

## Hollywood Unscripted Ep 01 – Avengers: Endgame

**Jenny Curtis:** Scott, we're calling to tell you to get your shoes on and get to the studio because Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is greenlit. You wanted to start with someone big. We're premiering with Avengers and game directors Anthony and Joe Russo and screenwriters Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. This is going to be one hell of an episode.

**Celleste:** There's no place like Hollywood.

**Scott Tallal:** Welcome to Hollywood UNSCRIPTED, the very first episode of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED from the Malibu Film Society. I'm your host, Scott Tallal and I can't think of a better way to launch our series than with today's guests. We have from the biggest movie of all time. A movie that as of this recording is approaching 3 billion with a B dollars in global ticket sales. The directors, Anthony and Joe Russo and the screenwriters Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. Welcome, gentlemen.

**all:** Thank you. Thanks for having us, its an honor.

**Scott Tallal:** Thank you for joining us. I want to start with how all of this came together, because as I understand it, you got a call from the studio and they said, we want to do Avengers 3 and 4, or 4 and 5, however you look at it. But there was no story at that point? You just knew that they wanted two stories, two films, is that correct?

**Joe Russo:** I can't remember...Were we in post on Civil War?

**Christopher Markus:** We had not started shooting Civil War.

**Stephen McFeely:** Correct, the story generally... And by the way, again, no one asked us, you asked us.

**Christopher Markus:** Right. Right, Marvel just assumed somehow that we're writing this movie. I still haven't been paid.

**Joe Russo:** Yeah, you're still waiting on your deal.

**Christopher Markus:** Yeah, there's a few things to iron out.

**Christopher Markus:** No, Joe came into our office and pitched us and we went, that's, wait, can we, can we shoot the movie that we're supposed to be making before we make a deal for the next two?

**Joe Russo:** Apparently not, yeah no

**Anthony Russo:** The thing was that the story in Captain America, Civil War seemed to set the stage so well for where The Avengers would go as a group of people. The fact that they were divorced, basically, and then the relationship was destroyed in civil war, the relationship between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers was destroyed. And it just sort of that, at that moment, it basically begged for where can they possibly go from here?

**Joe Russo:** we took over the Avengers storyline, I think, with Winter Soldier and Civil War. Steve Rogers and Tony Stark became co-leads of that. You know, this serialized arc that was playing out over these 10 years.

**Joe Russo:** So it would have been in 2015 then?

**Stephen McFeely:** Yes, you walked into our office in Atlanta in April of fifteen.

**Joe Russo:** Mmhmm

**Stephen McFeely:** And then.

**Christopher Markus:** Oh, no not Atlanta.

**Stephen McFeely:** No no Sorry,.

**Christopher Markus:** L.A.

**Stephen McFeely:** It was Christmas of 14, not to get bogged down in this. And then we all said yes in April of fifteen, shot Civil War, came back to Los Angeles. And then Chris and I got locked in a room for four months.

**Christopher Markus:** Although we delivered the so-called manifesto, although can't really be a manifesto if it has five million contradictory options within it, during Civil War. So we were shooting Civil War. We check in in the morning when it became clear we were no longer needed, went back to the office and started breaking down options for what this movie might be. From little moments to big themes,.

**Scott Tallal:** What were the big themes that you initially decided on that had to be included?

**Stephen McFeely:** Can you be the architect of your own destiny?

**Joe Russo:** Are you pre-destined or through sheer force of will can you alter your own fate? If you look at the films, it's a, you know, you always need a unifying theme for a movie. Writing a screenplay is very difficult. It's great to have a thesis statement at which you can drive your car towards. If you're doing two movies back to back with combined serial narrative, having a unifying theme is essential. And we wrote this on the board fairly early on and then we stuck with it. So if you look at the films, The end of Infinity War would reinforce the notion that we are predestined, that you cannot change your destiny, which is why Thanos says his now well known line, I am inevitable. And that has to do with the theme at the end of the second movie. Tony Stark, through sheer force of will, is able to alter fate, although not in the way he had hoped.

**Stephen McFeely:** Right.

**Joe Russo:** Our statement is, that you can, you can through sheer force of will altar your own fate.

**Scott Tallal:** I know you had a lot of challenges with this because as I understand it, you hadn't even shot the Captain Marvel movie yet.

**Christopher Markus:** No, They had not been written.

**Scott Tallal:** It had not been written. And yet you have to write this character into the movie as if you have this blueprint. You have no blueprint. How do you, how do you deal with that?

**Christopher Markus:** You just look confident stride onto set and go..ok. .

**Stephen McFeely:** Yeah, Marvel's very good about letting us do the thing we need to do for the movie in front of us, including characters, including storylines, what have you. So we were in a position where we had to write for a character 20 years after her origin story, which was in the 90s, which hadn't been written yet, let alone shot. And so Brie Larson's first day on set would be on our movie. Well before she ever shot her origin story. We just had to make her work for us and then ask Anna and Ryan, the directors of that movie, hypothetically, does this person seem like the person from a movie you haven't written yet, 20 years later? And they said, yes, sure, I guess?

**Scott Tallal:** Again, you came off of civil war and you had to resolve, for instance, the conflict between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers.

**Joe Russo:** Yeah.

**Scott Tallal:** Talk to us about that.

**Joe Russo:** That was actually the rocket fuel for Infinity War and Endgame was the conflict between Steve Rogers and Tony Stark. Because we would argue that Infinity War does not happen if the Avengers are not broken up and that the repair between the two of them is what allows them to fix the Thanos problem by the end of Avengers End game.

**Anthony Russo:** I mean, in the DNA of the MCU, Thanos was, was going to be the greatest threat that the The Avengers ever faced. Right? So what better time for that threat to visit them than at their lowest moment when they've sort of lost their relationship with one another and destroyed them.

**Christopher Markus:** But also, part of what I like about both of these movies is that they don't solve things quickly. And it pleases me that the problem prone Infinity War doesn't get solved till Endgames whole Avengers movie in-between, and that the problem from Infinity War doesn't get solved until very late in Endgames so that everyone is sitting with the after effects of the occurrences for a good long time, probably a lot longer than your average superhero movie or action movie has the real estate for. And that's one of the beautiful things about 22 movies in having a two movie epic landscape to play on is that you can really slow down. You know, you can, you can do giant action pieces, but you've bought yourself a lot of downtime. Oddly enough, it wouldn't seem like it it would seem like you have to make the biggest movie in the world, but it actually allowed us to take a lot of time where people weren't fighting.

**Stephen McFeely:** Endgame is surprisingly light on action until it's not, right? But that's well into the third act.

**Scott Tallal:** Now, you talked about deciding on certain points that had to be made in the movie. So you come up with your list of what you want to do. Are there any changes after that? What did you change from that first list and why?

**Joe Russo:** Everything.

**Stephen McFeely:** Everything changed. Yeah, it's a fluid... It's why Chris and I are around. Because Joe and Anth and Marvel generally are fluid in the way they work. And so we'll get to set on a given Tuesday morning and block the scene and realize not only is that door a narrow window and we got to change that, but actually we're going to make the Hulk in this scene and as opposed to the previous scenes. So we got to adjust for that. We're always chasing the best version plussing every scene. So it's why it's been job security for... Chris and myself,.

**Christopher Markus:** I mean, I would I would say the ends remained the same almost the whole way through. We knew how Infinity War ended and we knew how Endgame ended, how you get to those places took a bunch of different exits off the freeway before we got to what you see.

**Joe Russo:** I was going to say, a script is really its ultimately it's a roadmap of plots and emotional logic, character arc, thematics, but it's a roadmap. Translating that to set, especially in movies of this scale is exceedingly complicated. And that's, I think what Steve was getting at, which is blocking dictates everything. When you get to set and an actor decides they want to play at a very different way or they bring in an idea to the table that alters the way in which you want to play it, you have to be fluid. And when you're talking about 30 movie stars moving in and out of your narrative, there is going to be upheaval because these people are all movie stars, because they're very good at what they do and they're very good at taking care of their characters. So they're going to bring ideas to the table. The translation of it, just for the very nature of it, has to be fluid and iterative.

**Scott Tallal:** Now, I read and correct me if what I read was wrong, but your shooting style is to rehearse in the morning and then to shoot in the afternoon. Is that correct?

**Anthony Russo:** I wish.

**Joe Russo:** It is, we do do a... the first thing we'll do is we will get the sides and we'll sit with the cast and we'll read the sides outloud, read the action lines, and then have a discussion of what the scene is about, what they want. The actors can ask us questions in that conversation, but basically we just do script work. And that takes about a half hour depending on the complexity of the scene. Then we get it on its feet and we start to play. Now, people may have ideas during that script work that then MNM will go away and work on and we'll do a rough blocking based on the original scene, knowing that we may make accommodations based on dialogue or we've already come up with ideas of how we're going to accommodate the blocking and that's gonna be working on the script. Then we'll block for, which usually takes about forty five minutes depending on how much improvisation we're playing around with. Because if we do start improvising, we tend to like to improvise during rehearsal so that then that can also be incorporated into the script so you know what you're doing when you start rolling cameras. So all in all, I think it's a good hour and a half before we're ready to light and we start setting cameras.

**Anthony Russo:** Mnm is our shorthand for Markus and McFeely,.

**Christopher Markus:** Not the well-known rapper Eminem.

**Joe Russo:** Or the candies.

**Scott Tallal:** So as I understand it, this was 200 shooting days in Georgia.

**Joe Russo:** 200 plus, I think, right?

**Stephen McFeely:** That should be the behind the scenes title of the book.

**Christopher Markus:** Felt like more

**Joe Russo:** I think the original shoot was 210 and then maybe we went back for another 50.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah. Exactly, we went two months back

**Stephen McFeely:** It's not all Georgia. Most of it's Georgia. What they're seeing in Scotland and Durham, England and L.A. for some pickups and stuff.

**Scott Tallal:** But it's 200 plus days of shooting. And this was essentially two different movies, but they were not shot simultaneously, as I understand. They were shot back to back.

**Anthony Russo:** They were shot back to back. Initially the concept was perhaps that we were going to shoot them simultaneously because so much of the cast overlap between the two films and we thought it would be more economical to approach them that way. You're dealing with the most massively expensive films ever. But we very quickly realized that that was too difficult. The movies were each movie. It was so complex and so enormous in and of its own right. And we wanted each film to be very distinct from each other. So we decided we needed to separate the two films and instead of mixing them what's called crossboarding, like you would shoot a television show where you're shooting scenes from different episodes or whatever the case may be. We just separated and shot one after the other.

**Scott Tallal:** I actually have a very good friend of mine, works on another show, a television show, and he and his writing partner, they're also producers, are known for being able to come in and figure out how can we write this scene in a way that will cost us less money to shoot.

**Anthony Russo:** That's smart.

**Scott Tallal:** That's what they're known for. But in this case, you couldn't do that. I mean, you couldn't say, OK, we're here in this particular setting. Everything's ready to go. But you can't shoot both movies.

**Stephen McFeely:** Right.

**Scott Tallal:** Even though they're sharing,.

**Anthony Russo:** We couldn't take advantage of that. But we certainly still could apply those principles on each individual film.

**Joe Russo:** I think we found a sense of, these movies were so dense and so enormous and had so many moving parts that we would get in a room early on when we were we were actually going crossboard and shoot the movies together. And the meetings would take nine hours just to have a conversation about a day's worth of work because you're talking about two different films.

**Stephen McFeely:** Yeah.

**Joe Russo:** And if there are two significant scenes that, we just realized at a certain point.

**Stephen McFeely:** It wasn't saving us anything.

**Joe Russo:** Crafting this film would be untenable, it would be untenable. It would, you know, sap all the energy of the crew and ultimately not provide the best environment for making good stories.

**Stephen McFeely:** So it basically went movie one and then movie 2, with the pretty big exception of all the Asgard stuff. So that during Cathedral was early in the schedule and that was movie two. So that was shot two years ago. And it's always blown my mind that, you know, we were using heavy Thor well before the first movie ever came out.

**Christopher Markus:** A good amount of the crew had not read the scripts. And so they're, What? Why?

**Stephen McFeely:** What is happening?

**Christopher Markus:** What happened to Thor?

**Joe Russo:** Radnarok had not even been shot.

**Stephen McFeely:** That's right. Yes.

**Scott Tallal:** Talk to me about that, because Ragnarok was such, for those who haven't seen it. Spoiler alert. It's a comedy.

**Christopher Markus:** Mm hmm. Yeah.

**Scott Tallal:** And it's very different from everything else in the 22 movie Marvel Cinematic Universe. And now, joy of joy, you have to take that left turn and bring it all the way back. Talk to us about that.

**Christopher Markus:** Yeah, that was great. We were toying with different arcs for Thor. And he's a tough character to wrap your head around sometimes because he is, you know, he's comes from royalty, comes from offworld. He's not everything you can relate to. And we hadn't really made any hard, fast decisions. But Hemsworth and Taika and Eric Pearson were off in Australia doing something very strange.

**Scott Tallal:** Taika's the director of Ragnarok.

**Christopher Markus:** Yes, And they got in touch and said, look, we're doing something over here that you should know about because you can't do what we're doing and then

go back to old Thor. So they flew into Atlanta and they showed us clips and we went through the script and sort of modified to fit this new looser style. And then when we got to, that was mainly for Infinity War, when we got the Endgame, you know, it released so much opportunity. Yeah. Can you release Upton? Suppose you can. Now we could do things with Thor where you couldn't do it before. And thankfully, we'd also burned off the traditional Thor vengeance quest. He couldn't do that again. We'd broken him of all his kingly duties so you could finally take him and, and trash him the way you would a human character to everyone's great delight. And particularly Chris Hemsworth, who apparently is so tired of being attractive that he's willing to put on a giant fat suit,.

**Scott Tallal:** Isn't it? I mean, for all of us. Isn't it just the heaviest burden you've ever had to deal with?

**Christopher Markus:** I know the feeling, Chris Hemsworth. Man Yes.

**Scott Tallal:** Was there a point where you felt in putting the script together that you'd written yourself into a corner?

**Stephen McFeely:** Oh, sure. We kill half the people at the end of the first one. And then we killed the bad guy fifteen minutes into the second one. The ridiculous quarter.

**Joe Russo:** Happens to be a model though that we all use quite liberally in the room. And we're working together is write yourself into a corner.

**Scott Tallal:** Why?

**Joe Russo:** Because it creates a really compelling narrative point.

**Anthony Russo:** When you force yourself into a position where you're like, I have no idea how I move forward from this moment. That's when you have to dig really deep creatively to figure out what the road forward is. And it can't be the one you would initially go to quickly. You know, it's

**Stephen McFeely:** like time travel.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah, exactly.

**Stephen McFeely:** Oh, wait, you said its the one you go too quickly.

**Anthony Russo:** Or how to you get to time travel.

**Christopher Markus:** That was why we kept turning down time travel until we got the.

**Stephen McFeely:** Until we figured it out. Until we cracked time travel.

**Scott Tallal:** There's cracking time travel. And then there's what you guys did

**Joe Russo:** Which is not crack time travel.

**Scott Tallal:** Well, I know i mean the way you did it.

**Stephen McFeely:** That's the thing. It's a testament to Back To the Future that we all assume time travel, which is not a real thing

**Christopher Markus:** we assume that movie is true.

**Stephen McFeely:** Is the only way you can do it. And even we did for the longest time. And then eventually we sort of figured out that in quantum mechanics, particles can exist in, the same particle can exist in two places at the same time, ohthat's that's weird. That's really interesting. Fortunately, we have a guy who could exist in the quantum realm if we ask those filmmakers to leave him there. Maybe we could figure out a way, a little get out of jail on this problem . So it is rooted in science.

**Christopher Markus:** So writing yourself into a corner forces you to look for a surprise or look for a zag that makes the movie feel fresh. I mean,Endgame ends several times, you know, they get those, they get those things back. Could end right there. But Theros also comes back. Now you're back in a corner again and it keeps going like that, forcing you to jump that hurdle and it freshens things.

**Joe Russo:** We always talked about Breaking Bad as a modern example of writing yourself into a corner. I had the good fortune watching that show over like a two month period because I had missed all seasons up until that point. And I remember watching it over that period of time and thinking at the end of every episode, how the hell are they going to move this show forward in the next episode? And that is, that is, that is the essential nature of drama. That is what you want the audience to think every time. And so it's a great lesson in disruption and and making strong declarative choices. As Chris said, lead to a surprise that's going to delight the audience.

**Chris Porter:** Hi, my name is Chris Porter from Unless I Left the show you've been listening to is sponsored by Proud Source Water. Go to [Proudsourcewater.com](http://Proudsourcewater.com) to learn more about the company, their vision and their water. Leave the world better than you found it. Drink Proudsourcewater.

**Scott Tallal:** Don't you think, though, that we're in a golden age.

**Joe Russo:** Oh we are without question in a golden age of television. I mean, I think that we started in independent filmmaking. Soderbergh discovered us. Then we went to television because at the end of the 90s indie film sort of transition into television at the advent of HBO. We did a show for FX called Lucky that was very edgy, very different. And then now, with the advent of trillion dollar companies getting into the content game, they're not playing by the traditional metrics that TV used to play by and that used to cripple television, which was metrics that were advertising dollar metrics. Right. Because that would always drive you towards the middle, because you're trying to not offend anyone. You're trying not to piss off any segment of the audience. So ultimately, what you're trying to do is create a very sort of vanilla product that attracts as many people as possible. That metric has been done away with now and it's now the inverse of that. Film is married to a metric. How did you do on your opening weekend? That gets put in the papers and on the Internet and people make judgments based on that. But Netflix hides the ball and how shows perform. So it's really about what's their level of cultural saturation that they reach. And it's fascinating. I think that's why we're in the golden age of TV, because it is not tethered to anything.

**Scott Tallal:** But as directors, don't you think that there's another thing at play? Because when we were all growing up, I'm a little bit older than you. But I mean, a 25

inch TV was a big deal. And there are people listening to this who are going, what are you talking about? Now, the average size in a lot of homes is 55, 65 inches. Doesn't that change the way you frame a shot?

**Joe Russo:** We don't think about it that way. I will say, though, that I do think that that has contributed to the golden age is because everyone now is comfortable watching good content in their home because they feel like they're receiving it through quality technology. I don't have to go to the theater to get an immersive experience. I can sit very close to my 55 inch television and get a somewhat similar experience. I think there's a combination of things that have allowed for this massive disruption in the industry at the moment.

**Christopher Markus:** But at the same time, aren't some people also watching that on the smallest screen in history in their hand, you know, and they're both feeding the portability.

**Scott Tallal:** Right. Now you talked about opening weekends and that metric. I mean, your opening weekend one billion,.

**Stephen McFeely:** One point two not that we're counting.

**Scott Tallal:** one point two billion dollars with a B. And one of you was quoted as saying that you can't get your head around that.

**Joe Russo:** Yeah. I mean, it is very difficult to get your head around. You know, we grew up as film fans. We grew up watching movies with our father. We adored Star Wars and Empire Strikes Back. And James Cameron taught us about everything we know about modern commercial filmmaking. And so when you get, when we're sitting here talking about this, is very surreal. It's an almost out-of-body experience to be in this position that we're in. And I don't think we know how to quantify it. Ultimately, I think the nice thing, too, is I don't know that any of us care to quantify it. We just want to keep working and get on to the next thing.

**Anthony Russo:** The other surprising thing about that, too, why it's hard to wrap your head around, is that the only way you get to a number like that, whether it be an

opening weekend or the film's ultimate total, is through a massive global audience. And I think that's also hard to understand, the idea that these movies are playing enormously, you know, on every continent. It's a hard thing to understand. But they are, the fandom is spread worldwide. There's a huge global audience that was anticipating Endgame. And when it came out all over the world at the same time, everybody showed up. It was a really remarkable moment, I think, where you've got this worldwide audience communicating with one another about this experience that they're all having together at the same time. It's a really powerful thing.

**Scott Tallal:** So how do you go about making a film that is going to appeal to all of those different demographics? Is it a conscious process?

**Christopher Markus:** It's...it can't be until very late in the game, frankly. It starts with just trying to write a story that makes sense. Literally just doesn't feel like complete disconnected.

**Stephen McFeely:** Infinity War has 23 people on the poster.

**Christopher Markus:** Yeah.

**Stephen McFeely:** You know, it was, it's it's a lot of wrangling.

**Christopher Markus:** And, you know, frankly, we were really swinging for the fences on these, not pandering. And so when you talk about such a big opening weekend, it's hard to quantify because for the longest time, the only goal was to get it done. People's reaction was completely like, I don't know. Yes, sure. Someone's gonna see this, but I just want every scene shot. And it would be great if somebody edited it together. But my mind, I know other people's minds definitely on these things about who likes what, And all that. But you just want it to exist as a whole. And then who likes it, likes it. You know, when you're 22 movies into the Marvel universe, it's a pretty good chance people are going to like it because it's been road tested very well. But we're also killing people and we're taking your toys and breaking them sometimes. You walk a line whether, are people going to, are their hearts gonna break because you killed Tony Stark? Or are they just gonna be pissed off that you killed Tony Stark and eventually you just have to tell the best story and hope they're with you on that one.

**Anthony Russo:** I think what Chris is saying is we too, like that's a jumping off point for a concept that we often reference, which is this idea of balance and storytelling. We like movies that give you a really complete emotional experience when you go to see them. You know, those are our favorite films. So it's like a movie that can make you laugh and make you cry and make you think and delight you and thrill you and challenge you and entertain you, etc... Like the wider range of an emotional experience that you can find in a film, the richer the moviegoing experiences. So as we're moving through these difficult ideas, I think we all are looking for opportunities in the storytelling where we know we're being very dark here and this is really gonna be very challenging to the audience. You know, how do we eventually get them to a place of exhilaration where the weight of all of this difficult stuff that we want them to be able to experience and appreciate can be counterbalanced by something that's opposite of that.

**Scott Tallal:** Is that one of the reasons why you have Tony Stark so near death at the beginning of the movie to kind of prep the audience ?

**Stephen McFeely:** It's two part. One is the is totally right. Just on a selfish level, screenwriting wise, we wanted to introduce the method by which he would give his own eulogy. And so you already have it two minutes into the movie. And so you're absolutely prepared to hear from Tony beyond the grave. But yes, it's to tell you, this is going to, well, the scene prior probably told you this is gonna get serious because we wiped out a perfectly lovely family and in turn, Clint Barton into a murderer, sadistic murderer. Yeah.

**Christopher Markus:** So it's also to to restate the gravity of the end of Infinity War so that you are going into this knowing there isn't, you know, the first scene isn't gonna be. And here's how we undo it. It's gonna be no you're going to sit in this.

**Anthony Russo:** It gets worse. For a good long time, the choice I think it gets better,.

**Joe Russo:** We refer to it as taking your medicine. You have to, at some point, you've got to take your medicine or you're undermining the credibility of the choices that you made previously.

**Anthony Russo:** And to be fair, I think that's the way, again, we're always looking to surprise audiences. And, you know, you're going in that movie going, oh, jeez, you really brutalized me at the end of Infinity War. You're going to, obviously, you're gonna fix that. And it's like, no, we're gonna brutalize you more, you know?

**Scott Tallal:** Well, I think as a member of the audience, one of the things that really was so surprising to me was that you avoided the trope of the bad guy who's just bad through and through and through. The empathy that comes out of Thanos.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah.

**Scott Tallal:** Talk to us about that. I mean, he is such an, is that Josh Brolin? Where does it all come from?

**Stephen McFeely:** Josh Brolin is integral to the whole thing. The only way to manage Infinity War, as I said earlier we had 23 people on the poster, it's... If you don't do that right, it's just gonna be sort of a busload of people going from scene to scene and everybody gets one line and we move along. So we had to design a movie that took all that into account, broke up the characters into different small groups, hopefully some new and some old. So you get different types of friction. But most importantly, we had to decide on a main character and a main through line. And it took us a few months. But finally somebody just said, oh, I think this is Thanos's story. Oh, he's the hero of the movie. Are we going to really do that? Yeah, I think we're gonna do that so that The Avengers are the antagonists to Thanos. He gets a proper hero's journey. And so that means he gets the time to tell you what he really thinks. He gets to sacrifice things that are important to him, people that are important to him to get what he wants. He's challenged all along the way. That's because of the paradigm we chose. And because Brolin is really good and the technology is amazing.

**Christopher Markus:** And I will say the character in the comics is a very philosophical, only sometimes villain. So just by honoring that, you couldn't make him twisting his purple mustache. He had to be above it all, in some ways

**Anthony Russo:** And now I'm getting an image of Thanos, the purple mustache.

**Stephen McFeely:** This is a director's cut.

**Christopher Markus:** Sequels. Sequels.

**Scott Tallal:** Yeah. Did I hear correctly? Did you re-release?

**Joe Russo:** We did re-release. We re released with some unseen footage and...

**Anthony Russo:** It's kind of hard to call it a re-release because it never really left theaters, but yes, an enhanced version was released.

**Scott Tallal:** with the additional 14 scenes though. Yeah but you put back in some of the stuff that there had originally come out.

**Joe Russo:** There was a scene that...

**Anthony Russo:** No. No it was just at the end. But actually it didn't. It never affected the actual content of the movie it was simply post-credit. We added some post-credit stuff.

**Scott Tallal:** Okay. I want to shift gears now. While you guys were growing up in Cleveland, my wife was tending bar at the Agoura.

**Joe Russo:** Oh, wow, that's fantastic.

**Anthony Russo:** That's a good place to have tended bar.

**Joe Russo:** A lot of bootlegs out of the Agoura. including a very famous Springsteen bootleg.

**Scott Tallal:** And she did her grad school at Case Western.

**Joe Russo:** Well, we both went to Case Western.

**Scott Tallal:** One of you was at University of Iowa. The other was at University of Pennsylvania for undergrad.

**Joe Russo:** I was in Iowa doing English and Anth was at Penn doing English.

**Scott Tallal:** And then you both came back to go to Case Western for grad school.

**Joe Russo:** Anth went for law school and I was getting an MFA in acting.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah. I lasted about a year in law school.

**Joe Russo:** We grew up cinephiles. We were not in our backyard with cameras shooting movies, but we were instead watching movies and then talking about them. We ended up spending a lot of time at the Cleveland Cinematheque, watching a lot of foreign language movies. And then I think his first year of law school, Rodriguez had released *El Mariachi*, a very famous book about how to shoot a movie for \$7000. And it inspired a fad of young filmmakers all over the country trying to buy lottery tickets by making movies, maxing out credit cards. And we were one of those. And we are lucky enough to get a golden ticket in the form of Steven Soderbergh, who saw our movie at the Slamdance Film Festival in 1997.

**Scott Tallal:** Right. And then Ron Howard also came into play.

**Joe Russo:** Right. From that. We made a movie called *Love in the Collinwood* with Stephen and George Clooney. And off of that, we got a show called *Lucky* at FX. That pilot became an industry favorite as a very weird and very eclectic show, tonally. And Ron saw *Lucky* and gave us a call about *Arrested Development*.

**Scott Tallal:** I'm just struggling with the jump from things like *Arrested Development* to the *Avengers*.

**Anthony Russo:** The *Blues*, *The Avengers*, its a pretty clear pattern there I think...

**Joe Russo:** You know, , *Arrested development*, *Community*, *Happy Endings* all of our television work when you're functioning as a producer as well as a director. So we're

honing that muscle, we're doing a lot of work on TV over a 10 year period. There was a point where we had three shows on the air at the same time. If you walked on the Paramount lot every 10 minutes, you'd see Anth and I whiz by you in a golf cart going from stage to stage on each of our shows. So you get good at understanding volume. Each of those shows had large ensembles. And when in 20 minutes, when you're trying to tell the story of sometimes 20 speaking parts or 25 speaking parts in an episode of Community, it's not dissimilar to what we do on these these large scale Marvel films. And also, I just say at the end of the day, outside of green screen, where the significant portion of money goes out above the line on a movie, the scale, it's all the same. You're pointing a camera and you're trying to get it emotionally truthful performance out of someone.

**Anthony Russo:** But I would say this, too, for surprising as our road was from something like Arrested Development to these Marvel films. I mean, back then, you know, we won an Emmy for directing the pilot of Arrested Development, and then we became known in television as comedy directors and we had a very fun, fruitful run in that. And we used to say at that time, if you'd told us at the beginning of our careers that we would ever be known as comedy directors, we would have never believed you. So I think, you know, that our road to that moment was as unlikely as our road from that moment. So I think you had Joe and I, we, I think our taste is just really wide ranging. And if you look at our careers, we've shot a wide range of things. We've shot movies for as little money as you could possibly make movies for. Now, we've shot movies for as much money as you could possibly make movies for. We shot television, drama, comedy. We shoot commercials. We're sort of excited and challenged by running all over the map in terms of what you can do with cinema.

**Scott Tallal:** I know that there are quite a few writing teams, but directing teams are not nearly as common. Talk to us about the division of responsibility that goes into that. How do you decide who does what?

**Joe Russo:** I think actually we're one of the first directing teams to be approved by the guild because even the Coens didn't receive approval if I remember correctly when they went.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah, they get Directors Guild has been very, it's a very interesting issue if you really want to dig deep on this issue with the Directors Guild and it goes back to the early days of Hollywood when there were very powerful producers and studio heads and movie stars who could infringe upon the job of the director and sort of take credit for the film, take co-directing status, et cetera. So the Directors Guild established this idea of like, no, there's one director per film and that's it. And that was an effort to protect that position from getting co-opted through the process.

**Joe Russo:** From people who are more powerful.

**Anthony Russo:** So that stood for very, very many years, and there were people famously who had trouble with that rule, like Joe was just mentioning, the Coen brothers, the Coen brothers. The story goes that they initially had tried to get co-director status on Blood Simple and couldn't get it. And therefore they took separate credits as producer and director for many years until eventually the tide changed and they got co-director status. But we came up in the 90s and in the 90s because the indie film scene was so strong, the Directors Guild was trying to be very accommodating to the indie film scene in terms of how people work. So they came up with a lot of exceptions to their normal contracts in terms of what they would allow people to do and how they would allow people to work. And I think we benefited from that sort of moment by applying at that time and having somebody like Steven Soderbergh championing us to the Directors Guild, who is prominent in the Directors Guild and.

**Joe Russo:** Vice president at the time.

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah. So I think it was in that spirit of, oh, hey, people like to work in different ways and we as the guild should be open to that. We got credit and then we were saying years later the Coen brothers would actually re-apply.

**Joe Russo:** I think the Hughes brothers had gotten credit before we did.

**Anthony Russo:** That's true. Yeah.

**Joe Russo:** And that was a good test case.

**Scott Tallal:** Yeah. But the vast majority of movies that are made have a single director making those decisions. How do you divide that decision? How does that work between you guys?

**Anthony Russo:** Well, I mean, look at at the end of the day, all filmmaking is collaborative. There's a reason why there's hundreds of names in the credits of the movie. Right? And everything is, as we can all tell you, through our experiences of working together here, all of us. It's like filmmaking is a very intimate collaboration between the writers and the director and the producers and the actors and the cinematographer, etc.. I think the way we look at it is it's just that process of collaboration that you engage in as you make movies. Look, it's interesting because maybe because we are brothers and we grew up in the same family and we have this pattern in our relationship where in order to be a part of a family, you have to kind of submit your own ego at certain moments to the collective good. And so Joe and I have that pattern in our relationship where we're able to at moments submit our egos to sort of some collective goal that we have as co-directors and that allows our process to work.

**Joe Russo:** So, yeah, we subscribe to the mastermind principle, which says that two minds are not doubly better than one, they're exponentially better than one. So we try to put our brains on everything we do. So we don't really divide duties up for that reason is that we're trying to maximize the value of having two brains on every issue.

**Scott Tallal:** I would imagine that means having to park your ego alot.

**Joe Russo:** It does quite a bit, you know,.

**Anthony Russo:** but that's the process

**Joe Russo:** But also too, we assume, I mean part of the value of it is we're fiery Italian brothers who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and can argue as good as anybody. And I think that that provides great value to every decision that comes across your plate because you vet it. And I think we'll even just assume contrary views. Just so one of us is challenging the idea, you know, and that's an intrinsic part of our process.

**Scott Tallal:** As we discussed, the concept of a writing team is a lot more common. Why do you think that is?

**Christopher Markus:** I know why it works for us. I don't know why it's common.

**Stephen McFeely:** I think it's because moving to Hollywood and being a writer is petrifying.

**Christopher Markus:** Yeah, it is terrifying. And it's very easy because writing in particular is theoretically the thing that happens first in the movie making process. It is when the person is least collaborative, you know, more and more people get added to the team and you can bounce ideas off each other. The writer is alone and it's a tough place to be. And it's also a place where if the theoretical writer is distracted or not feeling inspired, that movie dies right there. Two people can push each other. Two people can get that thing done because one person may peter out, but the other one is going to go no let's just get it done. I've been in the room alone, too. People feels like a much more healthy and efficient way to go about things.

**Stephen McFeely:** And it's not unlike Joe said the mastermind principle... I think our scripts are a little more vetted than they would be if either of us had written them alone.

**Scott Tallal:** But are you working on scenes together? Are you working on scenes independently?

**Stephen McFeely:** Our process has been pretty much the same for 20 years and it's, we outline the heck out of it together. And that's the long days very often with Joe and Anth and sitting in the room going down cul de sacs, realizing that they lead nowhere and turning around.

**Christopher Markus:** So really the hardest part of the whole thing. That's when it feels like you might not have a movie and.

**Anthony Russo:** You realize you're in a dead end road in the middle of Montana and you're going like, ooh,

**Stephen McFeely:** I'm pretty sure I got to ask for directions.

**Christopher Markus:** When is this due?

**Joe Russo:** We're supposed to be in New York.

**Christopher Markus:** And it's also when you're shooting down ideas most directly across the table, gone like ehh I don't know about that. And that's also when irritation can come up the highest, because.

**Stephen McFeely:** Why are you killing this baby.

**Christopher Markus:** Babies are being murdered as fast as they're born. Later on there's enough span of time that you can sneak in later and kill the baby. But so we outline, once the outline is done, we'll split it up. I'll write one through five. He'll write six through ten. We'll put it all together. We'll put it together every Friday, not edit it, get a giant, really terrible, really long draft and then attack it together in the room as if some idiot had written this.

**Stephen McFeely:** So you get both parts just on a selfish level. You get the part where you get to write by yourself in your underwear, but you also get the collaboration part. And that's really where that's that's where it gets...

**Christopher Markus:** You wear underwear?

**Joe Russo:** I was going to say he doesn't just wear his underwear by himself.

**Scott Tallal:** I want to get back to the movies for a minute, because obviously one of these struggles that you're going to have in telling a two part film is where do you break it and why do you break it and how do you break it at that? What's the decision and how did you come up with the fingers snap as well?

**Stephen McFeely:** One of the few, we've written now, six Marvel movies, and the four of us have worked together on four of them. And with every succeeding movie, we sort of take less and less from the comics, but we certainly take the best things from the

comics and for Endgame and Infinity War one of the few things we did take was the snap. So Thanos in the comics, for different reasons, wants to kill half the people in the universe and he succeeds in doing so. So we always knew that we were going to do that. And the question becomes, where do you do that? And if you do that, Oh, if you do it too early in movie one, what the heck is the rest of movie one? I mean, you've really, it's just this vestigial limb that, you know, is not as interesting. If you do it too late in movie two, it means I don't know how to end movie one. Come back next week. Will he snap his fingers? So it was always the aggressive, more interesting choice to snap at the end of the movie. Now it meant that Marvel was going to sign off on the bad guy winning, wiping out half of our very interesting, expensive IP and daring the moviegoing public to come back in a year. But they were confident. I think we were all confident and then crossed our fingers.

**Christopher Markus:** It's the decision where it takes the stakes most seriously. You're going to end it on that and it's gonna be real. Like if you go almost gonna snap and then cut. That's just a tease. You have to know it happened and you have to sit with loss for a year.

**Stephen McFeely:** We think of that movie not as a cliffhanger, as some people might say, but as a tragedy because it is complete. That guy won, it's over and it takes years for it to be addressed.

**Joe Russo:** Somewhere in the process we knew we were going to have the finger snap at some point in the process. We said, let's sit there. Let's sit there and watch it happen and let's see what happens to everyone as they watch their loved ones go away. It might be the most intense, dramatic moment ever in the Marvel universe. We need to tell that story. And so you get two and a half, three minutes of pain at the end of the film. But I think that that's the emotional impact. And that's where the audience, if you saw the movie with an audience, would go dead silent and stunned. And then the credits roll and they get angry and you sort of go through all the stages of grief. And Mark Ruffalo is hiding in a theater with his son. He had a hat on and some glasses, and he said when the lights came up, he said the whole audience just sat there for a good 10 minutes until some guy got up and ripped his shirt off and started screaming why and marching around the theater. And that's when Mark said I better get out of here. And he snuck

out. But, you know, it's unique as a creative team to be in a position to create that kind of emotional response from an audience in a movie theater.

**Scott Tallal:** How about an emotional response in yourself, though, because you're living and breathing this through development, through script, through 200 day shoot, through post. What's the challenge on the emotional side of it?

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah. If you feel it every time you're watching. I think that's very much our process, to be honest with you. What you're asking right now is like our collaboration, I think, has been borne out of sitting in a room and telling each other stories and basically feeling out one another's emotional response to narrative ideas. I don't think, we never do anything because we're like, oh, the audience is going to feel this way if we do this. It's always like, the reaction, the barometer is...

**Stephen McFeely:** Steve's going to cry

**Christopher Markus:** It's also very often why we wind up reading it out loud, like quite far into the process, because that's the only way that you can really begin to feel it. Somehow when you're reading it, just reading it. You can zip through the emotion and not sit with it. But when you read it out loud, you have to be there and you can feel when it doesn't work much more viscerally than when you're reading it.

**Joe Russo:** The metric by which you make these movies has got to be an internal one. You have to make the movie that you want to tell. One, because we don't know how to make it any other way and two if you try to predict what the audience wants, everyone in the audience wants something different. I think an example of us using our own emotion to dig deeper in a moment was the infamous Peter Parker: I don't feel so good, Mr. Stark, moment. It was a much faster moment when we first rehearsed it. It was "I don't feel so good". He sort of stumbled, fell into Tony's arms and disappeared. And then sitting there on set, we're pushing to get to that place where we were fighting back tears watching it, because we knew then that that emotion would translate to the audience. We kept stretching it out and stretching it out and just became the longest death of any of the deaths at the end of Infinity War and became a very emotionally powerful moment. But we knew it on set when we started fighting back tears.

**Scott Tallal:** Is it true that you had trouble talking Marvel into the Tom Holland Spider-Man being even a part of this?

**Anthony Russo:** Yeah, by the way, the trouble all came from the fact that was just a very complicated business proposition in order for that to happen because Marvel Studios didn't control the rights.

**Joe Russo:** Let's define, let's also clarify at the time Marvel was being run through New York and Kevin worked for New York. So we did not have an issue talking Kevin into Spider-Man. It was gonna be complicated, expensive. No two studios had ever collaborated on an IP of that scale in history and however before...

**Anthony Russo:** And at that point, Marvel Studios was owned by Disney. So really the deal was between Disney and Sony that needed to be done. That was the difficult part.

**Joe Russo:** Kevin, it's his favorite character as a child. He could not be more passionate. It was my favorite character as a child. We could not be more passionate. ]And the three of us together started banging against the system, trying to get this concept through. And, you know, it was no small miracle and it took an incredible amount of effort and blood on Kevin's part to make it happen.

**Scott Tallal:** So you started off in Cleveland, you're cinephiles and everybody comes to this from somewhere else,.

**Anthony Russo:** Buffalo, San Fran, these guys here,.

**Scott Tallal:** And here you are now. You do a billion on the opening weekend, billion two, sorry. And for the first time in about 50 years, the all time box office champ is not directed by somebody named Spielberg, Lucas or Cameron.

**Anthony Russo:** That's what I hear.

**Scott Tallal:** wrap your head around that, guys.

**Stephen McFeely:** Yeah, well, thats for now.

**Anthony Russo:** For Now, that's great point.

**Christopher Markus:** All three of those names... We would not be here without them, massively formative on our minds as filmmakers and as people. I mean, without Star Wars, who

**Stephen McFeely:** Who amongst us is here?

**Christopher Markus:** Who would any of us be? Think of that.

**Christopher Markus:** Changed the world.

**Scott Tallal:** Yeah, but didn't Cameron send you something ?

**Joe Russo:** He sent a lovely Instagram post just congratulating us and we sent something back that implied his direct influence on our careers, which he did. I still say that Aliens, I think is the screenplay upon which most of modern movies have been built. Clearly, Star Wars and Empire and Lucas and Spielberg eventized filmmaking. There's something really specific about the structure of Aliens and the sort of contemporary quality in which the character spoke and the tag lines in that movie that, you know, have been copied since that film came out. Having him send us something like that, again, it's a surreal experience. It is hard to process. But, you know, we come from Cleveland and our Grandpa worked in the steel mills to his 80s, and so now it's just put your head down and keep working.

**Scott Tallal:** And are you so busy that you don't have time to really think about.

**Joe Russo:** For sure and I think you want to stay busy. I don't know that there's any value in thinking about those sorts of things. It's nice. It's fun to say. But at the end of the day, everything changes. It's cyclical. Someone else is going to come along and beat this movie at some point. It very well may be Cameron when he re-releases Avatar. When Avatar 2 comes out, he could take it back. It can't be why you do it, because one, it's virtually unattainable and two, it doesn't ultimately hold a lot of value. You have to do it because at the end of the day, you love telling stories.

**Anthony Russo:** The pivotal thing is at the end of the day, just speaking for Joe and I, you know, we've loved our entire filmmaking career from the second we first started messing around with cameras all the way through Endgame. Every bit of it, everything we've done on a cinema level has been special. And we'll go on to do other things. And they probably won't be the biggest movie in history, but they may be. Who knows? But the thing is, I know we'll go on to do other work that we love. And really very excitingly, we'll go on to do some of that work with Mercks and McFeely. So we're excited about that.

**Scott Tallal:** I can't think of a better way to open our podcast. Thank you so much to our guest today, Anthony and Joe Russo. Christopher Marcus, Stephen McFeely, thank you so much for your time and for your incredible and wonderful films.

**Stephen McFeely:** Thanks very much.

**Joe Russo:** Thanks. Appreciate it. Thanks for the great questions.

**Jenny Curtis:** Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is presented in cooperation with the Malibu Film Society. This episode was hosted by Scott Tallal with guests Joe Russo, Anthony Russo, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. The score from Avengers Endgame featured as the music in this episode was composed by Alan Silvestri, created by Curtco Media, produced and edited by Jenny Curtis, executive produced by Stuart Holperin Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy, recorded at Curtco Media's Malibu Podcast Studios. The Hollywood Unscripted theme song is by Celeste and Erik Dick. Subscribe to this podcast for more conversations with top industry professionals discussing the movies you love.

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