

SAG-AFTRA ends 11-month video game industry strike, making major concessions

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The 11-month strike by voice actors in the video game industry, members of SAG-AFTRA (the recently amalgamated Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television & Radio Artists unions), was suspended this Tuesday, pending ratification of a tentative contract.

After 18 months of negotiations, the union struck last October against 11 of the largest video game publishers in the industry, including billion-dollar giants such as Activision, Electronic Arts, Warner Bros. and Disney.

Nearly 97 percent of the union membership had voted to strike, expressing widespread anger at difficult working conditions and a lack of secondary compensation tied to sales, known as residuals, which are a significant source of income for actors in film and television.

The walkout was nearly twice as long as the previous longest strike by either of the two unions, the 183-day strike in 2000 against the advertising industry. Moreover, this was the first strike in the entire history of the video game industry and the first actors' strike in more than 17 years. It signals growing opposition by industry workers against the media and entertainment conglomerates who rake in tens of billions of dollars each year.

SAG-AFTRA deliberately kept the strike contained and limited, so that it could not offer a challenge to the corporate stranglehold over arts and culture.

The union called three one-day picket actions in the first month of the strike at the headquarters of three video game publishers. In the final 10 months of the strike, however, only a single action was organized, a star-studded march and rally in January beginning at SAG-AFTRA's headquarters on Wilshire Boulevard. The march proceeded three hundred feet down the street to a field in the adjacent La Brea Tar Pits and

Museum complex, discreetly secluded from the public.

The situation of the voice actors is appalling. According to the *New York Times*, voice actor Michael Hollick, for example, received \$100,000 for about 15 months of work voicing the protagonist Niko Bellic for Take 2 Interactive subsidiary Rockstar Games' massive hit *Grand Theft Auto 4*, which has sold more than 25 million copies. Upon release in April 2008 the game broke industry sales records, becoming the fastest selling entertainment product ever at the time, with \$310 million in sales on the first day and \$500 million by the end of the first week. Despite the lucrative returns, Hollick received no secondary compensation for his work.

The *Times* noted, "Had this been a television program, a film, an album, a radio show or virtually any other sort of traditional recorded performance, Mr. Hollick and the other actors in the game would have made millions by now."

While the tentative agreement has resulted in a secondary payment structure, the additional compensation is an insult to the voice actors, who stood their ground in the historically lengthy and bitter strike. Instead of residuals tied to sales, as is the standard in film and television, video game voice actors will receive levels of additional compensation depending upon the number of recording sessions the actor works for a game, beginning at a paltry \$75 for the first session and topping out at a total of \$2,100 after 10 sessions worked.

This structure is a capitulation by the SAG-AFTRA negotiators to the video game publishers. What the union was demanding was a traditional residual structure based on the standards set in film and television agreements, whereby actors are paid according to the number of copies of a title sold. This

would have amounted to an additional \$825, the standard rate for a four-hour recording session, for each session worked on a game for every 2 million copies sold, up to 8 million copies (in other words, a maximum of \$3,300). This demand itself was rather pitiful.

This issue became the primary point of disagreement during negotiations when the industry countered with the per session structure that was eventually agreed upon. The reasons why can only be fully appreciated by looking beyond the voice actors' struggle.

In an October 2016 article from Vice.com, Sam Singer, a spokesperson for the video game industry's negotiators, "Video game performers are less than 1 tenth of one percent of all the people who work on video games. We can't reward one set of people and not take into account 99 percent of other people who don't have that kind of that compensation. It's not fair to the vast majority."

The greatest fear of the video game publishers is that if actors are provided with residuals based on the success of a game, all the hundreds of other workers involved in bringing a blockbuster title to stores, from developers to play testers, could likewise demand a cut of the enormous profits that producers harvest when a game is successful. The standard for those doing the often grueling labor of video game coding and development is to work 12-hour days, six days a week to meet the strict deadlines the video game publishers set. In 2004 and 2006 Electronic Arts was targeted in a pair of class-action suits for requiring employees to work 100 hours a week with no overtime pay.

While video game workers are forced to endure such conditions to make a living, the publishers and executives make astronomically high sums.

In 2016 Robert A. Kotick, Activision's president and CEO, was paid more than \$33 million in salary and bonuses, while Electronic Arts CEO Andrew Wilson was paid just shy of \$20 million. Under no circumstances will these corporate heads allow their enormous wealth and privilege to be jeopardized by capitulating to the demands of the voice actors and, in failing to develop the strike beyond the ranks of the voice actors, SAG-AFTRA was only too happy to oblige.

According to a 2014 industry survey, 55.7 percent of game developers would vote in favor of an industry-

wide union. SAG-AFTRA from the start was determined to confine the voice actors' struggle to a few one-day pickets and a secluded rally in a park.

The other major point of disagreement in the contract negotiations was around the issue of vocal stress on voice actors and resulted in yet another capitulation by the union negotiators. Voice acting sessions can be strenuous and often carry the potential to damage an actor's voice, thus endangering their ability to work.

In the agreement, no standards were set and instead the deal contains "an employer commitment to continue working with SAG-AFTRA on the issue." In other words, the employers will not be required to take any measures to ensure the health and safety of voice actors.



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