

Video game performers protest unregulated AI use at Warner Bros. Studios

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SAG-AFTRA member Zachary Luna participates in a kick-off picket line for the SAG-AFTRA video game strike at Warner Bros. Games headquarters on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024, in Burbank, Calif. Hollywood's video game performers are currently on strike, throwing part of the entertainment industry into another work stoppage after talks for a new contract with major game studios broke down over artificial intelligence protections. Credit: AP Photo/Chris Pizzello

More than 300 video game performers and Hollywood actors picketed in front of the Warner Bros. Studios building on Thursday to protest [against what they call](#) an unwillingness from top gaming companies to protect union voice actors and motion capture workers equally against the unregulated use of artificial intelligence.

Standing before the crowd, Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, national executive director of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, said that AI has become the most challenging issue in many of the union's negotiations.

"We've made deals with the studios and streamers. We've made deals without a strike with the major record labels and with countless other employers, which provide for informed consent and fair compensation for our members," he told The Associated Press. "And yet, for some reason, the video game companies refuse to do that and that's what's going to be their undoing."

The protest marks the first large labor action since SAG-AFTRA game workers voted to strike last week. The work stoppage came after more than 18 months of negotiations with gaming giants, including divisions of Activision, Warner Bros. and Walt Disney Co., over a new interactive media agreement stalled over protections around the use of AI. Warner Bros. Games is the publisher behind games including "Hogwarts Legacy" and "Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League."

"Signs up, games down, LA is a union town," the crowd chanted Thursday morning, many of them holding up signs emblazoned with a fist holding a video game controller. One man, dressed in a skull mask reminiscent of a "Call of Duty" character named Ghost, waved a poster that read, "Don't ghost us for AI. It's your call of duty to pay actors." The first-person shooter game is published by Activision.

Members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and the Writers Guild of America also attended the protest in solidarity.

Union leaders have billed AI as an existential crisis for performers. Game voice actors and motion capture artists' likenesses, they say, could be replicated by AI and used without consent and fair compensation. The unregulated use of AI, the union says, poses "an equal or even greater threat" to performers in the video game industry than it does in film and television because the capacity to cheaply and easily create convincing digital replicas of performers' voices is widely available.

Concerns over AI helped fuel last year's film and television strikes by the union, which lasted four months.

On the picket line, Konstantine Anthony said that most people want humans—not AI—to be their storytellers.



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"A lot of the algorithms that we see in our most advanced video games have been around for decades. It's just become more and more advanced to recreate, likeness—that's really what they're trying to do so that they don't have to use us anymore," said Anthony, a Burbank city council and SAG-AFTRA member. "That's why we're here today: to ask that they simply pay their storytellers."

Seth Allyn Austin, a motion capture artist, said his involvement in his union has significantly grown as the negotiations continued over the last year and a half.

"To come here and then to be supported by your fellow artists, knowing that you're all in this fight together, it's like they're all a monument standing behind me. It's amazing," said Austin, who has worked on games such as "Horizon Forbidden West" and "God of War Ragnarok."

Audrey Cooling, a spokesperson for the video game producers, said the companies have offered AI protections as well as "a significant increase in wages for SAG-AFTRA represented performers in video games."

"We have worked hard to deliver proposals with reasonable terms that protect the rights of performers while ensuring we can continue to use the most advanced technology to create a great gaming experience for fans," Cooling said. "We have proposed terms that provide consent and fair compensation for anyone employed under the (contract) if an AI reproduction or digital replica of their performance is used in games."

SAG-AFTRA's negotiating committee argued that the studios' definition of who constitutes a "performer" is key to understanding the issue of who would be protected.

"The industry has told us point blank that they do not necessarily consider everyone who is rendering movement performance to be a performer that is covered by the collective bargaining agreement," SAG-AFTRA Chief Contracts Officer Ray Rodriguez said at a news conference last week, adding that some physical performances are being treated as "data."

The union had been negotiating with an industry bargaining group consisting of signatory video game companies. Those companies are

Activision Productions Inc., Blindlight LLC, Disney Character Voices Inc., Electronic Arts Productions Inc., Formosa Interactive LLC, Insomniac Games Inc., Llama Productions LLC, Take 2 Productions Inc., VoiceWorks Productions Inc. and WB Games Inc.

The global video game industry generated nearly \$184 billion in revenue in 2023, according to game market forecaster [Newzoo](#), with revenues projected to reach \$207 billion in 2026.

"We are at the table because we want to include SAG-AFTRA-represented performers in our productions, and we will continue working to resolve the last remaining issue in these negotiations," Cooling said. "Our goal is to reach an agreement with the union that will end this strike."

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