Genndy Tartakovsky’s dinosaur epic Primal turns compassion into a survival tool

In “Spear and Fang,” the first episode of the new animated Adult Swim show *Primal*, the caveman Spear (Aaron LaPlante) sees his mate and young children devoured by a pack of horned dinosaurs. Later in the episode, he winds up fighting that same pack alongside a *Tyrannosaurus* dubbed Fang, and he befriends her two young children. It’s a sweet redemptive moment, suggesting that Spear might be able to regain something of what he’s lost. Then the leader of the dino pack shows up and eats the babies.

Samurai Jack and *Dexter’s Laboratory* creator Genndy Tartakovsky designed *Primal* as a brutal show about survival in a fantastic version of prehistoric times, where early hominids, dinosaurs, ice age megafauna, and monstrous creatures that never actually existed are all trying to kill and eat each other. And yet his grimdark intro conceals a deeper emotional core arguing that no one can really survive alone.

[embedded content]

Shared tragedy forges a bond between Spear and Fang, who form a strange alliance that helps them get through the series of largely unrelated challenges presented over the next several episodes. (Four episodes were made available to critics before airing. The series launches on October 7th with a five-night rollout event.) Those challenges involve the sort of stylized epic battles Tartakovsky became famous for in *Samurai Jack*, though with the brutality and darkness he was only able to apply to the series once it moved from Cartoon Network to Adult Swim for its rebooted fifth season.

Each of the opening 22-minute episodes has a set piece combat, along with numerous other skirmishes. The characters are constantly caught off guard by the diversity of hungry creatures around them. Spear's tranquil river fishing in the first episode is interrupted by a giant crocodile who's after his catch, and later, he has to hide from a *Pteranodon* on his way home. One threat moving on or being dealt with is usually just an indicator that something far worse will show up soon.

The mix of stylized creatures and fantastic attention to detail makes *Primal*'s action sequences feel like segments from a particularly thrilling nature documentary. Tartakovsky and the animators make every struggle feel viscerally real. They show the strain in Spear's muscles as he climbs a tree for a better vantage point for throwing his signature weapon, and they underline the too-bright blood and gore dripping from Fang's mouth after she manages to lunge in for a successful bite. The protagonists are almost always outmatched, and victory comes from the way they use the terrain, or knowledge gained earlier in an episode, to their advantage. But their greatest strength is always working as a team.

Spear might want to treat Fang as a particularly powerful mount and hunting animal, but the dinosaur is no one's pet or beast of burden. The particularly charming second episode, "River of Snakes," has a dynamic that almost resembles *The Odd Couple,* as Spear gets annoyed with his new companion's snoring and tries to set boundaries for what she can and can't eat. When he tries to attach a yoke to her in the next episode, "A Cold Death," she walks away and leaves him pulling a sled himself. But when pressed, the two always fight for and with each other.

There's no dialogue in *Primal*. The characters solely express themselves through grunts, roars, and gestures. Yet their

emotions and personality come through extremely clearly, thanks to Tartakovsky's phenomenally detailed animation. Spear is highly reminiscent of *Samurai Jack*'s titular stoic hero. He's serious and battle-hardened, which adds power to the rare quiet moments when he just smiles and finds joy in something like creating shadow puppets on a cave wall. Fang is stubborn and surprisingly clever, showing off both traits in a sequence where she repeatedly tries to climb up a mountain to rescue Spear from dire bats, but just winds up looking pitifully embarrassed as she slides down the slope. Her solution is creative and even a little goofy, but it's surprisingly effective.

Primal repeatedly emphasizes the importance of compassion and cooperation, and shows that neither trait is limited to humans. "A Cold Death" starts with a gorgeous sequence of a mammoth herd migrating during a snowstorm, while an elderly, sick mammoth lags behind until it finds itself alone and near collapse. That weakness makes it perfect prey for Spear and Fang, though it still puts up a desperate fight.

Staring into the animal's massive eye as it dies, Spear shows a clear respect for his prey and a regret for the necessity of ending its life. That conflict is further developed in a flashback scene showing Spear taking his son on a hunt. The episode's writers also show the mammoths engaging in mourning behavior when they come across the remains of their fallen kin, in a scene inspired by behaviors in modern elephants. After an extremely dramatic fight where both Spear and Fang are nearly crushed by the vengeful herd, Spear is pushed to prove to the mammoths that he understands and appreciates their loss.

The lack of speech increases the importance of the show's score. Tyler Bates, who also scored the *John Wick* and

Guardians of the Galaxy films, continues to show off his expertise in providing music to fight by. His percussion-heavy tracks feel like a musical manifestation of adrenaline, building and maintaining tension both before the first blow is struck, and after the battle is over, as the characters deal with the bloody aftermath.

The sound design also helps bring the series' creatures to life, though roars, grunts, snuffles, and subtler noises like heavy footsteps, or the rustling of raptors rushing through a field of wheat. Of course every gory splatter of blood and brutally broken bone or tooth has its own dramatic squelch or crunch, which makes the battles palpably brutal.

It's remarkable how much pathos, humor, action, and suspense Tartakovsky has crammed into each of the first few episodes of *Primal*, all without having a single word spoken. By eschewing dialogue, he's challenged himself and his writers to find a way to explore emotions that words could complicate or obfuscate. He reaches into the ancient past to find the roots of empathy and cooperation that allowed humans and other animals to survive and thrive in a hostile world. Savagery isn't enough for a species, or a story to endure, and Tartakovsky argues that compassion is just as primal.

Primal *launches on Adult Swim at midnight ET on Monday, October 7th. Clips and information are available at Adult Swim's website, where the pilot episode is also available for a limited time.*

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