

SAG-AFTRA voice actor members outraged at union's deal with Replica Studios

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The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and Replica Studios, an Artificial Intelligence voice technology company, have disclosed what both termed a “groundbreaking” deal covering the use of AI voice technology.

The agreement, announced January 9, involves licensing actors' voices for use in video game development. The union claimed in a statement that the deal would “enable Replica to engage SAG-AFTRA members under a fair, ethical agreement” to create and use digital replicas of actors' voices, with the performers' “informed consent,” for games and other interactive media projects. In other words, this deal will lead, sooner rather than later, to the elimination of voice actors' jobs.

As one voice actor responded, “Does leadership not understand that we actually like working? ... I don't want my AI replica being used in AAA games [games produced and distributed by mid-sized or major publishers] I want to actually work on those AAA games.”

The union is facilitating the destruction of a portion of its membership. This is the logical follow-up to the sellout contract agreed to by SAG-AFTRA after a lengthy strike last year.

The Replica deal was engineered behind the backs of workers, with SAG-AFTRA failing even to inform actors it was engaged in negotiations with the studio.

The agreement comes as SAG-AFTRA is engaged in separate negotiations with the major video gaming corporations over the Interactive Media Agreement which covers both off-camera and on-camera artists in video games.

The announcement of the Replica deal sparked outrage among artists in the gaming industry.

Damien Haas posted on X/Twitter: “At this point, I can't tell what drives your actions more: direct malice, shortsighted greed, or sheer incompetence. Regardless, you've failed us yet again, @sagaftra.”

Alyssa commented on the same social media website: “I'm just so confused by this. Wasn't the whole point of the strike (besides actors being paid fairly) that they didn't want AI to take over in place of actual living actors? So the strike and all the delays were for nothing?” A third commented: “[It] Is not incompetence. They know allowing this is going to steal jobs

from voice actors.” And another: “It makes no sense right? Is there any redeeming point in the deal terms or something? What was that whole strike about anyways!?”

A further tweet: “This is the most disrespectful and underhanded thing you could've done to the actors and people who fought against this very thing. The fact that nobody seems to have known this vote was even happening just shows how cowardly this decision was.”

“This is the same SAG that went on a 4 month strike to prevent this ?!,” another individual asked rhetorically.

In response to the anger, the SAG-AFTRA officialdom was forced to issue a further statement, from the union's National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland and Chair of the Interactive Media Agreement Negotiating Committee Sarah Elmaleh. The statement defensively obscured the issues and deflected criticism: “We want you to be fully informed about the new agreement and to that end we are posting the agreement along with helpful informational materials.” This was done after the agreement had been inked.

In response to SAG-AFTRA's initial claim that the Replica deal had been “approved by affected members of the union's voiceover performer community,” Steve Blum, a Guinness World Records-holder, whose voice is featured in more than 300 game appearances, tweeted: “Excuse me? ... Nobody in our community approved this that I know of. Games are the bulk of my livelihood and have been for years. Who are you referring to?”

Voice casting director Samantha A. Morrison also angrily derided the union's claim: “‘Approved by affected members of the union's voiceover performer community’—@sagaftra [is] straight up spreading lies. No voice actor would willingly approve this. AI has no place in voiceover, or the arts in general! Stop lying—show us the terms, and prepare for another strike.”

Greg Baldwin tweeted: “I WILL NOT SIGN MY OWN PINK SLIP! You betrayed us. Few regards, A Voice Actor.”

Another voice actor, Veronica Taylor, asked, “How has this agreement passed without notice or vote? ‘voice to be used as a training data set’? Why can't the actual actor be used for the videogame??? Every job brings a unique opportunity for an

actor to ... act. Encouraging/allowing AI replacement is a slippery slope downward.”

SAG-AFTRA claims the Replica agreement provides new protections for workers, but it does nothing of the sort. While the agreement provides for “informed consent” to any use of an artist’s digital voice replica, there are no enforcement mechanisms in place. In the long run, codifying this practice will inevitably result in a decrease in the number of actual actors in favor of digital replicas, thus lowering costs for corporations.

As one voice actor posted, “If we don’t ‘consent’, then these studios will simply hire actors who do. It’s the same as any TOS [Terms of Service]. Technically, you’re free to not agree to its term, but then you don’t get to use the software. Same situation here. Coercion is not consent.”

Similarly, near the conclusion of last year’s strike, Crabtree-Ireland acknowledged that under the new contract companies could ask for an actor’s consent to have his or her image replicated as a condition of employment: “Yes, they can ask you for that. If you can’t reach agreement on that, then yes, they can go and hire somebody else instead of you.” Again, this is not “consent,” it’s simply a form of economic extortion.

The Replica agreement only covers a single studio and only video game voice actors, but as one worker put it on X/Twitter, if SAG-AFTRA officials “think Replica building a more useful bank and model of voices won’t EVENTUALLY transfer to animation and live-action uses once they don’t sound like robots, then they are very dumb.”

The announcement of the Replica deal came only five days before Kristalina Georgieva, International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director, issued an analysis of the future of AI and its effects on the world economy entitled “*AI Will Transform the Global Economy. Let’s Make Sure It Benefits Humanity*,” in which she states that “AI will affect almost 40 percent of jobs around the world, replacing some and complementing other.”

Georgieva makes clear in the piece that AI will especially affect the economically advanced countries, with up to 60 percent of the workforce being impacted across all industries. She argues that, in “most scenarios, AI will likely worsen overall inequality, a troubling trend that policymakers must proactively address to prevent the technology from further stoking social tensions.”

As the WSWS has recently explained, “AI represents a major advance in technology with the capacity to enormously develop the productivity of labour and thereby provide the basis for social advancement.

“But its development under the social relations of capitalism, based on the private ownership of the means of production (including so-called intellectual property) and the extraction of private profit, means it will not have this effect but the reverse.”

Actors are rightly enraged by this latest betrayal perpetrated

by the well-paid union bureaucrats, who stand at the head of a union in which 85 percent of the membership does not even earn the meagre \$26,000 a year required to earn medical benefits and in which 90 percent of the membership at any given time is unemployed.

Since the announcement last week, there have been calls for Duncan Crabtree-Ireland and Fran Drescher to be replaced, but this will not bring about any improvement in artists’ conditions: replacing one official with another won’t solve the problem, which is rooted in the capitalist profit system.

This development fully confirms the WSWS analysis of the deal reached between the giant conglomerates and the actors’ union in November:

The SAG-AFTRA deal is thoroughly rotten, a shameless betrayal, and many performers already understand that. Over the coming period, many more will come to understand it. Background actors, voice actors, stunt performers fully expect to have many of their jobs wiped out, without the union lifting a finger.

And further:

This underscores the need for actors to build rank-and-file committees to take matters out of the hands of this leadership, which is little more than an extension of management.



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