

SAG-AFTRA Strikes Back: Files ULP Over AI Darth Vader in Fortnite

Labor Relations Update on June 12, 2025

On May 19, 2025, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (“SAG-AFTRA”)—the union representing actors, voice artists, and other media professionals—filed an unfair labor practice charge against Llama Productions, a subsidiary of Epic Games, over the use of an AI-generated voice for Darth Vader in Fortnite. The heart of the dispute isn’t the technology itself, but the process: SAG-AFTRA alleges that Llama Productions unilaterally changed employment terms by deploying AI-generated voices without notifying or bargaining with the union.

The controversy centers on the iconic Darth Vader character, whose voice in Fortnite is now generated by an AI model trained on the late James Earl Jones’ voice. Although Jones reportedly signed over the rights to his voice before his death in 2024, SAG-AFTRA argues that Epic Games sidestepped its collective-bargaining obligations by using AI to replace union-covered voice work without negotiation.

This case highlights the growing tension in entertainment over AI’s role in replicating or replacing human performers, especially for legacy characters and posthumous performances. The outcome could set a major precedent for how AI is used in video games and other media, shaping the future of labor rights in the digital age.

At the core of disputes like this is the language found in collective bargaining agreements—particularly in management-rights clauses. The contractual language can either permit or restrict employers from introducing new technologies, such as AI, into the workplace. The clarity and specificity of these clauses are increasingly vital as technology continues to reshape the workplace.

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