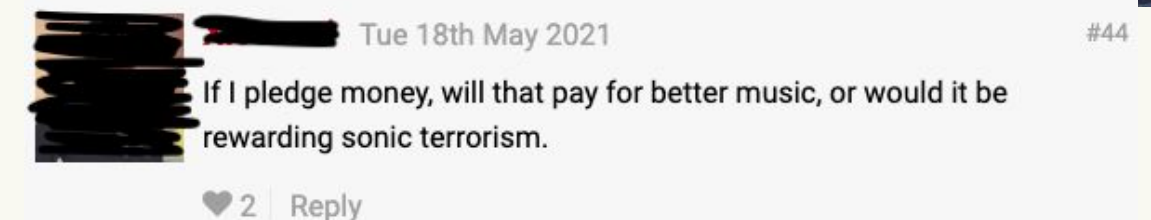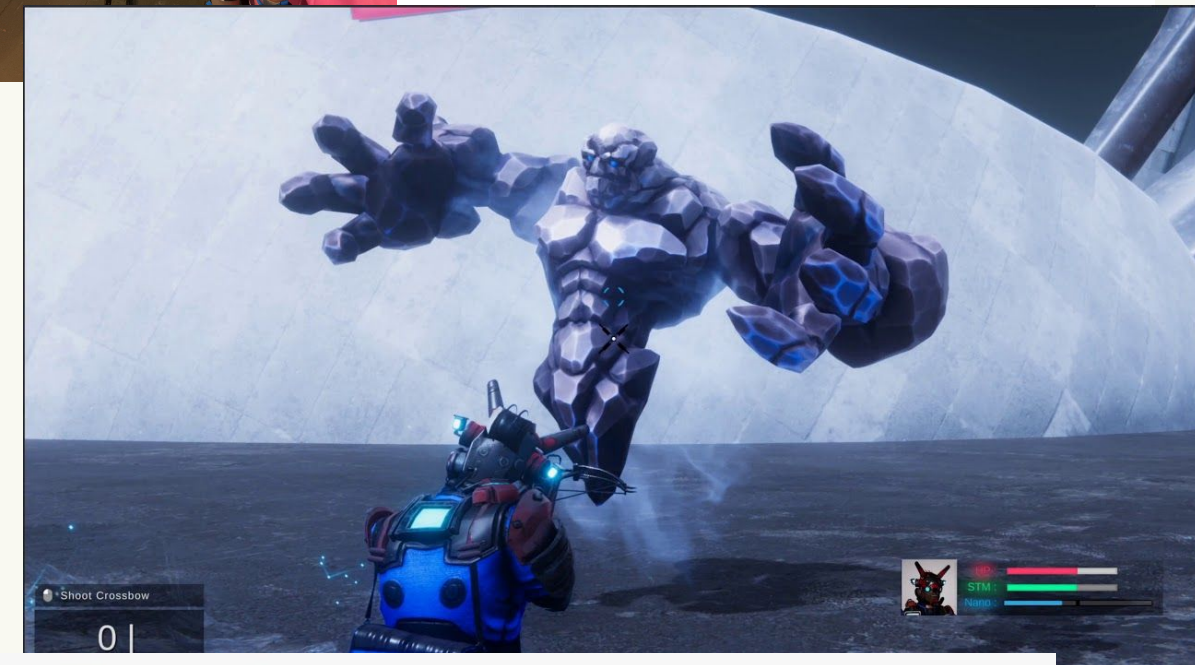**Composer and Member-Owner**
**Plant Based Audio**

#GDC23

# Hi there! I'm ZW.

I'm a co-founder of **Plant Based Audio**, a member-owned, all-remote game audio studio based in Seattle

I've worked on multiple projects with **Peeka VR**, and upcoming games like **Laxidaze** and **Knight Tails**

According to the bottom half of the internet, I'm also a sonic terrorist

Tue 18th May 2021                                    #44

If I pledge money, will that pay for better music, or would it be rewarding sonic terrorism.

♥ 2 | Reply

I'd like to talk about how we build our careers in game audio whether we're freelance or in-house, junior or senior

# This field is notoriously hard



am I in a survival horror game?

the games industry

the music/audio industry

# Can we make it *easier* on one another?

# The problem as I see it

# The solution as I see it

But how can we *practically* and *actionably* achieve a cooperatively-focused, community-centered career?

# A talk in three parts:

**1. The Casual:** Our relationship with our colleagues

**2. The Communal:** Our relationship with our community

**3. The Commercial:** Our relationship with our work

# A note before we get started:

The focus of this talk isn't about earning as much money as possible. This talk is **anti-hussle**

This talk is about creating **sustainable careers** and fostering a culture of **inclusion** and **abundance** in game audio

My hope is that this talk is relevant to junior and seniors, freelance and in-house alike

# **The Casual:** Our Relationship with Our Colleagues

# We Need One Another

It's sage advice to have friends outside of the games industry

However, I think it's important to have **meaningful, genuine friendships** within the industry as well

# We need a support system

Our desire to be viewed professionally by our peers can often be at odds with our need to continue to develop and grow in our chosen craft.

Culturally, we are conditioned to believe that vulnerability is disqualifying

There is no such thing as a self-made person. The entirety of our working lives are defined by our relationships with others

# The Inklings

From 1933 to 1949 J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and others met weekly in an Oxford pub

They would share their works in progress with one another to get feedback

These college professors and actual literary giants still actively sought feedback on their work
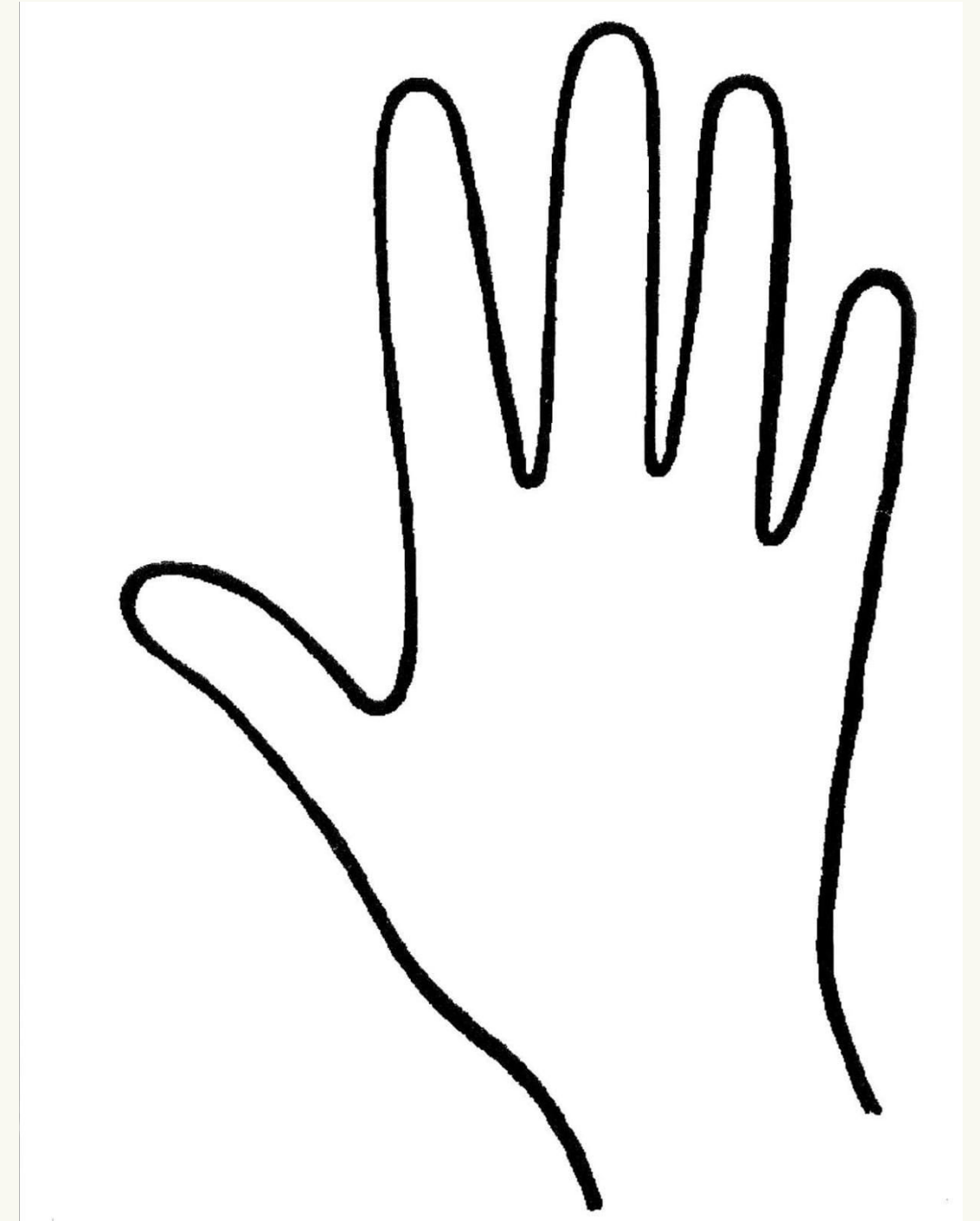
# Find a "High Five"

One person farther ahead in
their career than you are

One person earlier in their
career than you are

Three people on a similar
career trajectory as you

# **The Casual:** Actionable Steps

# Make friends with colleagues from different backgrounds than your own

# Freely give one hour of your time each month to helping a colleague earlier in their career than you are

# Boldly ask for advice from a colleague that you look up to

# **The Communal:** Our Relationship with Our Community

# To be in community

The "game audio community" is often spoken of as a singular all-knowing, all-seeing monolith

When someone says "get involved in the game audio community" it can seem really overwhelming

This ends up creating a problem

# Do you find yourself lurking everywhere and present nowhere?

# We can't be everywhere

To genuinely be a part of a community, you have to contribute to that community

This doesn't have to mean leadership

It can simply mean showing up and being present with others in the community
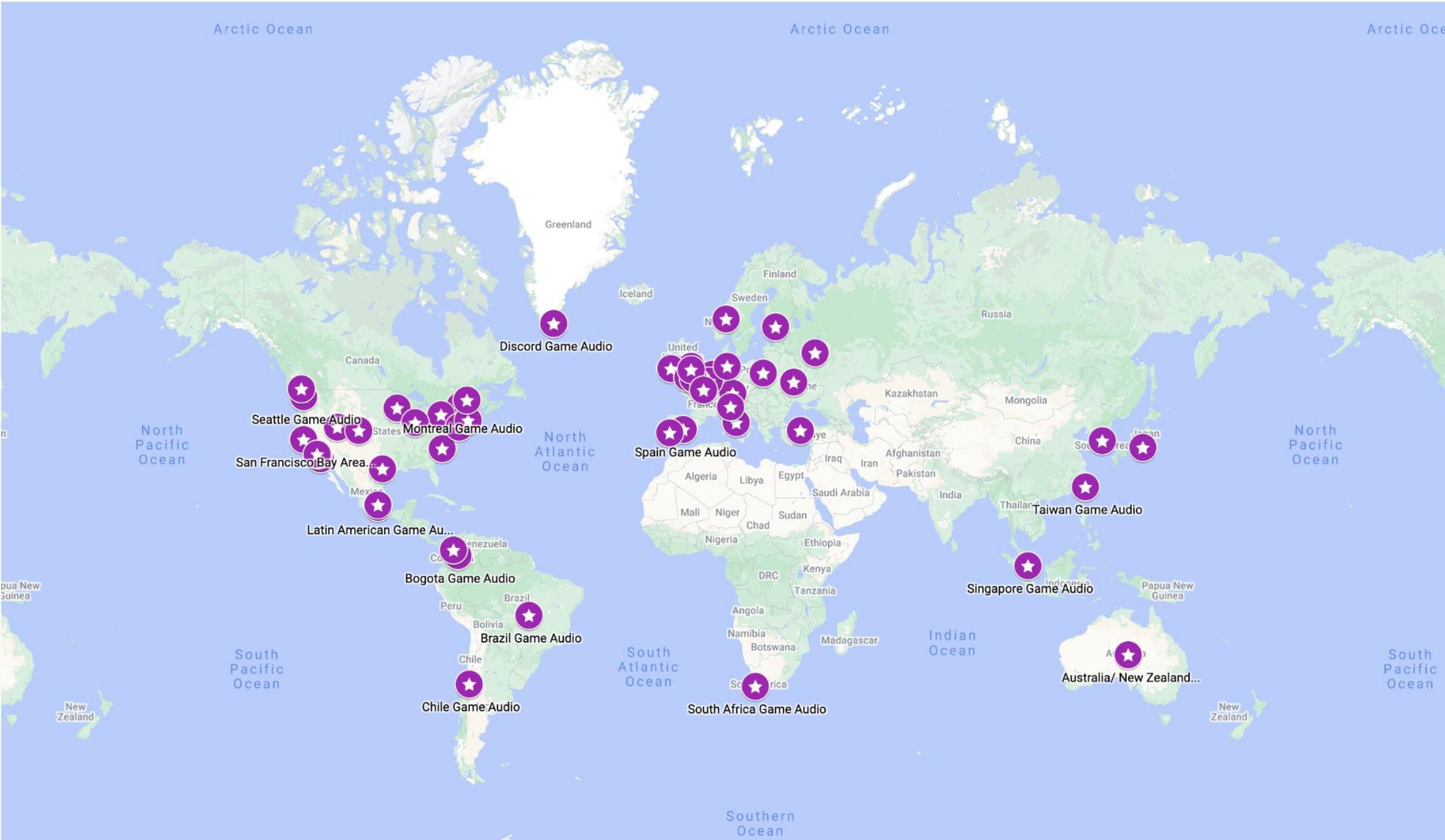
# Respect your limits

Everybody's social battery has a different capacity

With the prevalence of online and regional game audio communities, it's very possible to connect in a way that respects your limits

You don't need to be in every online space and at every physical event

Just somewhere folks know your name

# Game Audio Communites

# **The Communal:** Actionable Steps

# Leave the Slack/Discord/Facebook groups that you haven't checked in on in over a year

# Pick one community to be invested in and excited about

# Volunteer for your community once a year. The folks running them always need help

# **The Commercial:** Our Relationship with Our Work

# In-House = In-fluence

When you're in-house you have the opportunity to advocate and influence on a structural level

Champion team diversity

Be attentive to the kind of hiring criteria your team uses

You're a hero for every junior role your team opens

If you work with external vendors, try to expand that pool when possible

# Freelancing: A balanced diet

The phrase "feast or famine" gets thrown around a lot in game audio

It seems folks are either drowning in work or desperate for it

How can we ensure that we have enough to thrive but not so much that we are crunching constantly?
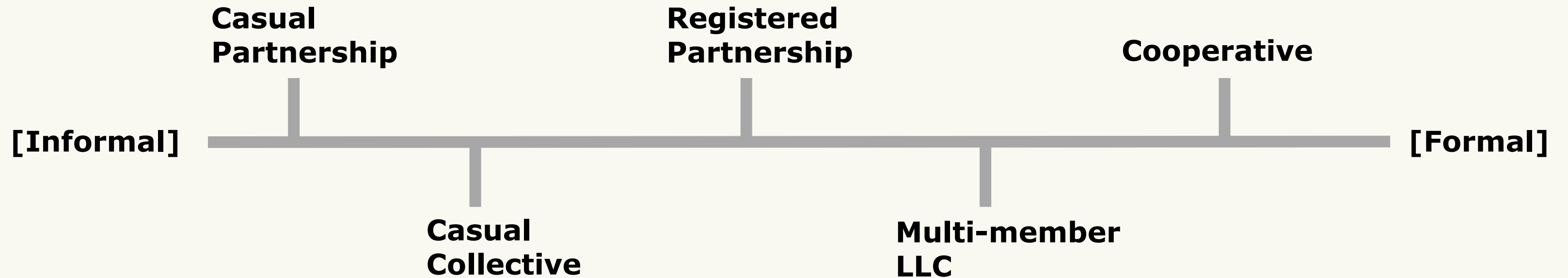
# Alternatives to going it alone

One factor that I observe consistently amongst the folks in our industry that always have work is that they are never working alone

They're bringing others onto projects and being brought onto projects as well

These relationships range from informal to formal

# Business Structures



**Casual Partnership**

**Registered Partnership**

**Cooperative**

[Informal]                                                                                      [Formal]

**Casual Collective**

**Multi-member LLC**

# Cooperatives

Co-ops are growing in popularity in the games industry and are an excellent fit for audio

A business structure in which everybody who works for the studio owns it as well

There are two audio co-ops (that I'm aware of) and room for plenty more

# **The Commercial:** Actionable Steps

# Share your rates or salary with a colleague

# Subcontract somebody for small parts of your larger projects to help build their credits

# Pass along a project to somebody out of your usual circle when you're able

# Support unionization efforts where you're able

# Advocate to ensure that everybody who works on a project with you is credited

**The Future:** A better industry built on the back of many small actions.

# Thanks!

- Make friends with colleagues from different backgrounds than your own

- Freely give one hour of your time each month to helping a colleague earlier in their career than you are

- Boldly ask for advice from a colleague that you look up to

- Leave the online groups that you haven't checked in on in over a year

- Pick one community to be invested in and excited about

- Volunteer for your community once a year

- Share your rates or salary with a colleague

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