

Unions and Game Audio

A practical guide

Edited by Alexander Brandon with thanks to Jason Poss, Chip Beaman and Bill Thomas

Please note: this document is designed simply to provide information on the use of Union talent in creating music, sound or voice for games, and provide a link to resources that game audio professionals may find useful. The Game Audio Network Guild takes no position on the use or non-use of Unions in video game audio production.

In the world of game audio, unions can play an important role. But it helps to understand what unions are and how they work in relation to games.

A union is a group of working professionals operating as a unit to establish fair practices in their respective industry. There is the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations) which is an organization that represents a large number of unions in the United States, for example.

In game audio, several unions that represent voice actors and musicians have become more and more relevant. For the first draft of this document the unions represented will be for US projects.

SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Actors)
www.sagaftra.org

SAG-AFTRA before 2013 was two unions, SAG and AFTRA. The two joined and now operate as a single union representing actors in film, television, radio and video games. It is the largest union representing voice actors and screen actors in the world.

What do I need to know?

SAG-AFTRA rates for games are here: <http://www.sagaftra.org/production-center/interactive/documents> (under Rate Sheets).

While this does not apply universally, for the most part, smaller mobile / independent titles do not have the budget to accommodate union rates and hire non union actors or even friends / family / coworkers. Larger projects will usually work as union projects. In some states it is possible to use both union and non union actors such as Texas, which is a “right to work state” (right to work states are here: <http://www.nrtw.org/rtws.htm>).

Hiring more established talent (examples include publically known) will typically mean your project will need to be considered a union project as most stars are union members. George Dearing.

There are also important terms to understand such as “double scale” and “triple scale”. Some actors command double or more scale rates because of their demand.

When engaging workers under a union contract, a team / production company / publisher may engage a union signatory (which is a company that has an existing contract with the union), or contract directly with the union. Many casting agents and recording studios are union signatories, but be sure to ask said casting agent or studio.

There are many types of rates that accommodate different scenarios. For example recently “atmospheric” voices was added to the rate sheet to accommodate MMO or RPG characters where many actors and roles will need to be cast that only have up to 10 lines of dialogue.

Taft Hartley

The term Taft Hartley refers to the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 in which the right is granted for someone not a full time union member to become a part of a union project. A report must be submitted and the actor is only active for that project.

Fi-Core

Financial Core (sometimes referred to as “Beck Status”) is a ruling that allows members of a union to become “Fee Paying Non Members”, where they are allowed to have limited participate in union projects paying union dues, but are not considered a member and have no union rights such as voting. A union can also refuse to allow admittance.

How are rates and rules established for game audio?

Large game developers and publishers represented by a legal team meets with top ranking SAG-AFTRA representatives to discuss and negotiate rates and rules (collective bargaining). An updated contract for interactive (the last one ratified was in 2009) is still in discussion.

Strikes / Controversy

Periodically a union or guild may go on strike (such as the Writers Guild strike of 2007) if it feels negotiations will not yield an equitable contract. This may lead to rallies and in extreme cases where unions will call a strike (actors are instructed by the union not to work until a contract is signed).

In addition, unions have long held contractual agreements with film studios regarding residual rates from sales of films and those rates have, through much debate, even translated to streaming online residuals. Such residual rates are still under discussion for games.

If this all seems confusing, that’s because it is. Should you wish to delve further into research feel free to look at the SAG AFTRA website or Google the terms. You are also encouraged to ask questions on the G.A.N.G. forums.

For questions regarding rates or contracts from SAG AFTRA please contact Pierre Debs at SAG-AFTRA: pierre.debs@sagaftra.org

AFM (American Federation of Musicians)

Founded in 1896, the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada (AFM), AFL-CIO, is the largest organization in the world dedicated to representing the interests of professional musicians. With more than 80,000 members, the AFM represents all types of professional musicians, including those who record music for sound recordings, film scores, videogames, radio, television and commercial announcements, as well as perform music of every genre in every sort of venue from small jazz clubs to symphony orchestra halls to major stadiums.

The AFM has developed a new agreement in collaboration with Microsoft Corporation covering professional musicians employed in the making of videogame soundtracks. The new agreement extends through December, 2016. This AFM videogame agreement replaces all previous agreements promulgated over the last several years. It contains new provisions that permit game publishers to use tracks recorded for a particular videogame across all platforms applicable to a game franchise or series.

<http://www.afm.org/>

<http://www.afm.org/departments/electronic-media-services-division/video-games>

[Current Video Game Agreement \(VGA\): http://www.afm.org/uploads/file/VGAgreementJune2014a.pdf](http://www.afm.org/uploads/file/VGAgreementJune2014a.pdf)

[Video Game Agreement Summary: http://www.afm.org/uploads/file/VGSummaryJune2014.pdf](http://www.afm.org/uploads/file/VGSummaryJune2014.pdf)

The AFM is a union representing musicians, specifically players of musical instruments. Note that if a game is already under a SAG/AFTRA agreement, a singer would most likely be included in that agreement.

If you're interested in learning more, please get in touch with Mary Beth Blakey, at:

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American Federation of Musicians

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Mary Beth can assist you with the scales, terms and conditions, and forms necessary when utilizing the VGA or scoring a videogame. She can refer you to the appropriate local office for sourcing players that would work best with your project.