SAG Game Contract Scuttled

By Claire Hoffman, Times Staff Writer

In a potentially divisive move, the Screen Actors Guild's national executive committee on Tuesday rejected a proposed contract covering performers who provide the voices of video game characters.

The unexpected move scuttled a deal — reached earlier this month by union negotiators — that would have given actors a 36% raise over three years but failed to gain residual payments for actors in top-selling games.

It also throws into question what future role SAG will have in dealing with the $25-billion game industry because representatives of its sister union, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, approved the terms. AFTRA's deal takes effect July 1.

"It is unfortunate that our brothers and sisters at the Screen Actors Guild have chosen another path," AFTRA President John P. Connolly said.

SAG Chief Executive Greg Hessinger said the executive committee felt the proposal was inadequate.

"We will now explore other options," Hessinger said.

The action represents yet another schism at the union, which has been plagued by infighting among members for years. Other internal splits have resulted in the expiration of a decades-old agreement governing relations between actors and their agents, and the ditching of a proposed merger between SAG and AFTRA.

One member of SAG's national board of directors who, citing the union's internal tensions, asked not to be identified, said that the rejection of the deal represented a slap in the face to the actors who work in the video game industry.

"We are now perceived in our own industry as an organization that does not bargain in good faith," the board member said.

SAG members said that the negotiators had recommended the agreement unanimously, albeit reluctantly, and that the 1,900 voice actors who were affected largely favored it.

But other SAG members argued that the union should hold out until makers of video games agreed to share some of their soaring profits and also acknowledged the contribution of stars, who are increasingly tapped for games. Among the well-known actors voicing games are Sean Connery, reprising his role as James Bond, and actress Jessica Alba in a game version of the upcoming film "Fantastic Four."

SAG said that nine out of the top 10 games last year featured actors working under a union contract. But video game makers say that the actors play a small part in the success of the overall game-playing experience and that sharing profits would require them to do the same for game developers and others who contribute to a game's success.

Actors currently are paid a minimum of $556 per four-hour session. The 3 1/2-year agreement that was scrapped Tuesday would have increased the rate to $759 by 2008, with an immediate 25% increase to $695.

One of the key demands from actors had been to receive extra money when a game sells
One of the key demands from actors had been to receive extra money when a game sells more than 400,000 units, but the companies refused to budge.

Video game industry negotiators could not be reached for comment. Companies involved in negotiations included such industry giants as Electronic Arts Inc. and Activision Inc.

SAG’s contract with the industry expired in May. Negotiators began bargaining in February but broke off talks on May 13. The tentative agreement was reached after balloting did not yield enough support for a strike.

Industry analysts and some union officials had expressed doubt about whether actors had the clout to carry off a strike, noting that most 2005 games were already developed and that companies would have no difficulty finding replacements.