

In video game strike, SAG-AFTRA pickets one company, with no further plans

Hong Jian
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Some 2,500 video game performers, including voice actors, motion capture performers and others, went on strike July 26 against a host of major video game companies, including Activision, Electronic Arts, Epic Games, Disney Character Voices, Insomniac Games, Take-Two Interactive and Warner Bros. Discovery's Games.

The Interactive Media Agreement (IMA) covering the video game workers expired in November 2022, and was extended on a monthly basis while the futile negotiations continued.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI), through which the companies plan to eliminate large numbers of jobs and even entire crafts, higher pay for video game performers (which has fallen far behind inflation), medical treatment and health and safety issues are central issues in the dispute.

The performers, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), are particularly determined to achieve protection over the use of their likenesses and voices.

Union leaders have made it clear they are prepared to accept the companies' introduction of AI. However, the union has not been able, on the one hand, to obtain even verbal commitments from the companies that video game performers would be protected from the ravages of the new technology and, on the other, to wear down the opposition of its skeptical and suspicious membership, many of whom can see quite clearly what the massive firms are up to.

From this point of view, the SAG-AFTRA informational meeting held last Tuesday might just as well have been billed as a disinformation meeting.

The meeting began with prerecorded remarks from Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator for SAG-AFTRA, who declared, "I want to start out by saying the fight that we are launching here is not something that's been taken lightly. This comes after more than 18 months of intense negotiations and incredible efforts by our Interactive Media Agreement."

SAG-AFTRA members voted overwhelmingly for strike action last September. In fact, the union has done everything

in its power since November 2022 to avoid a conflict. Crabtree-Ireland let the cat out of the bag when he acknowledged, "We have fought so hard to try and achieve the necessary provisions *without having to go on strike with these companies.*"

This is known as fighting from one's knees. The union did everything, in other words, except use its *only* serious weapon, the strike.

Last year, the SAG-AFTRA officialdom kept its members on the job while their brothers and sisters in the film industry were on strike over the very same issues, and after the overwhelming strike vote 11 months ago of 98.32 percent.

Moreover, earlier this year, giving a hint as to what it planned to do more widely, SAG-AFTRA negotiated in secret with Replica Studios, approving a contract without even putting it to a vote or informing the membership that negotiations had been taking place before the deal was inked. This provoked widespread anger.

On August 1, SAG-AFTRA organized a picket outside Warner Bros. Games (which produces the *Mortal Kombat* series, *Hogwarts Legacy* and *Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League*) in Burbank, California. Some 500 actors participated in the action.

Reuters reported that the picketing video game voice actors and motion-capture performers explained that "artificial intelligence was a threat to their professions. 'The models that they're using have been trained on our voices without our consent at all, with no compensation,'" *Persona 5 Tactica* voice actor and video game strike captain, Leeanna Albanese, told the wire service.

"They're calling the information data—our movement, our voice, the way we talk," Ted Evans, a voice actor on the Warner Bros. picket line, commented to *Variety*. "For them, it's just data. For us, it's our hopes and dreams and life purposes. ... It's basically taking everything we have and throwing us in the garbage."

SAG-AFTRA argues that the video game companies' AI "protections" entirely exclude certain categories of performers. Ray Rodriguez, a union official,

told *Variety* that the so-called protections “for on-camera performers apply only to those whose image is recognizable as that performer. ‘That doesn’t happen in video games, right?’ he said. ‘You’re providing the stunt work for a zombie—you’re not going to look like that zombie hopefully.’” Union officials “also fear that the video game companies will be able to use an actor’s previous performances to create synthetic characters.” But what strategy does SAG-AFTRA have for combating these various plans?

Crabtree-Ireland asserted that the fact “that WB Games happens to be the first, I can assure you, they won’t be the last. This action, even though it’s outside of Warner Bros. facility, should be viewed as directed at all of them, because every single one of them has a responsibility to come to the table and make a fair deal. And until they do, we’ll be holding them accountable.”

However, no plans for further action have been announced. *Variety* notes, “Unlike last year, the union is not planning to picket in person every day. Instead, it will be looking for other ways to draw attention to the strike, particularly online.”

After dragging its feet for nearly two years and having been finally forced to call a strike by the companies’ intransigence, SAG-AFTRA is limiting the action to the greatest extent possible. It has not called out every video game performer. According to the previous contract language to which union officials agreed, games in production under the previous contract are allowed to continue production.

More studios—or particular IPs [intellectual property]—have been given exemption from strike activity than are actually being struck. Indeed, the union observes on its web page that “it is easier to think about the strike in terms of struck games as opposed to struck companies.”

Reuters points out that “major video game publishers including Electronic Arts and Take-Two will likely stave off a big hit from the strike due to their in-house studios and the lengthy development cycles for games, analysts have said.”

On top of all this, SAG-AFTRA has been actively encouraging consumers and streamers to essentially “cross their picket lines” and continue to play and engage with IPs and studios that were being struck, insisting on their FAQ page that

the only situation in which streaming a struck video game would be in violation of our strike order is if you had rendered services as a performer in that struck game. Otherwise, we are not asking you to stop playing/streaming video games. In fact the

opposite! Please continue doing what you love, and any support and solidarity would be extremely appreciated!

So, just to be clear, rather than asking streamers/gamers to show their solidarity by *not crossing* the picket line, the union officials are encouraging them to show their support by ... *crossing* the picket line. Every aspect of the current strategy is guaranteed to lead the video performers to defeat unless there is a dramatic change and the rank-and-file take control of the struggle through building independent, democratically controlled committees.

In his statement last week, Crabtree-Ireland argued that “these companies ultimately have to change that position and agree to a contract that provides those basic protections.” By “basic protections” SAG-AFTRA simply means requiring the companies to obtain the “informed consent” of individual voice actors when using their likenesses and voices for artificial intelligence purposes.

However, as workers in every industry know, if you do not sign the “informed consent” form, you do not get to work. The union officials are playing a game of three-card monte with workers’ livelihoods, as well as the continued existence of their careers. As the AI database gets larger and larger, the original performer’s work can be subsumed into a much larger whole. This will make it more and more difficult for any individual worker to prove that his or her effort or likeness is being used and therefore to establish eligibility for compensation.

It should also be pointed out that in all of the talk about AI, the union officials have been able to keep silent about the disparity in pay between voice actors in the video game industry versus voice actors in the film and television industry, an egregious disparity given that the video game industry profits dwarf that of the film and television industry.

The global video game industry generated nearly \$184 billion in revenue in 2023, according to forecaster Newzoo. “The US and China accounted for a whopping 50% of all consumer spending on games, with US consumers spending well over \$46 billion,” writes Newzoo, adding that it projects “that revenues will reach \$207.0 billion in 2026.”



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