

Screen Currency 2026

Understanding the value of
Australian screen and games

A study in 5 reports with
supporting case studies

 Case study

The Dry

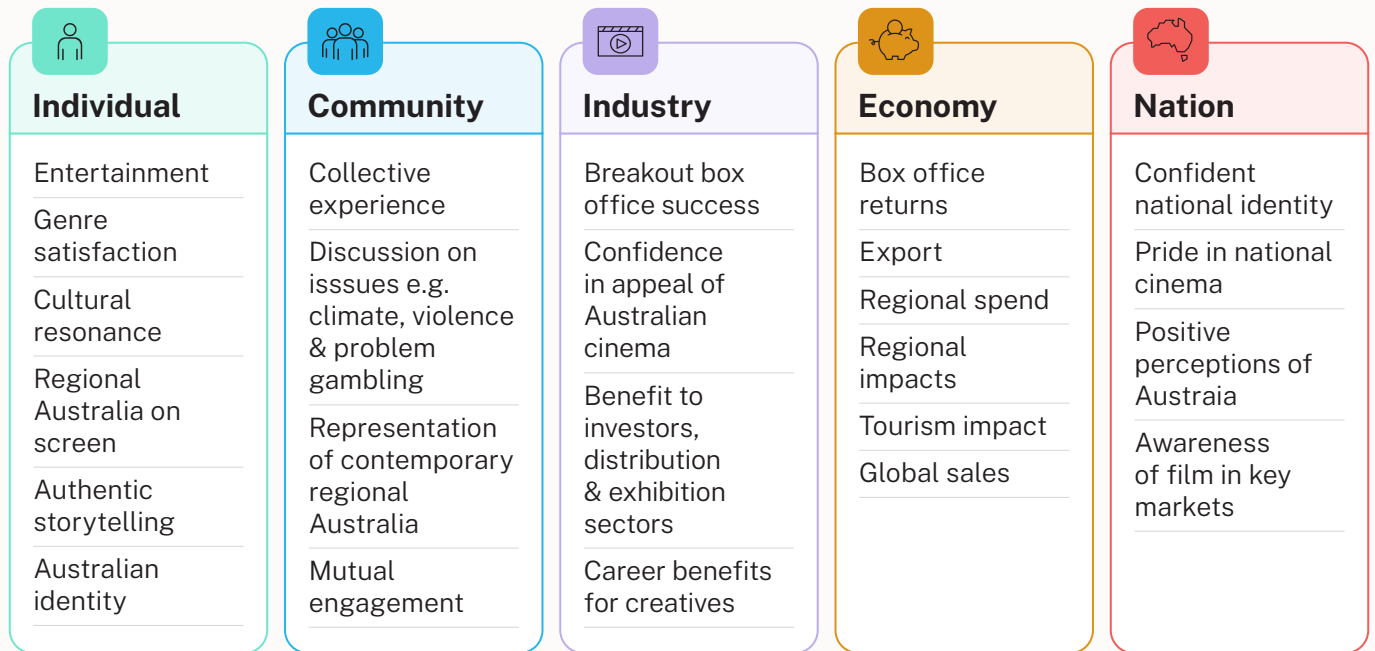
Feature Film • Released 2021
Made Up Stories



Australian Government



Introduction



***The Dry* is a murder-mystery film which vividly portrays the effects of drought on a regional community in rural Victoria.**

Adapted from Jane Harper's best-selling crime novel, *The Dry* was a critical success both in Australia and internationally, winning numerous Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) awards including for Best Adapted Screenplay in Film and Best Cinematography in Film. *The Dry* was the first Australian film to be shot using Panavision large-frame lensing and Atmos-scale sound and was therefore pitched as a film that should be watched "only in the cinema". Released in Australia on New Year's Day in 2021, *The Dry* made \$3.5 million during its opening weekend and went on to earn \$24.4 million worldwide. It is the 8th highest-grossing Australian film of all time, outpacing *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

The Dry shows how powerfully executed Australian stories can resonate with Australian audiences, particularly in the context of an extended release in cinemas. The unique circumstances surrounding *The Dry*'s 2021 release following COVID-19 disruptions and US industrial action allowed it to build a substantial local audience. This growth capitalised on a record-breaking opening weekend, positive reviews, and strong word-of-mouth.

Creation

Companies involved

Production company: Made Up Stories

Made Up Stories is a privately held film and TV development and production company founded in 2017 by Bruna Papandrea, Jodi Matterson and Steve Hutensky. It operates across Los Angeles, Sydney and London. Made Up Stories has positioned itself as a creator of high-quality, commercially appealing screen stories with a strong emphasis on women-led narratives and women in key creative roles.

Origin story: the idea and initial development

The film was adapted from Australian Jane Harper's debut crime novel *The Dry* (2017), which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2015. The book became an international bestseller and won several awards, including the British Crime Writers Association Gold Dagger, the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction, and the Australian Book Industry Awards (ABIA) Book of the Year award.

The film rights for *The Dry* were initially optioned by producers Bruna Papandrea and Reese Witherspoon.¹ Producers included actor Eric Bana and director Robert Connolly, as well as Hutensky and Jodi Matterson.²

On filming *The Dry*, Bana recalls, "We shot at the beginning of 2019, which was the height of the drought. And I think for any person that's part of a rural landscape where you're weather-affected, you can relate to it. We were just so lucky that Jane Harper's novel was set in this particular landscape because of the toughness that comes from this drought and that landscape definitely adds to the tension in the film."³

The creative process

A screenplay was adapted by Connolly and Harry Cripps from Jane Harper's novel.

The Dry was filmed across 17 locations in the Wimmera region of regional Victoria over 34 of 37 filming days. Towns featured in the film across the Wimmera and Mallee regions were Minyip, Murtoa, Hopetown, Warracknabeal and Beulah.⁴

Landscape played a central narrative role, supporting the portrayal of drought conditions, rural isolation and climate change impacts.⁵ Regional communities contributed significantly by providing local cast and extras as well as access to civic sites and farmlands.⁶

“We need an Australian film industry that makes hyper-Australian films, that makes emerging, diverse and bold and representative films about who we are, but is also able to make a hyper cinema that speaks to us.”⁷

– Robert Connolly, film director

“We have a cultural agenda. So a lot of the support and subsidy for our national cinema talks about cultural issues of representation and diversity and things that we do. And it's always battling against the commercial imperative of international partners who say you need to have an international actor, you need to have someone. And this has been the eternal dilemma in my life.”⁸

– Robert Connolly, film director



“*The Dry* is a hyper-Australian film. It's about Australia. It's set in Australia. It's got an all-Australian cast without exception. It's, you know, it's about us as a country.”⁹

– Robert Connolly, film director

Production

Cast and crew metrics

The following IMDb-sourced metrics illustrate the breadth and structure of the production workforce.¹⁰

Producer:	14
Director:	1
Writers:	3
Cinematographers:	1
Composers:	1
Cast:	36
Crew:	307
People in multiple roles:	13

Production financing: investment and presales

Direct supports

The Dry received significant federal and state government funding to support development and production. Screen Australia contributed \$44,750 in story development funding and a further \$1,805,250 in production funding, underpinning the project from early creative stages through to delivery.¹¹

At a state level, Film Victoria supported the production through the Production Incentive Attraction Fund (PIAF) and the Regional Location Assistance Fund (RLAF), which were instrumental in enabling the film’s regional shoot and driving high-impact economic activity in regional communities. This support aligned with broader strategic objectives to attract screen production and showcase Victorian locations and capabilities.

The production also received strong government endorsement, with Victoria’s Minister for Creative Industries Martin Foley highlighting the significance of the investment, noting that the project would showcase “the talents of Victoria’s crews, the versatility of our locations and the state’s reputation as a screen leader.”¹²

Training and skills

Attachments

- Art department attachment
- Director attachment/placement

Economic impacts

The Dry generated an estimated \$7.8 million in total economic activity. This included \$861,000 directed to regional economies, with spending on accommodation, catering and other local services supporting businesses in filming locations.

The production created approximately 450 jobs across Victoria, including 91 roles in regional areas, with opportunities for local crew and on-screen extras. In addition, 120 Victorian businesses were engaged to supply goods and services,¹³ demonstrating the production’s broad integration with the local supply chain.

Beyond immediate economic benefits, the film’s international sales and distribution extended Victoria’s cultural and economic footprint globally. By showcasing distinctive regional landscapes on screen, *The Dry* contributed to increased visibility for these locations.¹⁴



“Once a film’s been done here, they say ‘Oh, I’d love to go and see where they’ve done that’ ... So it really helps the economy of small towns ... It really helps those little towns and brings back the soul into the town, I think.”¹⁵

– Dale Maggs, Rupanyup cafe owner

Innovation

The Dry was the first Australian feature to shoot in large format capture, showcasing Victoria's epic regional vistas. In a Screen Australia podcast episode, Connolly talks about the opportunity to experiment with the Panavision large-format system and the use of the 4K Atmos DP Sound system, which improved the quality of the sound and music.¹⁶ This combination, alongside an "incredible ensemble of actors", allowed them to position the film as one to only be seen in the cinema. Connolly said, "I love that Roadshow [Pictures] have had the guts to go out on the biggest day of the year with a campaign that says 'only in the cinema'."

According to Connolly, the greatest risk of committing to a cinema-first release at the time was COVID-19: "Cinemas were social distancing in Australia, limiting capacity. The threat of COVID-19 outbreaks meant that we could not be sure whether the film would be shut down in cinemas. Older demographics, key audience for the film, were not returning to cinema. Overwhelming risks, but offset by a perceived opportunity for the film with limited competition."



"The collective experience is incredible. How do you create in cinema the same emotional experience? A great film can do this, where you feel the exhilaration of narrative changes ... And I think that it's much harder to have that at home [than], going to a cinema."¹⁷

– Robert Connolly, film director



Dissemination

Distribution

ANZ distributor:	Village Roadshow
International sales agent:	Cornerstone Films

The Dry was distributed in Australia by Roadshow Films. Ahead of its national release, 3 closed community screenings were held in December 2020 at Horsham Centre Cinema in regional Victoria, to acknowledge and thank local participants in the production. The film then opened widely on New Year's Day 2021.

Domestically, *The Dry* has maintained a strong presence across multiple digital platforms, including Stan, Netflix, Prime Video, Apple TV, Google Play, YouTube, Fetch and HBO Max, supporting continued audience accessibility beyond its theatrical run.

Internationally, the film achieved broad market penetration, selling into 95 territories at the time of release, including a key North American deal with IFC Films.¹⁸ By 2026, distribution rights were held across 25 territories, alongside one worldwide sale, reflecting its sustained global circulation.

The film's distribution strategy was influenced by the US and UK markets, driven by both the scale of those territories and the established popularity of Jane Harper's source novel. According to Connolly, this was due to "scale of market and success of Jane Harper's book in those territories. Other territory sales tend to follow the lead of a strong US distributor coming on board, sending a signal to the market."¹⁹

When asked if he would make the same distribution decisions again under similar (i.e. COVID-19) conditions, Connolly has said, "Yes. One of the key decisions made by the entire producing team and with encouragement from Roadshow Distribution, was to support Australian cinemas, struggling with a limited number of films to screen. I still have cinema owners come up to me at the Movie Convention and thank us for screening *The Dry*; some have suggested the success of the film during that time saved their business."²⁰



"A lot of exhibitors, whenever I go to the movie convention or the Independent Cinema Association, they say *The Dry* saved them because it brought people back to their cinemas."²⁶

– Robert Connolly, film director

Exhibition

Australian box office:	\$20.7 million ²¹ Ranking: 8
Worldwide box office:	US\$17.1 million ²² Ranking: 6,175

The Dry was among the top 10 highest-grossing films of 2021 in Australia, earning \$3.5 million in its opening weekend following its release on New Year's Day 2021.²³ This makes it one of the highest-grossing Australian film opening weekends ever, and the best debut for an Australian-made feature at the country's box office from an independent studio.

“I didn't set about thinking I'd make a film that was commercially successful. I'd always assumed it would have an audience, but that audience just exceeded any expectations.”²⁴

– Robert Connolly, film director

“COVID hit. On one hand ... exhibition is hemorrhaging, there's very few films coming out, they've got no content ... it's a risk. There were cinemas still being shut down. We had our premiere in Sydney and we had to race home because Sydney shut for 2 weeks. I mean, you remember the whole quarantining. There was social distancing in the cinemas. We couldn't get as many people in. They also had the danger that the big demographic was older people going to see a film and that they were the last people to go back to the cinema because they were staying away. So we had lots of negatives impacting, but the positive was no other content around.”²⁵

– Robert Connolly, film director



"Village Roadshow released it on January the 1st, the biggest day of the year. They spent millions of dollars on the P&A and released it like a studio film."²⁷

– Robert Connolly, film director

The impact of COVID-19 on theatrical exhibition necessitated a change in distribution strategy. According to Connolly, “Festivals were reduced in scale and online; most territories had closed cinema, etc. We did feel, however, that the strength of the film would support a shift from theatrical to a streaming-platform release outside Australia in most territories. This was a huge success for the film in both the US [opened at #1 on iTunes movie charts], and the UK [huge success for Sky Cinema with results equivalent to large studio film].”²⁸

After 5 weeks, the film stood at more than \$19 million (US\$14.6 million) and had overtaken *Muriel’s Wedding* and *The Water Diviner* to rank 17th on Australia’s all-time top 20, just behind *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. By March 2021, the film had passed \$20 million²⁹ and was the 15th highest-grossing Australian film of all time, outpacing *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.³⁰

Joel Pearlman, CEO, Roadshow Films said, “The box office results on *The Dry* are truly extraordinary and absolutely confirm that Australian films can deliver blockbuster results alongside their Hollywood counterparts. This result is an incredible example of just how willing Australian audiences are to support their own cinema and stories and how important it is for the local filmmaking community to continue to be provided with opportunities to create great works of cinema for Australians to delight in.”³¹

Awards

The Dry received strong industry recognition following its release, with awards reflecting both its critical impact and craft excellence. The film secured 6 wins and over 25 nominations across major Australian industry bodies.³²

The most notable recognition includes winning the Australian Writers’ Guild AWGIE Award for Feature Film – Adaptation and the Australian Cinematographers Society’s Milli Award for Cinematographer of the Year, signalling high-level recognition in both writing and visual storytelling.

The film was also nominated for several AACTA awards including Best Film, Best Direction and Best Lead Actor³³ alongside multiple nominations from the Film Critics Circle of Australia and the Australian Film Critics Association.³⁴

Renewal

The success of *The Dry* led to *Made Up Stories* following it up with a sequel feature film, *Force of Nature: The Dry 2* (2024).³⁵



“Our national cinema is like a very complex jigsaw puzzle. And each film, you hope, is another piece in that puzzle that comes together into an amazing portrait of who we are and helps us understand who we are, helps us contemplate who we are, challenges who we are.”³⁶

– Robert Connolly, film director



Engagement

Online metrics

Selected audience and critic scores are shown below:³⁷

IMDb:	6.8/10
Rotten Tomatoes (critics):	90%
Rotten Tomatoes (audience):	89%
Letterboxd:	3.3/5
Metacritic (general score):	69/100
Metacritic (user):	7.0/10

Reception

When *The Dry* was released in Australian cinemas in early 2021, global COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns had reduced the release and distribution of international films in local cinemas. In this window, 3 Australian films – *The Dry*, *Penguin Bloom* and *High Ground* – held the top positions at the Australian box office for the first time ever. Many reviewers reflected on how much they enjoyed seeing *The Dry* in cinemas and encouraged others to do so.

Reviewing the film in *The Guardian*, Luke Buckmaster wrote, “Connolly’s adaptation is a very gripping and polished film, commandingly performed and directed, with an airtight sense of tonal cohesiveness – despite lots of, well, air in the frame, derived from countless mid- and long-shots capturing barren exterior locations in a fictitious Australian outback town”.³⁸

Australian audiences

The Dry resonated with Australian audiences, with over a quarter (29%) of the Australian population seeing the film in full or partially. Viewership was significantly higher among older Australians aged 65+ (35%) and First Nations communities (36%), but lower among younger Australians aged 16–24 (11%).³⁹

Film Ink reports on the film’s strong commercial performance in Australia, “*The Dry* has taken audiences by storm across Australia, taking in an



“*The Dry* ... is not made for the rest of the world, although you hope it will travel to the rest of the world, but it is made very specifically to tell an Australian story to Australians.”⁴⁴

– Robert Connolly, film director

astounding \$3.5 million since it was released on New Year’s Day. The figure gives *The Dry* a place amongst the highest-grossing Australian film opening weekends, joining classics including *Happy Feet* and *Mad Max*”.⁴⁰

International audiences

Among international audiences, awareness of *The Dry* is highest in India (18%), with those aged 25–34 and higher income households having significantly higher awareness. New Zealand (18%) also had the highest awareness, with China close behind (15%), reflecting the appeal of the crime/thriller film genre and strong local marketing in these regions. Recognition is more limited in countries such as the USA, Canada, Germany and Great Britain (≤9%).⁴¹

Online engagement

Online engagement with *The Dry* was substantial, with almost 7,000 reviews on Letterboxd and 39,000 ratings on IMDb. Many Letterboxd reviewers stated that they were eager to see *The Dry* to support the local film industry, suggesting that they valued the film not only as entertainment but also as a landmark moment in Australian national cinema. These reviews often described the film’s quality and box office success as a source of pride. “I walked out of the theatre feeling so proud of this Australian movie,” wrote one reviewer. “It’s world class.” Several reviews described how *The Dry* compares favourably with international equivalents. One review said it is “an Australian film to be proud of [which] takes its own approach to the classic story of a murder mystery in a small town.” Comments like these show how high-profile Australian releases such as *The Dry* create a collective sense of pride in and connection to, national cinema.⁴²

“If the film then performs really well for Australians, it has the potential to speak outside of Australia to other people.”⁴³

– Robert Connolly, film director



“There’s a place for ... a big Australian cinema that is our stories, our IP, our actors, made big, marketed like a studio film.”⁴⁵

– Robert Connolly, film director

Social and cultural impacts

Entertainment value

More than half (56%) of online comments and reviews analysed for Screen Currency described *The Dry* as entertaining while 39% mentioned its aesthetics.⁴⁶

International and local reviewers remarked how Australian accents, settings and stars brought variation to the familiar murder mystery genre. Some international reviewers compared it with similar small-town detective stories from their regions. One Letterboxd review posted in Turkish observed, “Even in our own country, these rural detective stories are bearing fruit.”⁴⁷

Aesthetic value was another recurring theme in reviews. In discussing the film’s haunting depiction of rural Victoria, many reviewers drew comparisons to classic Australian films including *Wake in Fright*, *Red Dog*, *The Last Wave* and especially *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Even in negative reviews, there was general agreement that the film’s cinematography was excellent, with many reviews name-checking cinematographer Stefan Duscio and stating that the filmmakers made the most of the story’s rural setting.⁴⁸

Historical and educational value

Some online reviews noted how the film captures the traumatic experience of drought: “Walking into *The Dry*, I didn’t realise just how much I was going to understand the entire vibe of this film. The small, rural Victoria town feel, the desperation of the drought, the dryness and the vast vistas of just yellow/brown. It was all so familiar.” For others, *The Dry* was about “the cruel fractured legacy of patriarchy or greed of farming families’ practices” or “the tide of time and the impassive, ancient nature of the landscapes our lives are lived and lost within”. These interpretations demonstrate the multiple, diverse meanings and forms of symbolic value that different audiences have found within *The Dry*.⁴⁹

Social value

The Dry strengthened visibility of rural Victoria on screen, addressing social issues including climate change, drought, resilience, community trauma and memory. Landscape played a central narrative role, portraying drought conditions, rural isolation and climate change impacts.

Over a third (37%) of sampled online comments mentioned *The Dry*’s Australianness.⁵⁰ One reviewer from Letterboxd said “a bloody terrific Aussie murder mystery. The cast is superb, the filmmaking is on-point, and the reveals are satisfying. You know you are watching an Australian film when a gun is present but isn’t used in the climax.”

Authenticity

Many reviewers highlighted the film’s “authentic” depiction of small, rural Australian towns and its interrogation of local attitudes. Reviewers praised the specificity of the representation of the Australian rural experience in *The Dry*. For example, several reviews noted how the film included electronic gambling machines (pokies) as a major plot point.⁵¹

Other impacts

Australian music

Connecting international viewers with other Australian creative artists is a further dimension of value generated by *The Dry*. For example, many reviews commented on the soundtrack which features The Church’s much-loved track *Under the Milky Way*. A Letterboxd review translated from Norwegian described how the film prompted them to “put the song on my playlist”. Another review in Russian noted, “there’s a cover of my favourite song by the Australian band The Church, albeit in campfire singalong form – which was a nice touch”. Other international reviewers also showed awareness of Jane Harper’s other books and expressed a desire to read them. These reviews point to the ability of Australian film to showcase other Australian cultural industries for an international audience.⁵²



37% of sampled online comments mentioned *The Dry*’s Australianness.⁵³



56% of online comments described *The Dry* as entertaining, and 39% mentioned its aesthetics.⁵⁴

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