

[HOME](#) > [A&E](#)

Talk is cheap, they say

The Boston Globe

Computer-game actors are threatening to strike over the lack of royalties

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | May 20, 2005

LOS ANGELES -- Some of Hollywood's biggest actors may soon strike. But movie fans have nothing to worry about: This strike would affect only computer games.

ADVERTISEMENT

Video games are becoming more like movies every day, and not just because of the realistic on-screen graphics. Thousands of actors, from unknown journeymen to stars like Sean Connery and Clint Eastwood, lend their voices to the games, which posted \$6.2 billion in US sales in the past year.

Now, the unions that represent these performers, the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television & Radio Artists, say it's time their members benefited from the video game boom.

While major stars can command fat contracts for their work, most of the roughly 2,000 SAG members who do game voice-overs earn a standard

rate of pay. Game companies have offered to increase wages by 35 percent over 3 1/2 years. They've also agreed to shorten hours, improve working conditions in recording studios, and increase the companies' contributions to the unions' health insurance programs.

But the unions want something more: a cut of the profits made by the most popular games. They're pushing a plan similar to the "residual" benefits that actors get when one of their movies or TV shows is rebroadcast or sold on DVD. The unions say their performers ought to get a similar deal for any game that sells more than 400,000 copies.

"The video game sector is the only sector in the entertainment industry where performers do not share in some way in the profits their efforts helped create," said Seth Oster, the guild's deputy national executive director.

Oster said the current contract, which expired in December but has been extended, was drawn up 3 1/2 years earlier, when the industry was much smaller. "The claim that came from the company was that the industry was in its infancy," said Oster. So the unions agreed not to push for profit-sharing. But today, business is booming: Americans spent \$1 billion on video game software in first-quarter 2005.

The unions have requested royalty payments for voice actors who work on any game that sells

Advertisement:

TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [TOP E-MAILED ARTICLES](#)

SEARCH GLOBE ARCHIVES

- Today (free)
- Yesterday (free)
- Past 30 days
- Last 12 months



[Advanced search](#)

SPONSORED LINKS



[Click Here](#)



[Click Here for Tickets](#)



[Unlimited Phone Calls to US & Canada \\$24.99/mo](#)

more than 400,000 copies. Oster said only 30 of the hundreds of games released last year did that well. But the game companies still rejected the proposal. "They told us in the most straightforward terms that they just didn't want to," Oster said. "That's unacceptable."

The game companies' negotiator, Howard Fabrick, a partner in the law firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, said the demand for residuals is absurd. "In television commercials they get residuals. Why? Because in TV commercials they sell the products," he said. But as exciting as it is to hear the voice of popular actor Samuel L. Jackson in the hit game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, the game would have been a hit without him. "The voices, frankly, are peripheral," he said.

Fabrick's clients offered to raise the base pay from \$556.20 for four hours' work to \$750 by the end of 3 1/2 years. "I would be very happy to work four hours and get 750 bucks," Fabrick said. Workers would get half the basic rate for an hour's work, and twice the rate for a maximum work day of six hours. The companies would also provide extra rest breaks and ensure that microphones and headphones are sanitized.

But residuals? "As a matter of principle it's unacceptable; as a matter of economics, it's outrageous," Fabrick said.

Schelley Olhava, a game industry analyst for IDC Corp., said it's difficult to measure the value of having a movie star perform in a video game. "It definitely adds marketability to a game," Olhava said. On the other hand, Olhava agreed with Fabrick that if the game is good enough, the stars don't matter. While the Grand Theft Auto series uses well-known actors, the top-selling series built around Tom Clancy's novel "Splinter Cell" does not.

Talks have broken off, and the two unions will soon ask their members to authorize a strike.

That appalls Lev Chapelsky, general manager of Blindlight LLC, a West Hollywood, Calif., firm that supplies voice actors. Chapelsky said the game companies want to use the best actors they can find. But rather than pay residuals, they could easily switch to nonunion actors, eliminating hundreds of jobs for union members. Chapelsky figures few gamers would notice. "There's a lot of substitutes that are open to this industry," Chapelsky said. "There's a lot of great actors who don't hold SAG cards."

Hiawatha Bray can be reached at bray@globe.com.

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)  [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

RELATED ADVERTISING LINKS

[About these Ads](#)

Free iPod Mini

Cool, Stylish, Free! Limited Time Offer
www.OfferGift.com

USADDRESS Shop in America

קניית דרך האינטרנט ומשלוח עד הבית
www.usaddress.com

\$279 DMC 30GB MP3/WMA

7500 Songs with PDA and Games MP3 Player Recorder with FM Radio
www.DigMind.Com

[feedback](#) | [help](#) | [site map](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2005 The New York Times Company

Home delivery for as little as **\$1.75** a week!



[click here](#)