

Screen Currency 2026

Understanding the value of
Australian screen and games

A study in 5 reports with
supporting case studies

Case study

Mystery Road

TV Series • Released 2018
Bunya Productions



Australian Government



Introduction

 Individual	 Community	 Industry	 Economy	 Nation
Entertainment	Understanding of First Nations communities	4 seasons of local drama	A\$25 million boost to Western Australia	Soft power
Genre satisfaction	Discussion about issues & history	Training & skills development, including for First Nations creatives	Exports (sales to 19 territories)	Positive perceptions of Australia
Culturally resonant stories	Profile of contemporary regional Australia	Ratings success for First Nations content	Regional impacts	Better understanding of First Nations
Insights into First Nations issues	Representation		Regional spend	Confident national identity
Authentic storytelling			Tourism impact	
Identity				

***Mystery Road* is an award-winning Australian drama series celebrated for redefining the Australian neo-Western genre and for its groundbreaking approach to First Nations representation.**

Created by Bunya Productions for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the series had its origins in 2 earlier films, *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016), both written and directed by First Nations filmmaker Ivan Sen. The TV series *Mystery Road* and its prequel *Mystery Road: Origin* built on the tropes of the Western thriller that characterised the original films, creating a crime drama that follows the career of First Nations detective Jay Swan and was immediately branded ‘outback noir’ in the press.¹ The series has been applauded by critics and audiences for its portrayal of community relationships in Australian towns, its foregrounding of First Nations characters and storylines, its spectacular use of regional locations, and its unswerving attention to pressing social issues. It also demonstrated strong audience appeal, with Season 1 ranking as the most-watched non-children’s series on ABC iView in 2018, attracting an average of 246,000 viewers per episode.

Mystery Road reveals the importance of authenticity in development, casting and setting to achieve cultural resonance. It relies on a well-established narrative structure. A cop arrives in a new town each series or, in the case of *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 1, returns to his hometown (the fictional-but-familiar WA mining

town of Jardine). He is then required to navigate the secrets and tensions within the community, as well as his own past.

The authentic stories, landscapes and cultural context of remote Australia make this program unique, as does its foregrounding of First Nations characters in central roles. Audiences responded to these characters and their challenges, identifying both the entertainment and educative impact of the series as the inner workings of the town and the dilemmas faced by its protagonists are revealed. First Nations audiences described how such programming reduced the need for them to continually educate others about the contemporary realities of First Nations Australians’ lives.² Many online responses described how it had provided them with a deeper understanding of the dynamics of contemporary remote Australia.³

Skilful acting, powerful scriptwriting, beautiful cinematography and evocative music were all cited as reasons for increased engagement with the series. The response to *Mystery Road* demonstrates how well executed drama can provide unique opportunities to empathise with characters’ struggles and identify with others’ points of view.

Creation

Companies involved

Production company:	Bunya Productions
Commissioner:	ABC

Bunya Productions was established by Ivan Sen and David Jowsey in 2008. According to Jowsey, “We’re an Indigenous company, Ivan owns half the company and he’s an Aboriginal filmmaker so it’s having that Indigenous influence over the company that is probably the main feature.”⁴ Jowsey has stated that the collaboration with Sen has influenced how Bunya works with First Nations creatives. The series was commissioned by the ABC TV as part of its ongoing investment in distinctive Australian screen stories and First Nations-led storytelling for national audiences.

Origin story: the idea and initial development

Mystery Road was a television drama that sought to address First Nations issues in the new millennium. The series is a crime drama that echoes the Western in its iconography and setting, but also has a keen eye on recent developments in TV crime drama, the environment and First Nations issues.

Season 1 director Rachel Perkins points to multiple values when explaining the initial development “We went to great lengths to shoot our series in some of the remotest and most spectacular landscapes in Australia. This landscape also has a deep history of black-and-white conflict, which we mine to give greater layers. It is a universal story of colonisation, which is the undercurrent of what on its surface seems to be a cop show, but also has something to say about our country, our history and a future where 2 cultures must exist together and reconcile their past.”⁵



“You can watch it at one level as a crime drama and ... watch the action, so to speak. But underlying that is the thematic ... question for people to explore. And I think having that multi-layered approach is something that audiences like.”⁹

– David Jowsey, producer

The creative process

Mystery Road: Origin saw the series move from the Kimberley to WA’s Goldfields region. According to Jowsey, “It’s an amazing place to film, the locations are incredible ... It’s perfect for Westerns because you’ve got these beautiful old buildings that look like an old Western town and then you’ve got these incredible landscapes and salt lakes and mountain ranges. It looks sensational.”⁶

Casting

Casting director Anousha Zarkesh advocated for the social and cultural value of the series, suggesting that a show like *Mystery Road* “... can change the psyche of the country” by encouraging people who would not normally do so to engage with First Nations storytelling and learn about cultural practices.⁷

“The [series] all had a contemporary crime, but also something from the past that speaks to a topic we wanted to interrogate. The first TV season covered massacres that were unacknowledged... The second season was about repatriation, you know, bones and artefacts being taken and sitting in museums. The third was about the justice system and the fourth season was about the Stolen Generations.”⁸

– Greer Simpkin, producer



“We would use genre as a sort of a Trojan horse to attract people that they could recognise what they were watching, a Western or a crime drama ... and out of the belly of the Trojan Horse would come the meaning and the exploration of, you know, themes of, you know, identity of Australia and its relationship with the First Nations Australians and how that has played out.”¹⁰

– David Jowsey, producer

Production

Cast and crew metrics

One of Bunya’s key operating principles includes the hiring of First Nations crews and employing locals as interns on their productions. Award-winning First Nations directors and cinematographers who worked on the show include Rachel Perkins, Wayne Blair, Warwick Thornton, Dylan River, Jub Clerc and Tyson Perkins. First Nations actors Aaron Pedersen and Mark Coles Smith were acclaimed for their performances of the older and younger Jay Swan.

The following cast and crew figures, sourced from IMDb, illustrate the scale of the production workforce required for programs such as *Mystery Road* and *Mystery Road: Origin*.¹¹

	<i>Mystery Road</i>	<i>Mystery Road: Origin</i>
Producers:	2	2
Directors:	3	3
Writers:	7	9
Cinematographers:	2	2
Cast:	113	136
Crew:	238	131
People with multiple roles:	24	21

In 2025, it was reported that Season 2 of *Mystery Road: Origin* was scripted by an “all-Blak” writers’ team.¹²

Production financing: investment and presales

Direct supports

Over the course of its total run, the franchise has received support from Screen Australia, Screenwest, Screen NSW and distributor All3Media International.

All 4 seasons of the *Mystery Road* franchise have been funded by the Screen Australia First Nations Department (formerly the Indigenous Department).

Training and skills

Mystery Road has a tradition of nurturing emerging talent, and giving opportunities to mid-career creatives in new screen crafts, bolstering the versatility, employability and diversity of Australian screen practitioners.

Achievements among First Nations creatives include:

- Clerc completed a director’s attachment on Season 1, later directed 3 episodes *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 2
- River worked as second unit director and camera operator on Season 2, later directed all 6 episodes of *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 2 and won the 2022 AACTA Award for Best Direction in Drama or Comedy for his work.¹³
- Jada Alberts, originally cast on screen as Jay Swan’s police partner for *Mystery Road* Season 2, later wrote an episode of *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 2 – only their second primetime drama writing credit.

Other departments also featured opportunities for emerging First Nations talent.

- Tyson Perkins was director of photography (DOP) across all 6 episodes of *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 1, his first time working as cinematographer in a TV drama. Tyson won the 2022 Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Award for Best Cinematography in Television for his work.
- Vincent Goodyer received his first primetime television drama credit as composer on *Mystery Road: Origin*. He received a nomination for the AACTA Award for Best Original Score in Television for Season 1 and Season 2.
- Kodie Bedford was promoted from notetaker to writer on Season 1 and continued writing for the next 2 seasons.¹⁴

“On every season, there’s lots of people who come through. There are lots of cases where actors have suddenly had a rise by being in *Mystery Road*, let alone Mark Coles Smith, but many actors have done their first roles and then gone on to be working regularly.”¹⁵

– David Jowsey, producer

Economic impacts

Economic spillovers

Screenwest estimates that *Mystery Road* delivered a significant financial boost to Western Australia across its 4 seasons.

“With support from the WA Government, the 4 *Mystery Road* seasons – each filmed in Western Australia – have collectively injected a staggering A\$25 million into the state’s economy, including A\$18.5 million to country towns. We have seen screen productions really pull regional communities and country towns into their exciting projects,” says Rikki Lea Bestall, Screenwest’s Chief Executive Officer.¹⁶

“We’re doing a whole locations document so that people can go and find the places that are public that they can go and visit and in conjunction with the community and with a First Nations Traditional Owner putting some stories around where we filmed.”¹⁷

– Greer Simpkin, producer



“Buying local, using all the local businesses. You have lots of community involvement.”¹⁸

– Greer Simpkin, producer

Regional jobs

Examples from the first season include experienced Australian horse trainer Jim Willoughby, hired to train local horses and riders; 3 boys enrolled in an agricultural course at the local Kununurra District High School employed as extras – one as a stunt double; and 100 extras hired from Wyndham and 100 in Kununurra.¹⁹

Mystery Road: Origin Season 1 was filmed in Kalgoorlie-Boulder and Coolgardie. The production hired 245 extras, 33 cast in speaking roles and 36 crew from the Goldfields region of Western Australia. The Goldfields Arts Centre hosted a free screening of the first two episodes for members of the public along with local cast and crew.²⁰

The town of Pemberton was the prime location for *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 2. Locals hired to work on the production include a catering assistant who now works full time in film catering in Sydney and 3 locals who worked as production runners.



“People in Kununurra and Wyndham say tourists come to find the locations of *Mystery Road*. And the locals we know in Pemberton say people are already booking because of *Mystery Road*.”²¹

– Greer Simpkin, producer



Dissemination

Distribution

First release platform:	ABC
International distributor:	All3Media
International platforms:	Acorn TV, BBC Four, C More Entertainment, Ivi

All3Media was involved in *Mystery Road* from the early stages of development, attracted by its “sumptuous, cinematic outback noir character” and viewing it as a “groundbreaking, genre-defining drama,” reflecting the series’ ambition to reach international audiences.²² In Australia, the series premiered on ABC TV and is currently available on ABC iview and Acorn TV. Internationally, Season 1 was acquired by Acorn TV in the United States²³, BBC in the United Kingdom,²⁴ C More Entertainment across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and Ivi in Russia. Acorn TV also acquired secondary rights for the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.²⁵ Season 1 has been sold into 19 territories, while *Mystery Road* Season 2 and *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 1 are available in 17 territories. *Mystery Road: Origin* is currently available to stream on Apple TV, Stan, ABC iview, Acorn TV and AMC+.

Exhibition

Mystery Road Season 1 premiered in competition at Séries Mania in 2018.²⁶

Mystery Road Season 2 was 1 of 8 Australian projects selected to screen at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2020.²⁷

Mystery Road: Origin Season 1 was 1 of 2 television titles selected for the Sydney Film Festival 2022.²⁸ It made its international premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2022.²⁹

Awards

By July 2023, the *Mystery Road* franchise held the highest number of Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) nominations for a TV season in the history of the awards.³⁰

Awards received include 15 AACTA Awards, 2 TV Week Logie Awards, 3 Equity Ensemble Awards, Australian Writers’ Guild AWGIE Award, Australian Directors’ Guild (ADG) Awards, Australian Screen Sound Guild (ASSG) Awards, Australian Screen Music Awards, Asian Academy Creative Awards and SPA Awards Australia.

Renewal

The success of the first season of *Mystery Road* led to a second season and then 2 seasons of the prequel series *Mystery Road: Origin*.

The continuation of *Mystery Road* reflects its success on multiple fronts. Season 1 built on the original movies to establish a critically acclaimed, culturally significant crime-and-drama world, enabling the series to adapt to shifting eras and new actors, particularly in the prequel series. Both critical and audience reception remained strong in the competitive “on demand” era for screen content.

Bunya Productions’ focus on regional production and its First Nations creative leadership informs a program that aligns with ABC’s strategic priorities. This validates the confidence demonstrated by the ABC and Screen Australia in continuing to invest.



Engagement

Online metrics

Selected audience and critic scores are shown below.^{31,32}

	<i>Mystery Road</i>	<i>Mystery Road: Origin</i>
IMDb:	7.5/10	7.6/10
Rotten Tomatoes critics:	100%	100%
Rotten Tomatoes audience:	75%	62%

Reception

Critics were uniformly enthusiastic, including First Nations academic and broadcaster Larissa Behrendt who welcomed the distinct voices of the First Nations creative team and suggested they had effectively captured community relationships in a small Australian town.³³

Mystery Road Season 2 made The New York Times list of best international shows in 2020.³⁴

Australian audiences

Among the general population, 21% of Australians reported watching *Mystery Road* in full or partially. Viewership is significantly higher among First Nations communities (41%), culturally diverse communities (26%) and older Australians (27%). In contrast, younger Australians aged 16–24 are less likely to have watched the series, with only 10% reporting any viewership.³⁵

Mystery Road has proved popular with audiences, both on the main ABC broadcast channel and on its Broadcast Video on Demand (BVOD) service. Season 1 ranked as the most-watched non-children's

series on ABC's iView platform in 2018. Season 2 attracted the highest ratings for any Australian adult television drama series on free-to-air television in 2020, averaging 1.2 million viewers over the series.³⁶ *Mystery Road: Origin* Season 1 premiered as the most popular drama in its launch week, averaged 635,000 on first broadcast with 270,000 further views via encore screenings and between 317,000 and 372,000 views online.³⁷

International audiences

Overseas audiences stated that they valued *Mystery Road* as a way to learn about First Nations cultures and offered an “interesting and informative ... look into Aboriginal peoples’ culture and general Australian culture and dynamics.”³⁸

Online engagement

Online engagement with the first season of *Mystery Road* was evident on IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes and YouTube. Most of the 174 reviews collected were in English and posted by viewers in Australia, with a smaller number from the US, Canada and the UK, demonstrating the international reach of the show.³⁹

The aesthetic qualities of the show were appreciated, with many online commentators praising the cinematography, the locations and the performances of its leading cast. The “evocative music” used in the season was also mentioned. Another key theme was recognition of *Mystery Road*’s contribution to international crime drama. This took different forms depending on the reviewer’s perspective, with some American commentators comparing *Mystery Road* very favourably with American crime dramas.⁴⁰ One YouTube user wrote that they “loved the landscape, which became one of the characters in the story”.



“There’s just no argument any longer that [First Nations content] doesn’t belong in the very, very front of mainstream viewing. And you can’t argue with that because it’s demonstrably true with the ratings.”⁴¹

– David Jowsey, producer



21% of Australians indicated they had watched *Mystery Road*⁴²



“On the ABC, it’s been a ratings hit, and people are really watching it. For a long time it was the highest rating drama in iView’s history.”⁴³

– Greer Simpkin, producer

Social and cultural impacts

Entertainment value

Many online reviews praised the show's aesthetic value, especially its cinematography, setting and the performances of its leading cast. Almost two-thirds (60%) of comments described it as entertaining and 82% highlighted its aesthetics. Reviews mentioned "two very fine and charismatic lead actors" in Pedersen and Judy Davis, and the "evocative music" used in the series. Around a third of all reviews noted the distinctive Australian setting with one describing it as, "A noir in bright sunshine in an awe-inspiring landscape".⁴⁴

A key theme throughout the reviews is *Mystery Road's* contribution to international crime drama.⁴⁵ As one IMDb user wrote, "We should welcome good drama that comes from a different place and perspective. Not all police procedurals should be based in the USA." Another user from the US stated that they "have watched many [crime] movies and shows from Australia and they do a better job making quality shows than the US."⁴⁶

Historical and educational value

Authenticity and lived experience are the primary markers of "quality" when valuing Australian screen content. *Mystery Road* presents First Nations people in contemporary settings with agency and complexity. It depicts authenticity and lived experience, with its accents, dialogue, family dynamics, places and social realities all enhancing the relatability of the series.⁴⁷ A study participant said they value "stories that have uniquely Australian background and culture but doesn't shy away from the 'bad' stuff (like *Mystery Road*). Strong storytelling and good production."⁴⁸

First Nations-centred screen content is used as an education tool to build cultural understanding and spark real-world discussion in workplaces, within families and communities. Its role in "starting conversations" was linked most often with documentaries and authentic, historically-grounded films – including *Mystery Road*.⁴⁹ For example, the series has inspired a foster care worker to share content with other carers, particularly during NAIDOC Week, using portrayals in TV and film to prompt

workplace discussions about foster care, child removal and responsibility. Watching documentaries or historical content assists in teaching family history, explaining why they work in justice or education and teaching children about Country and community.

The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) has created a production design display for *Mystery Road: Origin*. It includes architectural drawings and set dressing. The associated web page includes a YouTube link to a behind-the-scenes video with commentary from River talking about his aesthetic choices including visual references to the original *Sen Mystery Road* film as well as the Coen brothers' feature film, *No Country for Old Men*. River chose the town location – Kalgoorlie – because of its architecture, including its derelict buildings, stating that he wants to continue "the legacy of First Nations story-telling".

Social value

65% of online comments recognised the series' "Australian-ness".⁵⁰

One poignant YouTube review appreciated the slower pace. They pointed out the cultural symbolism of the subtext coming through with "the lack of dialogue", noting that "it's not just about what's spoken but what's not spoken, it's so subtle at a deeper level ... you need the actors with the skill and sensitivity to deliver this dialogue, spoken and unspoken". This comment reflects how the symbolic value perceived by some audiences of *Mystery Road*, who appreciated its ability to tell larger truths about Australian society, culture and history.⁵¹

Other impacts

Each season of the series has invested in the local area where filming took place. A report for *Mystery Road* Season 1 found that 36% of local businesses reported an increase in sales, particularly during months outside the tourist season.⁵² The Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Centre had interns on the production who learnt about video production. A local photographer was engaged as an attachment and now has a career in the film industry as a drone operator and cameraman.



"Stories that have a uniquely Australian background and culture but don't shy away from the 'bad' stuff (like *Mystery Road*). Strong storytelling and good production."⁵³

– Australian survey respondent

Endnotes

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