

At least 7,000 animators are based in the Los Angeles area, commanding an average salary of \$104,000 a year, according to the Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Union Local 839.

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"This is a project-by-project industry that demands your product be always new and always unique," said Jhon Dykstra, an independent visual effects supervisor who handled the last two "Batman" films, Dykstra and Edlund

were among those who headed the team that worked on "Star Wars".

"Hollywood asks effects teams to provide a budget figure for something that no one knows how to do, or how much it will cost. That's an expensive gamble, especially when you may be paying someone's salary even when there's a lull in your production schedule."

Late Monday afternoon, Edlund called his staff together in the company's screening room.

"It was one of the worst days of my life," said one digital animator. "You could hear Richard getting all choked up. I've never seen him so upset."

While special effects are increasingly important for major studio films, the effects industry is a cyclical business that has been enduring a difficult period.

In June, Time Warner announced it would close its digital studios division in Burbank and lay off about 150 workers.

Digital Domain and Sony Pictures ImageWorks have cut staff recently, sources said.

"This is a very vicious area, because everyone's bidding for the same projects. And historically, this is not a high-profit business," said John Swallow, vice president of production technology for Universal Motion Pictures. "If some of these companies are running on a 5 to 10% profit margin, then they're doing really, really well."

Boss has never enjoyed a comfortable financial existence, Edlund acknowledged.