

Hollywood's video game actors want to avoid a strike. The sticking point in their talks? AI

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SAG-AFTRA captains Iris Liu, left, and Miki Yamashita, center, and SAG-AFTRA chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland lead a cheer for striking actors outside Paramount Pictures studio, Nov. 3, 2023, in Los Angeles. While negotiators with SAG-AFTRA have made gains in bargaining over wages and job safety in their video game contract, leaders say talks have stalled over a key issue: protections over the use of artificial intelligence. Credit: AP Photo/Chris

Pizzello, File

For more than a year and a half, leaders of Hollywood's actors union have been negotiating with video game companies over a new contract that covers the performers who bring their titles to life.

But while negotiators with the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists have made gains in bargaining over wages and job safety in their video game contract, or interactive media agreement, leaders say talks have stalled over a key issue: protections over the use of artificial intelligence.

"It is the major obstacle to having an agreement, and this contract area has been for quite some time," said Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, SAG-AFTRA's executive director. "The fundamental issue is, at this moment, an unwillingness by this bargaining group to provide an equal level of protection from the dangers of AI for all our members."

Union leaders say they aren't "anti-AI altogether." But [voice](#) actors and other video game performers are worried that unchecked use of AI could provide game makers with a means to displace them—by training an AI to replicate an actor's voice, or to create a digital replica of their likeness without consent.

In some cases, the role of an AI voice is often invisible and used to clean up a recording in the later stages of production or to make a character sound older or younger at a different stage of their virtual life.

"Our concern is the idea that all of this work translates into grist for the mill that displaces us," said Sarah Elmaleh, chair of the interactive negotiating committee. "They do not have to call us back, you do not

have to be informed of what they've used your material to create."

The union has held onto one last option in their battle over a contract: calling a strike. Crabtree-Ireland said that the union hopes to avoid a work stoppage, but will "do what it takes to make sure that our members are treated fairly."

"Anyone who thinks that we're afraid to go on strike, or that we won't go on strike, clearly hasn't been paying attention," he added.

SAG-AFTRA members voted in favor of giving leadership the authority to strike against video game companies in September. Concerns about how [movie studios](#) will use AI helped fuel last year's strikes by the union, which lasted four months.

Scott Lambright, an actor who has voiced monsters and non-player characters for games, said AI could threaten jobs by making it cheaper to use a generated voice, while also lowering the quality of vocal performance as an art.

"Emotionally, it's going to be shallow," he said.

AI could also strip some actors of the chance to land smaller background roles, like NPCs, where they can hone their craft before landing bigger parts, Lambright said.



Voice actor Sarah Elmaleh poses for a photo in Los Angeles on Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024. While negotiators with the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists have made gains in bargaining over wages and job safety in their video game contract, or interactive media agreement, leaders say talks have stalled over a key issue: protections over the use of artificial intelligence. Credit: AP Photo/Richard Vogel

"Having those roles gives you the trust in yourself to take a bigger role," he said. "And if one doesn't have access to NPC roles, telling a small part of a story... you're going to have no confidence leading something."

The last interactive contract, negotiated in 2017, did not provide protections around AI. The agreement covers more than 2,500 "off-camera (voiceover) performers, on-camera (motion capture, stunt)

performers, stunt coordinators, singers, dancers, puppeteers, and background performers," according to the union.

The bargaining group of top video game producers is willing to put protections in place for voice actors, SAG-AFTRA said, but won't go as far as including other performers, including stunt workers and motion capture artists.

The video game companies covered by the interactive contract include Activision Productions Inc., Blindlight LLC, Disney Character Voices Inc., Electronic Arts Productions Inc., Formosa Interactive LLC, Insomniac Games Inc., Take 2 Productions Inc., VoiceWorks Productions Inc. and WB Games Inc.

Audrey Cooling, a spokesperson for the companies, said they are negotiating in good faith and "have made tremendous progress."

"We have reached tentative agreements on the vast majority of proposals and remain optimistic that we can reach a deal soon," Cooling said in an emailed statement.

Amid the tense negotiations, SAG-AFTRA created a new, separate contract in February that covered indie and lower-budget video game projects. The tiered-budget independent interactive media agreement contains some of the protections on AI that video [game](#) industry giants have rejected.

The union also announced a side deal with AI voice company Replica Studios in January. The agreement, which SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher called a "a great example of AI being done right," enables major studios to work with unionized actors to create and license a digital replica of their voice. It sets terms that also allow performers to opt out of having their voices used in perpetuity.

That type of agency is why contract protections are important, said Tim Friedlander, president of the National Association of Voice Actors.

The technology doesn't currently exist for them to monitor what happens with actors' audio files, he said—it's unclear whether decades worth of recordings have already been used to train AI models. Performers, he said, essentially send their audio files to the person who recorded them and trust that they will ensure those recordings are "going to be safe."

Unchecked AI can lead to ethical questions, particularly when it comes to a so-called "synthetic voice" generating voice work that the original actor might not morally agree with.

"If my voice is out there... doing something that I wouldn't say, now I'm potentially in conflict with myself. Now I'm losing work to my own voice," Friedlander said.

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