

TFEO - Dirt: An Audio Drama Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Kris Kaiyala, Joseph, Kim, W. Keith Tims

W. Keith Tims 00:11

Hello, and welcome to The First Episode Of, a podcast about audio drama and the creative process. I'm W Keith Tims, writer and podcaster, creator of The Book of Constellations. In this show, I listen to the first episode of an audio drama and have a discussion with the creators about the show their methods, their struggles and successes. Today we're discussing the first episode of Dirt: An Audio Drama.

Joseph 00:37

[Begin clip from Dirt: An Audio Drama.] (mailbox opens, mail is removed, an envelope is torn open, paper unfolded). What? (footsteps hurry away.)

Joseph 00:56

(voiceover) Think my deceased grandfather is trying to communicate with me. (door slam) [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 01:11

Dirt, An Audio Drama, is a mystery story written and produced by Chris Kaiyala. Set in modern Washington State. Dirt follows unlikely hero Joseph Elo, a tech company CEO, who is surprised to receive a recently mailed letter from his grandfather Imo years after Imo's death. The letter hints at buried treasure and Joseph must dig into his family's past to discover the truth. The first episode, "Are you bracing yourself?" begins with Joseph receiving a letter from Imo and meeting with his sister to watch old movies of their grandfather to look for clues. As the story continues, Joseph finds himself trying to juggle his work life with his quest and reconnecting with his family's history in unexpected ways. Dirt was recently picked up by the Fable and Folly Podcast Network, I spoke to Kris remotely from his home in Seattle.

W. Keith Tims 02:07

Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background as an artist and a creator, and how you came to make Dirt: An Audio Drama.

Kris Kaiyala 02:15

I guess going back even to when I was young, my mom says I always used to write stories. The first story that I ever wrote, she printed out for me on my dad's work, I guess it was a printer at that time, this would have been in the 70s. And it was called The Loneliest Cowboy. I ended up getting in college, a creative writing degree in English of all things, which of course, usually is a career killer. (laughter) But for me, it worked out I didn't really do much creative writing. I haven't done much creative writing in my career up to this point. It's been mostly things like journalism and feature writing for magazines and that sort of thing. And I also work for a creative agency where I'm asked to do a lot of marketing, writing and that sort of thing. So I always had it in the back of my head that I wanted to explore some different fiction ideas, whether it be a longer form, or or maybe short stories. Finally, I found my outlet, at least for now, this is the one that I'm really enjoying just sort of mashing up a lot of the ideas I've had in my head for a while. And audio fiction just seemed like the right time and place to do it.

W. Keith Tims 03:16

How did you come to audio drama as a choice?

Kris Kaiyala 03:19

Well, first of all, I didn't even know it existed until a few years ago, I of course, knew the term podcast like everybody else does. But I hadn't actually listened to anything that I guess would be classified as an audio drama. In my mind, it was always like old radio plays and things like that, which I think are interesting, but just don't really hold my attention. But when I started listening to these, I was like, wow, that just seems like something I could try. And the more I thought about it, and then of course, there's that whole sort of like, toys aspect of like, ooh I could buy a microphone and ooh I could buy a you know, an audio interface and and I just thought, let's give it a try. And I had always been told that my voice you know, people where at work at my creative agency we do a lot of video voiceover work for our clients and things like that. And people were always like, oh, you should you know, try your hand at radio or audio recording. And I was like, Nah, it's okay. So I did it in the privacy of my own home, listened to it very nervously. And then I played some of the clips for family members and they're like, I think you might have something here. And so it was that point that I decided to kind of put that fun audio aspect with the sort of like story aspect that I had been working on it but those two together and just started creating drafts of things to see how how it sounds.

W. Keith Tims 04:32

Yeah. I do like your voice for the show. And I can tell that you've put a lot of work into crafting the sound for Dirt. It does have a very NPR, This American Life kind of vibe, especially the first episode where you're doing a lot of narration and a lot of the main character looking back. Is that your inspiration?

Kris Kaiyala 04:49

I have listened to This American Life. I love this sort of like storytelling and journalism mashup that they have going on there. And even though what I was trying to do was is completely made up and fictional, I thought it just seemed like an interesting road to go down with that type of format. And I think as the as my show has developed beyond the first episode, it has surely become more of like a serial

character interaction story versus a narration story. But the narration of course still plays a heavy role in getting the story along,

W. Keith Tims 05:21

You're still there, the Joseph is still narrating as he goes, but it does become more straight drama as the episodes go along. What is Dirt? In your own words? What is this show mean to you?

Kris Kaiyala 05:33

There's that deep question I was waiting for. It's kind of a mash up of a lot of ideas that I had, in my mind already. I think maybe on a deeper level, it's sort of just me having a format to recount or maybe put into a different context, just some great memories of my life. And my family. Growing up, I was very close to my grandparents. And of course, Joseph has fictional grandparents that he didn't, he didn't know very well in the story. But they factor incredibly into his life and his memories. I think it was just a way for me to, in some ways, pay tribute to some Kaiyalas, who have come before me. And I'm very lucky in that I have a real Finnish grandfather. And he, in his later years did in fact, write down a whole bunch of stories just about adventures and different things in his life. His thoughts about things, you know, in the stories are all very playful, and they're very light. It's really just how he lived his life. It's a collection that all of us, his kids and US grandkids have just cherished throughout the years. And I thought, what a what a great wealth of material to draw from. So yeah, I just started kind of putting some of that more historical stuff together with more contemporary ideas that I had. And before I knew it, I started to have a story.

W. Keith Tims 06:46

Yeah. Throw in a dash of mystery and a little treasure hunt. What was your relationship with your grandfather, like?

Kris Kaiyala 06:51

Well, I knew my grandfather for a lot longer than Joseph knew his grandfather in the story. Joseph was seven, when his grandfather died, I knew my grandfather into my 20s. You know, he was an interesting guy. He was, he was a concert violinist in the Oregon symphony orchestra. And then he was also a music educator, he taught kids and the Portland school system. And so I think that there was sort of like a little bit of a disciplinarian to him on the one hand, but he was also a really, really humorous man. And it was a kind of a dry sense of humor wasn't like, immediately obvious when he was being funny. But then after the fact, you're like, Oh, I think he just got me, you know, it was kind of a lot of that built into a really great relationship. And I remember when I was little, he used to send me used to send me letters, I think he wanted to be a pen pal with me more than I was into at the time, which is a shame, because I wish I had engaged more. But I was, you know, I think I was like, 10-11 years old, and in my own, in my own world, of course. But a lot of the story of Dirt is about these letters and stories that Imo wrote to people in his life, I was lucky enough to get some of those stories from my own grandfather growing up.

W. Keith Tims 07:56

Yeah, family, of course, is central to Dirt. And I'm assuming that it's fairly central to you and your life as well?

Kris Kaiyala 08:02

It is very much so most of my family lives nearby, I actually have a sister who lives down in the LA area, just like Joseph does. But we all communicate very frequently. I'm very close to my family. I feel fortunate about that.

W. Keith Tims 08:15

We talked a little bit about the genesis of this idea. But I'm curious as to what made you want to tell this story now.

Kris Kaiyala 08:22

As I mentioned, I'd always kind of had these ideas. I think when it comes down to why now a lot of people may relate to this, in that, you know, the pandemic hits, my work went from in the office every day to working remotely every day, I think it was a trend that a number of people started to create various side hustles for themselves, whether it be podcasting, or writing, or maybe bread making, or knitting, you know, all the things that we all saw on our Instagram feeds.

W. Keith Tims 08:51

(laughter) We're all gonna have sweaters this coming winter.

Kris Kaiyala 08:54

That's right. I have a couple of empty spaces in the basement that would make for a decent little studio area. Let's just give this a try and see where it goes. And this is a nights and weekends project. For me. I have a very busy day job. But because of the nature of the last couple of years and being you know, being home more and whatnot, like it's actually been a great use of time, and it's just a terrific creative outlet.

W. Keith Tims 09:20

Let's talk about the show a little bit. Dirt follows the story of Joseph Elo, who is a tech company CEO based out of Seattle, and he gets a mysterious letter from his grandfather. But the thing is it was mailed after his grandfather died. Through the letter and other evidence, he begins to suspect that his grandfather has left him a buried treasure somewhere. And so he starts connecting with his family and revisiting the past to try to figure it out and what this mystery is all about. And of course, at the same time he's trying to juggle his professional life and deal with the responsibilities that he has there. Joseph is not Indiana Jones. He's not somebody going out into the abandoned temples to hunt for artifacts. He's an unlikely hero. Tell me a little bit about how you came up with Joseph as your protagonist.

Kris Kaiyala 10:10

Yeah, I think that's a terrific observation, it wouldn't perform well at the box office if Indiana Jones was just hauling a metal detector around a shovel. Certainly, I think for me, part of the magic of the show is that it's an adventure that in some ways that Joseph didn't really choose for himself, something that sort of landed in his lap and becomes a major disruption to what might be an otherwise perfectly fine life. But there's something about the way that it unfolds that gets a hold of him that he just can't let go

of. He can't say no to later, I don't want to give too much away for those who may not have listened very far in the show. But I think for if any of us felt like we were being either followed, or spied on, at the same time that something like this landed in their lap, they might think there's something really going on here something very intriguing, or, or maybe an element of danger. And so I think that that's part of what hooks Joseph to become almost obsessed with the treasure hunt right away. And I'm hoping that that's part of what is hooking the audience.

W. Keith Tims 11:13

I think what's really interesting is in the first episode, you spend a lot of time setting up Joseph's life. You also do, again very This American Life kind of thing where you talk about the real person Forrest Fenn who buried treasure and then encourage people to try to hunt for it and spawned a whole movement of sorts to people who went out into the woods to experience nature, but also, let's turn to live look for this treasure.

Joseph 11:36

[Begin clip.] (Narrating.) Sometime around the year 2010, a man in his 80s named Forrest Fenn hid a chest full of treasure somewhere in America's rocky mountain range, and lots of people went looking for it all over the West. (Light electronic music.)

Joseph 12:02

It's not hard to understand why the contents of the chest were reported to be worth between one and \$5 million. And according to Fenn, an antiques collector and art dealer who was based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the person who eventually found the chest 10 years later, got to keep it along with everything inside of it all for themselves. [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 12:24

So you set that up at the beginning to sort of frame what's happening in the story and and then you tell us a lot about Joseph himself, we learn about his career, we learn about his sister, Kim, the two of them are talking about Imo, we don't really get that something is up specifically until the very end when he says I got this letter. And I think our granddad is trying to communicate to me. Part of me as a sort of narrative storyteller says, you know, you got to you got to drop something a little stronger in earlier on, but I didn't find that to be the case with Dirt. And I think part of that is that you're doing very careful world building here, that you're you're framing the whole thing in the lens of Forrest Fenn. And then Joseph does get something strange in the mail right from the very beginning. And so we know that something's up and then immediately he flies down to California to meet with his sister, and the two of them are revisiting, and she keeps on asking him questions. So there is a slow build of tension there. And I think what's really interesting is that you are spending a lot of time developing Joseph's non adventure life, I'm curious as to why you wanted to spend the time doing that.

Kris Kaiyala 13:28

Keith I... can't tell you how much I sort of... that was a real hand wringing decision. Because, you know, we're all taught as traders of art or entertainers, you know, you got to hook the audience, you got to, you know, you have to have something right out of the gate that makes people not look away, right or

not stop listening. You know, I did drop a little bit of that at the beginning, but then you really don't get that big. Oh, I have to tune in to the next episode to find out what happens until until the very end. And that's certainly something that that I worried about quite a bit. And also, like devoting the first two and a half to three minutes of the very first episode to a real life person who basically has nothing else to do with the story from that point on to me was like, a huge risk that I debated even whether I should have that introduction or not, but it just seemed to me like too good of a parallel story or an allegory for the rest of the show to not allude to, and I think it has probably caused some confusion for some people who have only tuned in to the first couple of minutes of the show. In fact, there's one audio platform which I'll leave unmentioned that was kind enough to promote dirt on audio drama on his channel, but they framed it up as a story about Forrest Fenn. (laughter) And I was like, Yeah, I was like, Okay, two things are going wrong here. One is that I blew it by starting out that way. And then the second thing that went wrong is that clearly someone only listened to the first couple of minutes and then wrote a broad social media copy. So so that's something that I have always wondered if that's had has been helpful or a hindrance to the show that said, I think you know, the download numbers show that for those who've chosen to stick with it, it's pretty consistent from that point on.

W. Keith Tims 15:11

This is something I think that everyone struggles with in their first episode is, you know, how do we get the audience to come back? For me it's always the question of what are called forwards in analysis. You know, these are these are things you put into the script that make the audience want to pay attention. But really all of forward is is a question that the audience wants answered. And sometimes I think it's enough for the question to be small, but if it lingers, and it keeps coming up, I think that's enough for an audience member to come back. You bring up Forrest Fenn and for me, okay, my question was, how does this guy relate to the story? And then I wanted to know what was in that letter? And then I wanted to know what's going on with the sister because they kept on kind of hinting at the question so that when we finally do get the answer at the very end, that leaves room for a further question, which is now what, and that's really all we need is to pull us along is, as a question the audience wants answered, presented in a way that maybe keeps coming up in a little subtle ways. I'm thinking about your title, Dirt. Now, in the first episode, Kim uses that word, when she's talking to Joseph, they're talking about maybe Imo, the grandfather might have buried some dirt on someone, some secrets, some scandal, I also then thought, well, dirt is also digging in the dirt looking for treasure. But I also thought that dirt is also where things grow, then I thought about family trees, and roots, and all that kind of thing. And it kind of made sense to me that that's kind of what this story is about. It's not about the gold, it's about connecting in other ways. It's about family,

Kris Kaiyala 16:42

it took me a while to land on a title that I felt really good about. And even with Dirt, knowing that it has all these different meanings. And that gave me sort of some fertile ground, if you will, for playing with some of those different meanings, right? I mean, there are some aspects of scandal or sensation in the story that could also be tied to that word. But then I also, of course, struggled with the notion of like, it's just a it's such a generic word like will it will it stick? Will it be memorable? Am I being distinct enough by calling it that but in the end, I just kind of threw all that out the window on because I liked it so much. And I just knew that you know what the metal detecting and and sort of like there being these

mysteries, and maybe maybe potentially some hidden information about some of the characters that could play out really well.

W. Keith Tims 17:29

In the first episode, you actually spend some time adding details about Josef's and Kim's life. You know, we you've got kids coming in, like they're coming home from karate, they're making noise. And it's a whole family scene. And I'm thinking you didn't have to put that in there. Right. in later episodes. You also include a lot about Joseph's work life. The I think the second episode, you actually have a lot of him talking with his assistant and handling things while he's trying to piece this story together.

Kim 17:58

[Begin clip.] (busy restaurant ambience) And work? How is the life of the celebrity CEO these days?

Joseph 18:05

I get written up in a bunch of magazines and you guys think I'm Mark Zuckerberg, it's not like that.

Kim 18:09

Oh, you're on TV, too. I've seen it.

Joseph 18:12

Yeah, that was just a PR tour. You know, we were just named a top 10 agency.

Kim 18:18

The ticker under your name, read Joseph Elo: Wolf of Wall Street. And they showed photos of you in your private jet.

Joseph 18:25

Whoa, okay. You know, I don't have a private jet. And that was just a weekend getaway to blow off some steam.

Kim 18:32

To Bali? [end clip]

W. Keith Tims 18:33

Why did you choose to put in the details like that?

Kris Kaiyala 18:36

you know, for me, when I listen to an audio drama, or read a book or watch a series on Netflix, it's usually those little details that sort of endear me to a character. And in particular, if it's a character that maybe isn't super likable, whenever you find out that there's just a little bit more to something or someone than what meets the eye or what's on the surface, it just kind of makes you you tune in a little bit more and and realize that there might be some deeper things going on. And so I think I just wanted to weave that kind of stuff in, throughout all the different chapters, some of it may seem trivial, it may

not even have a direct connection to the action of what's actually happening. But hopefully, it just contributes to a sense of knowing who these people are. And, and I hope that that's been effective. Someone recently commented that, that the characters in the show are people that you want to hold hands with. And I thought if that's actually what I've accomplished here, then I think that those you know, adding in those types of details has absolutely been worth it.

W. Keith Tims 19:31

You did the music for the show?

Kris Kaiyala 19:32

I did I did. And my grandfather, if he were alive today, he would be so proud of me because he did I wouldn't say sternly but he was pretty he was pretty firm and that I needed to keep practicing my piano just as he says to, just as Imo says to Joseph in the in the letter that that he recounts and that's actually one of sort of the unsung things about the podcast that I'm always excited when people find out because I don't make it obvious where the music came from. But when people say, Wait, you you did that? I'm like, Yeah, I did that. So that's, that's kind of fun.

W. Keith Tims 20:08

What do you struggle with creatively speaking?

Kris Kaiyala 20:10

Probably like a lot of people who are starting out or maybe even who are pros, I think there was, there's been a bit of impostor syndrome in starting up the show, putting it out there in platforms, alongside all these sorts of great renowned productions. And just worrying that it wouldn't be any good, right? That or that my the writing would be shallow or silly or or I would portray characters in a in a shade ways and things like that. So I think that's what I struggled with early on was, am I really creating anything of value here? And so it's, it's been gratifying to get reviews and feedback from people who have said, you know, quite the opposite. So I'm very grateful that my work which, you know, I initially was very sort of cautious to, to put out there and promote has actually been something that people have have enjoyed. So I think I think that impostor syndrome thing is real, especially when you're just starting out something new. And actually, Keith, if you don't mind, I would ask you, you know, how, how do you feel about that, especially in the context of the shows that you've started,

W. Keith Tims 21:13

W. Keith Tims 21:13

Impostor syndrome, and I are old friends (laughter), we have had a long relationship together, and I still struggle with it. I'm very pleased that Book of Constellations has had a measure of success. I've gotten a lot of good reviews, I'm still getting downloads and things are progressing. But there's always going to be a part of me that kind of goes, Yeah, but you're not doing it exactly right. Or it's not your best work. Or, you know, what are you even doing here? You don't know anything about doing this. And there are some days that are better than others. But I think what's helped me is, like you say, is gathering some

evidence from nice people like you who have said nice things about my work. And then also trying to reframe how I measure success. Maybe numbers aren't the best way to evaluate my self-worth as an artist, because there's so many ways that shows either get picked up or they get listeners or people tune in, or they don't. And a lot of the times, it doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the storytelling or the production value. Sometimes it's just the way it is. That's a hard lesson to learn. But it's something I'm learning to do. Well, since we talked about it, how do you measure success?

Kris Kaiyala 22:23

I think first and foremost, that my family likes the show, because the story even though it's completely made up of course, does have parallels to just our own experiences and memories with family picnics and gatherings and, and whatnot throughout the years. And so I think more than sharing the podcast with the world, I was frightened by sharing it with my family of my parents and my aunts and uncles and cousins, who would, you know, even if I didn't give them a lot of setup, they would know within minutes of listening to it, what my inspiration was. I was really worried honestly, about that part of it. And the fact that it has been embraced by that group of people who are not tough critics, by the way, I think that their enthusiasm, or maybe lack thereof was going to tell me a lot about whether I should push forward and and keep rolling with it. That has been really awesome. And I would say probably the biggest measure of success for me.

W. Keith Tims 23:18

is that your primary motivation now I know that you talked about having a pretty busy job and you know, knock wood COVID may ease up and we all get back to a normal life and a little while. Curious as to what sustains your motivation, given all that you have to do.

Kris Kaiyala 23:33

Writing and producing the show has been pure joy, even those long production days where I'm cutting up clips and, and applying filters and noise reduction types of things to all of all the audio, I do all the production myself, that can become tedious at times, but even then I I have such a big smile on my face as I'm doing it. So I don't see myself not being able to not do this. It's just a matter of making time for it. And that's what's ahead of me right now is, you know, the show just finished season two with, of course, a big cliffhanger. And so now it's all about writing the next batch of chapters. And it could be the last batch of chapters or there could be even more after that.

W. Keith Tims 24:16

Is there something that you wish you had known ahead of time before you jumped in and started making dirt that you know, now?

Kris Kaiyala 24:21

It's taken longer to build an audience than I thought it would? But I also was, I think I was naive when I got started in that I knew about a lot of audio productions, ones that I had tuned into, and then you know, sort of seen and had seen on iTunes and other platforms. And I thought, oh, I can jump into this. What I didn't know is that there was all the other like sort of hundreds of other productions like ours that I just didn't know existed at the time. And so it was eye opening to me in those first few months after I

put my show out into the world how much more competition there is for people's ears than I thought there was and so it's just taken a long time to build an audience to get people's attention, well, you know, you stick with it. It's great to make friendly alliances also with other independent podcast creators who are making their own art and are kind of have the same goals that you do, which is to just put something out into the world that they're proud of, and to try to get people to listen to it. The more you can sort of build those alliances with your fellow creators, and even with up and coming bloggers, you know, independent creators like us starting out, the more of those kinds of alliances you can make, the better also.

Joseph 25:31

[Begin Clip] (narrating) I grab an envelope from my jacket pocket and hand it to Kim. Her face becomes serious. Like I'm delivering a warrant or an eviction notice. I give her a moment to look at it. And then she opens it. She pulls out a piece of paper that I know she'll recognize. She looks up at me, and then back down at the paper. Her eyes scan its contents. She looks back up, and then she reads it again.

Kim 25:57

What is this?

Joseph 25:59

I suppose that's what it looks like.

Kim 26:00

It's his handwriting and everything. And it's... (turns letter over) you just got this.

Joseph 26:08

Yep.

Kim 26:11

Joseph!

Joseph 26:12

(narrating) In her hands is a letter I've received in the mail. An impossible letter, a letter that arrived only 10 days ago. A letter from Imo, our dead grandfather. [End clip.]

W. Keith Tims 26:27

Dirt's strength as an audio drama lies with its well developed characters and strong production values. The mystery at the core of Dirt is certainly interesting enough to sustain the curious. But as Kaiyala hints in the first episode, the hunt for the treasure is only part of the tale. Joseph Elo is also putting together the pieces of his past. You can listen to Dirt: An Audio Drama on most major podcast platforms, or see our show notes for more information. [Theme music plays.] The First Episode Of is written and produced by W. Keith Tims. All opinions expressed in this show belong to the people who expressed them and not necessarily to anyone else. The theme song is "Mockingbird" by David Mumford. The show's webpage is thefirstepisodeof.com If you're an audio drama creator and would like

to be on the show, send an email to thefirstepisodeof@gmail.com If you'd like down to earth, sci fi audio drama, check out my show The Book of Constellations wherever you get your podcasts. Keep telling stories. It's the only way we're going to get out of this mess. Until next time!

W. Keith Tims 27:38

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