Video game actors are officially on strike over AI

Actors have once again picked up their picket signs. But this time, members of the Screen Actors Guild are striking against the video game industry after negotiations for a new contract governing interactive media and video games fell through. The guild began striking on Friday, July 26th, preventing over 160,000 SAG-AFTRA members from taking new video game projects and impeding games already in development from the biggest publishers to the smallest indie studios.

Negotiations broke down due to disagreements over worker protections around AI. The actors union, SAG-AFTRA, negotiates the terms of the interactive media agreement, or IMA, with a bargaining committee of video game publishers, including Activision, Take-Two, Insomniac Games, WB Games, and others that represent a total of 30 signatory companies. Though SAG-AFTRA and the video game bargaining group were able to agree on a number of proposals, AI remained the final stumbling block resulting in the strike.

SAG-AFTRA's provisions on AI govern both voice and movement performers with respect to digital replicas – or using an existing performance as the foundation to create new ones without the original performer – and the use of generative AI to create performances without any initial input. However, according to SAG-AFTRA, the bargaining companies disagreed about which type of performer should be eligible for AI protections.

SAG-AFTRA chief contracts officer Ray Rodriguez said that the bargaining companies initially wanted to offer protections to voice, not motion performers. "So anybody doing a stunt or

creature performance, all those folks would have been left unprotected under the employers' offer," Rodriguez said in an interview with *Aftermath*.

Rodriguez said that the companies later extended protections to motion performers, but only if "the performer is identifiable in the output of the AI digital replica."

SAG-AFTRA rejected this proposal as it would potentially exclude a majority of movement performances. "Their proposal would carve out anything that doesn't look and sound identical to me," said Andi Norris, a member of SAG-AFTRA's IMA negotiating committee, during a press conference. "[The proposal] would leave movement specialists, including stunts, entirely out in the cold, to be replaced … by soulless synthetic performers trained on our actual performances."

The bargaining game companies argued that the terms went far enough and would require actors' approval. "Our offer is directly responsive to SAG-AFTRA's concerns and extends meaningful AI protections that include requiring consent and fair compensation to all performers working under the IMA. These terms are among the strongest in the entertainment industry," wrote Audrey Cooling, a representative working on behalf of the video game companies on the bargaining committee in a statement to *The Verge.*

SAG-AFTRA's strike rules include a number of exceptions for struck companies and work, which makes it difficult to know the true scope of the strike, especially the games it affects.

For example, work done under SAG-AFTRA's Tiered-Budget Independent Interactive Media Agreement or an Interim Interactive Media Agreement is exempt from the strike. Additionally, a specific clause in the IMA called "side letter six" grants an exemption to games in production before August 2023. This means that though Take-Two is a struck company, *Grand Theft Auto VI* is not considered struck work. However,

members of SAG-AFTRA’s negotiating committee have encouraged others to refrain from working on side letter six games.

“Side letter six permits but does not require performers to render services during a strike,” said Sarah Elmaleh, a video game performer and chair of SAG-AFTRA’s IMA negotiating committee in a TikTok video. “This language made its way into our contract for one reason only, to undermine our union’s most valuable tool: a strike.”

The last SAG-AFTRA video game strike was in 2016 and lasted 11 months, earning performers fixed rate increases, improved safety assurances on set, and better oversight to prevent vocal stress in voice performers.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/8/5/24213808/video-game-voice-actor-strike-sag-aftra