

'Early Man' is Unabashedly Freaking Hilarious

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- [Aardman Animation](#) [2]
- [Bronze Age](#) [3]
- [Cave Man](#) [4]
- [Early Man](#) [5]
- [Eddie Redmayne](#) [6]
- [football](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Hooligans](#) [9]
- [Maisie Williams](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Nick Park](#) [12]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [13]
- [Soccer](#) [14]
- [Summit Entertainment](#) [15]
- [Timothy Spall](#) [16]
- [Tom Hiddleston](#) [17]
- [Wallace and Gromit](#) [18]



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Humor flows from one individual, and reaches another. Whether the receiver laughs or not is subjective, based on experiences and worldview. It can be agreed, however, that animator Nick Park (“Wallace & Gromit”) is hilarious, and he’ll make the world laugh in “Early Man.”

Set in the cave man era, what begins as a glimpse into the transition from dinosaurs to homo sapiens, becomes a broad satire of greed and soccer (football, of course, to the rest of the world). Yes, through a convoluted series of events, Park converts the cave man cartoon picture into a satire of the sports underdog genre, and makes it funny on all levels. From a rag-tag bunch of cave dwellers trying to learn soccer, to a giant duck that makes perfectly timed appearances, “Early Man” is the film guaranteed to chase all the blues away. Nick Park is an international animation treasure.

After a meteor takes care of the dinosaurs, early man emerges and makes some lemonade out of their now lemon earth, and invents soccer. Many eons pass, and the cave dwelling ancestors of the game inventors are a happy tribe that features Dug (voice of Eddie Redmayne) and is led by Chief Bobnar (the great Timothy Spall). Their idyllic rabbit hunting existence is shattered by an outside army, metal encased men who have begun the Bronze Age.



The Cave Dwelling Footballers of 'Early Man'
Photo credit: Summit Entertainment

The Bronzers not only have superior weaponry, but have established a capitalist society that is based on the need for the precious metal. They exile Dug's tribe out of their homeland to mine the ore, which is led by the greedy Bronzer Lord Nooth (Tom Hiddleston). There is one hope... if the cave men can somehow learn the game of soccer from a sympathetic coach Goona (Maisie Williams), and defeat the Bronze Age all-stars, they can win back their home.

The switch from cave man jokes to soccer jokes is brilliant, with a lot of flashy cartoon humor in between. Director Nick Park, with story/screenplay help from Mark Burton and James Higginson, create warm and intensely passionate characters, and formulate gags around them that are fast and frenetic. Bottom line, the audience begins to root for the cave men to win the match, and the journey to get their is rollicking fun.

If you are familiar with the animation style of Nick Park, who came to fame through the now legendary cartoon duo Wallace & Gromit in the Oscar winning short "A Close Shave" (1995), and the full length features like "Chicken Run" (2000) and "Shaun the Sheep" (2015), then you are familiar with his wide-mouthed claymation signature. The advent of computer generated animation has just given the wacky and surreal creator more leeway, which he uses to grand scale, in both form and comic potential. A perfect example of that scale was a cockroach wearing sunglasses as he watches the dinosaur-killing meteor explode like an atom bomb.



Dug (Eddie Redmayne) and Chief Bobnar (Timothy Spall) in 'Early Man'

Photo credit: Summit Entertainment

The soccer element of the story is the best, which is where Park seemingly wanted the story to be. The ridiculousness of the game is exposed in its invention (the blast creates the familiar soccer ball design), but then the reverence towards the game is also amazingly skewered, and perhaps the British and other soccer loving countries will get the jokes more than Americans, but the whole absurdity of cave men versus Bronze Age is classic, when rendered almost symbolically onto an ancient soccer field.

One of the best bits, under appreciated as pure cartoon, is the old "repeat slapstick gag." The cartoon character, in this case Dug, falls from a great height only to then tumble over a series of stadium seats, level by funny level. It's a great symbol for life... no matter how many times we have to tumble, there is always another level to tumble again. To sum up, Th-th-th-th "That's All, Folks."

"Early Man" is currently in theaters everywhere.. Featuring the voices of Eddie Redmayne, Tom Hiddleston, Timothy Spall and Maisie Williams. Screenplay by Mark Burton and James Higginson, from a story by Burton and Nick Park. Directed by Nick Park. Rated "PG"



[19]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/bronze-age>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/cave-man>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/early-man>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/eddie-redmayne>
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