

# Developing Pokies Problem Gambling Literacy for Yolŋu Project Report



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Northern Territory Government – Department of the Attorney-General and Justice  
Community Benefit Fund

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*Cover Photo: Howard Amery, Andrew Pascoe and Gawura Waṅambi, during content development for the 'Nhaliy dhu Yolṅuy yutjuwaḷakum mari benjur pokiesṅur?' programs*

## 1 A Message from the ARDS Board

Our Board members are senior Aboriginal leaders from across Arnhem Land, reflecting ARDS Aboriginal Corporation's long history in the region. The board includes:

- Maratja Dhamarrandji – Galiwin'ku (Chair)
- Gawura Wanambi – Gapuwiyak (Vice Chair)
- Biritjalawuy Gondarra – Darwin
- Mathew Dhulumburrk – Ramingining
- Basma Dipiliinga Bukulatjpi - Yirrkala
- Gwen Warmbirrbiir – Millingimbi
- Elizabeth Gurimanga Bukulatjpi – Darwin
- Vacant – West Arnhem

We are passionate about ARDS because it is the bridge that spans cultures. ARDS has more than 40 years of experience navigating cultural latitudes, managing complex community engagement, and facilitating understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory.

ARDS has been learning a lot about gambling and pokies through this project. These programs will provide information that many Yolju will not be aware of. We are pleased that Yolju will have the opportunity to make informed decisions about gambling, now and into the future.



**Maratja Dhamarrandji (Chair)**

We are grateful to the NT Government for their support, and we look forward to future opportunities to work together on this and other issues.



**Gawura Wanambi (Vice-Chair)**

Sincerely,

**Maratja Dhamarrandji, Chair,  
ARDS Aboriginal Corporation**

## 2 Introduction

The following report provides an overview of ARDS Aboriginal Corporation's *Developing Pokies Problem Gambling Literacy for Yolŋu*, a Community Benefit Fund Gambling Amelioration project. The main outcome of this project was the production of 12 radio programs/podcasts, 'Nhaliy dhu Yolŋuy yutjuwalakum mari beŋur pokiesŋur?' ('Finding a pathway to reduce harms caused by pokies').

**The programs aim to reduce confusion about gambling and problems associated with it – in particular, with pokies – and stimulate dialogue towards Yolŋu-led responses.**

They do so by building a deep understanding of gambling and pokies. Over 2.5hrs, we unpack the history and mechanisms of pokies and the gambling industry in Yolŋu language. The programs build on – and sometimes reframe – existing Yolŋu concepts relevant to gambling and addiction, and broader Yolŋu ideas about the way to live lawfully in the the 'new' contemporary world.

By gaining a more complex understanding about pokies and gambling, Yolŋu – in their capacity as individuals, elders, parents, heads of households etc. – can develop their own informed responses to the problems they see arising from gambling.

The storylines that unfold in the programs were developed from extensive dialogue between Yolŋu and Balanda (non-Indigenous) educators. Content development started in August 2016 and continued throughout the recording process between February-July 2017.

'Nhaliy dhu Yolŋuy yutjuwalakum mari beŋur pokiesŋur?' is currently being broadcasted to approximately 12,000 Yolŋu living in Darwin and northeast Arnhem Land communities and homelands on a regular basis on Yolŋu Radio. They are also available online at ARDS/Yolŋu Radio's Soundcloud page at:

<https://soundcloud.com/ards-2/sets/pokies-story>.

Importantly, these programs are underpinned by a Yolŋu worldview, and are Yolŋu-led in terms of both problematisation and problem solving. To our knowledge, it is the most comprehensive resource about gambling to ever have been produced for and by Yolŋu.

## 3 Programs Overview

### List of programs

Episode 1: Nhä ñayi gambiliñ-dja? (What is gambling?)

Episode 2: Nhä dhäwu Yolñu'yulñuwuñ yawungupuy? (A Yolñu history of gambling)

Episode 3: Rom bäyñu gambiliñgu, wo wanha rom? (Regulated and unregulated gambling)

Episode 4: Nhaku gapman mala liya-märrmayirr' gambilinggu?? (Why does the government have two stories about gambling?)

Episode 5: Nhä rom djinawa' gatjinawñur? (What happens inside the casino?)

Episode 6: Dhudi-rom gambilingu (The gambling industry)

Episode 7: Yolthu ñuli yuwalktja rrupiya märram gambiliñur? (Who really wins from gambling?)

Episode 8: Pokies girri' wanhal ñurru-yirri'yurr (The history of the poker machine)

Episode 9: Nyira'puy dhäwu pokies-gu (The secret story about pokies)

Episode 10: Nhä ñayi pokies – manymak wo yätj? (Are pokies good or bad?)

Episode 11: Warrpam' dhäwu pokies-puy (Summary)

Episode 12: Nhaliy dhu Yolñuy yutjuwalakum mari beñur pokies-ñur? (Solutions)

### Personnel

*Presenters:* Howard Amery (Programs 1-4, 6-12); Gawura Wañambi (1-12); Sylvia Njulpinditj Gurruwiwi (11-12) Andrew Pascoe (5).

*Content development:* Howard Amery, Gawura Wañambi, Andrew Pascoe, Sylvia Njulpinditj, Ruth Nalmakarra, James Wapiriny

*Producer:* Andrew Pascoe

*Mixing/Mastering:* Paul Hayes, Andrew Grimes.

## 4 Key Themes

An underlying story for each program validates the Yolŋu concept of *romgu malthun njäthil, ga djäl dhuḍikurr* – ‘follow law first, following my desires comes second’. There is an ancient law, *njurrngitj rom*, that provides guidance for the right way to live. It can be overtaken by following your own desires – your *djäl* – so Yolŋu believe it is crucial to act according to the law, rather than one’s own individual wants and desires taking precedence.

Another underlying theme throughout the series is laying out (*bularmaram*) the ‘hidden’ story about pokies and gambling. The series tells the history of the machines, and explains the many aspects of gambling that trick players and draw them in. By understanding this *dhuḍi dhäwu* (deep story), Yolŋu will have a better ability to make informed decisions about the pitfalls of gambling than previously.

Gambling has been part of Yolŋu lives for hundreds of years, through *dopulu* – card games – introduced by Macassan traders. We explore this history, and build it on as a conceptual framework to create understanding about other forms of gambling. Care has been taken to frame *dopulu* as ‘introduced’, and therefore not synonymous with *njurrngitj rom*: this allows us some latitude to explore how cards and other forms of gambling can be problematic, without offending Yolŋu who have with close connections to cards and the history and culture they represent.

Another way the programs explore gambling without offending our audience is to objectify poker machines and the gambling industry, rather than gamblers. Thus our focus is on problem *gambling*, not problem *gamblers*. We also show that gambling is a problem not just for Yolŋu, but for *Balanda* (non-Indigenous people) and everyone else, and we discover many parallels between the experiences of Balanda and Yolŋu with gambling.

The Yolŋu consultants engaged in this project strongly believed that pokies have a power (*nyira*): an inherent ability to ‘hook’ players, with the result that they become blinded by their desires (*djäl*). In doing so, the player begins to neglect their other responsibilities, like family and law obligations. The failure to fulfil such obligations – i.e. to behave in a lawful way – is identified by Yolŋu as the root problem that arises from pokies. It is also regarded as an inevitable outcome of playing the pokies, or going to the casino.

The programs validate this fatalistic view, by showing that pokies are inherently problematic. We explain *how* the machines ‘hook’ people, and show that there is a gambling industry, as well as government, that are dependent on pokies’ revenue and sanctions their use. A key analogy used throughout the series draws

on Yolŋu experience of fishing. When gambling, we often think we are the fishermen, but we end up being the fish and getting hooked (addicted, or *gaṯmaranhawuy*). The true fishermen are the owners of the poker machines. Through this analogy, and the information about the industry we build around it, we show that the problematic potential of pokies/gambling is both a result of the machines, as well as the gambling industry that allows the machines to exist.

This underscores the role played by *djäl* (desires). Gambling persists due to *djäl* for money on behalf of individuals (players), the government, and private businesses. The existence of deep-seated *djäl* from all three parties requires gambling be regulated. The concept of regulation (contrasted with non-regulation and banning) is another key theme explored, and is crucial to developing an understanding about problem gambling and addiction. We find there are parallels between Yolŋu and Balanda regulation.

Yolŋu regulation is also considered as an option for reducing the harms emerging from pokies. The series ultimately draws the conclusion that any substantial solutions have to come from Yolŋu themselves. Change is unlikely to come from the government or gambling industry, so Yolŋu have to find their own solutions. For example, strengthening Yolŋu regulation around card games in community, to prevent children developing a 'taste' for gambling too early.

Another preventative solution draws on an understanding of Yolŋu trade relationships. We consider the contract-giver and contract-receiver in a pokies context, and conclude that the player always has the ultimate control to give their money to the machine, or not. This is particularly important in terms of Yolŋu educating other Yolŋu about the 'hidden' story about pokies/gambling. People are more likely to consider that they have an option to withhold their money, if they have heard the story that the machines always win. Education can also play a role for addicted players, once they have been taken back to their community or homeland where they can reconnect with *rom* (law) and *raypirri* (discipline).

Again, these solutions are all embodied in the concept of *romgu malthun nãthil, ga djäl dhuḍikurr* – following law first, and my own desires second. The series emphasises Yolŋu have the power to reduce the current and future harms caused by gambling by following a pathway already inscribed in their *nurrngitj rom*.

## 5 Key Learnings

Through the process of developing and recording these programs, we have discovered a lot about how Yolŋu think about gambling and pokies. Some of these learnings include:

- There is a lot of confusion about what the Government is thinking and doing in relation to gambling and pokies. Key government stories about regulated (versus unregulated) gambling, revenue raised through regulating gambling, and the 'harm minimisation'/'responsible gambling' approach, are not known.
- Concepts associated with luck and 'magic power' (*nyira*) dominate people's thinking about gambling and pokies. Coupled with the fact that people don't understand how the gambling industry works, this thinking means most people are not aware that you cannot beat the machines.
- Yolŋu see the casino as a potential source of income. Very few Yolŋu go there for any other reason than to win money, because for Yolŋu living in Darwin, money is hard to find and badly needed.
- Yolŋu consider *dopulu* (community card-games) and pokies to be separate things. 'Gambling' is an abstract concept for Yolŋu – who think in terms of concrete activities – so people are not making a connection between the role *dopulu* might play in predisposing people to other types of gambling.
- Most Yolŋu (non-players) view pokies with suspicion. There is a strong belief that the machines and the casino itself has a 'power' (*nyira*), which casts its spell on anyone who plays the pokies for any length of time. Once you have been 'hooked' by this spell, Yolŋu believe there is little family members can do to break it, and the person continues to be hooked until they run out of money or go back to community.
- Gambling problems identified by Yolŋu relate to the impact caused by addiction on *gurrutu* (kinship/extended family). A person is seen to have a gambling problem when they are not fulfilling their cultural/legal obligations to their immediate and extended family, e.g. not meeting their responsibilities in traditional ceremonies. They can become increasingly disconnected from *gurrutu*/Yolŋu society as such – something no Yolŋu wants to see happen to anyone.
- While this is seen as being problematic, the extent of the problem caused by pokies is not necessarily considered major, by comparison to other issues experienced by Yolŋu. However, Yolŋu can see this problem is growing.
- Yolŋu see solutions to gambling-related harms as residing in the traditional Yolŋu pathway for living a lawful life. An individual has a responsibility to decide whether they are going to act lawfully or unlawfully (selfishly), and family members have a responsibility to help others behave lawfully.

Addressing each of these key learnings form the basis for much of the radio program content, as the Program Summaries, below, demonstrate.

## 6 Program Synopses

### Episode 1: Nhä n̄ayi gambiliŋ-dja? – What is gambling? (13:21)

Howard and Gawura, the main presenters of the programs, introduce themselves and explain the reason for this series: to find pathways to reduce problems caused by pokies.

We start by defining the concept of 'gambling'. For Yolŋu, 'gambling' is an abstract concept – most Yolŋu just think of *dopulu* (traditional card games) when they hear the word 'gambling'. An important part of this first program is to show how there are different activities that can all be considered gambling, because they share particular traits.

We state that, broadly, all types of gambling share two characteristics: they are activities involving numbers, and *djäl* (desire) for money. We ask, can we think of an activity that's just for fun as gambling? We decide 'no' – there has to be money at stake, for us to think of an activity as being gambling in the true sense.

Because of this, there is always a 'bait' or 'lure' in gambling, i.e. a prize, usually monetary, to motivate people to play. But like bait or a lure, the prize hides a 'hook' (*bekaŋ*) – the possibility of getting hooked (*bekaŋmirr*), or addicted, to gambling. This will be a key concept throughout these programs.

We discuss how players get confused about who's the fisherman, and who's the fish, when they gamble. Players think they are the fisherman, who is fishing for money. In reality, they are the fish, getting hooked by the machine (or other game), which is owned by the venue owner – who is the real fisherman, because s/he knows the machines will bring in money from players' pockets.

We talk about how players also get confused when they think of themselves as being 'lucky'. We can feel lucky, or have a lucky charm that we think will help us to win. However, this is just another factor that leads us to the 'hook'.

These observations prove there has to be *djäl* by the player, for gambling to exist. If a player has no or low *djäl* to win, they won't play, or they won't get hooked if they do play.

Now that we've created an understanding of what gambling is, and what it isn't, we can start unpacking the deeper story (*dhudi dhäwu*) for pokies and gambling, in the coming programs.

## **Episode 2: Nhä dhäwu Yolŋu'yulŋuwuŋ yawungupuy? – A Yolŋu history of gambling (12:28)**

We listen to Yolŋu ceremonial music (*manikay*) for *dopulu* (card games). We discuss the history of cards in Arnhem Land – first brought to Yolŋu by Macassan traders. They taught Yolŋu how to play these cards, but they didn't bring a law (*rom*) for cards.

We show that *dopulu* is *märr-dharrpaŋ*: an important part of Yolŋu history and present day experience, which is represented in songlines, and so people have a sentimental attachment to it. But they are not deeply sacred (*dhuyu*), because they were introduced from overseas, not from the Creator Spirit. This opens the door to critique the impacts of gambling, without causing offence.

Cards became more widely available during WWII, due to increased contact with Balanda (non-Indigenous people), and continued to be played during the Mission era. Missionaries frowned on card-playing, and tried to prevent people playing. We don't endorse or reject this attitude, we just tell the story. Again, our aim is to avoid making listeners feel criticised or ashamed when they listen to these programs.

Card-playing increased further when the Mission era finished. Yolŋu were now able to play cards with money – we distinguish between this event and prior card-games, which must have just been played for fun (*galŋa-biraŋ*). So, the post-Mission era must have been when 'gambling', in the true sense of the word, started in northeast Arnhem Land.

Around the same time, Yolŋu became exposed to casinos (Don Hotel Casino), which then introduced pokies in the '80s. Don Hotel became Mindil Beach Casino, then Diamond Beach Casino, then MGM Grand, and now SkyCity Casino. In 1996, pokies spread outside the casino to other bars and clubs around the NT. Through telling this history, we introduce the concept of casino owners (*watjanu mala*), and the fact the government provides the license for casinos to operate.

## **Episode 3: Rom bäyŋu gambilingu, wo wanha rom? – Regulated and unregulated gambling (13:18)**

One of the key areas that causes confusion for Yolŋu around gambling, is not understanding how government regulation works. This episode explains that gambling can be regulated or unregulated; and how (and why) gambling is regulated in Australian law.

Regulated (*wäyukmirr*) means 'with law'; unregulated means 'without law'. There is either someone enforcing a law (a *djunḡayamirr*), or not. We discuss cigarettes as an example of something that's regulated – it means there are laws about who can sell it, who can buy it etc.

We discover that Yolŋu also had laws around tobacco use, so we see that regulation is not a foreign concept for Yolŋu. This is an important discovery – Balanda and Yolŋu have parallel concepts for regulation. This is a new story for most Yolŋu, and a helpful one for them to make sense of their very confusing experiences with *Balanda* (non-Indigenous) law and regulation.

We explain that Australian laws are made in Parliament – again, as happens in Yolŋu law – and require people to have a license which specifies their requirements under the law. Regulation applies to lots of things: driving a car, getting a gun license. Laws can change, too: we know that methylated spirits used to be sold on the shelf because it was unregulated, but now you have to ask the shopkeeper in order to buy it, because it has become regulated.

We then look at the casino. The casino is highly regulated – for selling alcohol, for food venues, and for gambling. Gambling regulation is enforced by the NT Government’s Gaming Control Act. This Act applies not just to gambling at SkyCity or Lasseters Casino but to other regulated types of gambling, like lotteries, for example.

#### **Episode 4: Nhaku gapman mala liya-märrmayirr’ gambilingu? – Why does the government have two stories about gambling? (12:50)**

This episode uses the learning from last episode that gambling is regulated, to investigate why we hear two different stories from government. On one hand, NT Government says, ‘don’t throw your money away on gambling’; on the other hand, it says, ‘Go to the casino, or the racetrack, or pokies, enjoy yourself!’ Lots of Yolŋu are confused by these mixed messages.

The first reason is that the NT Government, because it provides the licenses to gamble, makes millions of dollars from gambling operators like the casino. It has a strong desire (*djäl*) for this money (*rrupiya*), because it costs billions of dollars to run the Northern Territory.

We also discuss how several prominent people, like Andrew Wilkie, Nick Xenophon, and Tim Costello, have tried to increase regulation for pokies. But the *djäl* of government and of pubs and clubs for *rrupiya* has blocked these attempts.

Another reason is that banning something doesn’t work. We tell the story about prohibition of alcohol in the US, which demonstrates this. Consumers also have *djäl* – they want the freedom to do certain things, even if those things can be harmful to some people.

Thus, the desire for gambling by the gambling industry, by some consumers and by the government is strong. So the government, instead of banning it, tries to reduce the harms caused by gambling. It does the same with alcohol, for example. Indeed, an example of harm minimisation is this project, which is funded by NT Government using money from pokies. Government funds education programs to try to reduce the harms from gambling.

Because of these factors, government is unlikely to ban gambling, even though we know it is harmful. So we introduce the idea that people have to make their own choices with gambling, and make sure they are not overcome by their own djäl.

### **Episode 5: Nhä rom djinawa' gatjinawjur – What happens inside the casino (9:05)**

Gawura and Andrew return from a trip to the 'White House' – Yolŋu slang for SkyCity Casino – and share with listeners what they've seen there. There's various types of gambling: pokies, card tables, Keno, and a VIP room. There's restaurants, bars, a hotel and swimming pool. There's people from a variety of backgrounds: Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and Asian-background people.

We discuss what brings non-Indigenous people to the casino. There might be several reasons: some come to win money; others come for entertainment, or because they're bored at home. This can be the same for Balanda and for Yolŋu. But for Yolŋu, winning money is by far the most common reason for going to the casino.

One of the reasons for this is that everything costs money in Darwin, compared to your Arnhem Land home community, where you can call on family to help you if you have no money.

We explore how a Yolŋu person might feel when they are using the pokies. They're feeling good when they win – when 'their number comes up'. And they're feeling bad when they're not. Some of those people are 'hooked' – *gatmaranhawuy*. A person might ask himself, "am I hooked (on pokies, or the casino)?", after losing but going back to the ATM again and again to keep playing. This is the first time we've introduced this concept of addiction. We confirm that the same thing happens to non-Indigenous players too.

We finish by asking, how are Yolŋu introduced to the casino for the first time? Gawura says it's usually with a relative, who has been there before. Somebody wouldn't normally go there alone the first time. Then they go, and see what's inside the casino. After seeing you can win money, their djäl is sparked, and they might think – 'I might go back there, maybe I'll win.'

## **Episode 6: Dhugi-rom gambilingu – The gambling industry (14:37)**

Having set the scene in the previous episode, we now look at SkyCity Casino in more detail. We discuss that it is a big business: it employs lots of employees, and makes \$117million from customers per year, of which it keeps \$23million as profit. It purchases a license from the NT Government to make this money, worth around \$1.6million per year over 30 years.

We describe employees and employers in terms derived from Yolŋu business concepts, of contract-givers (*djugu'-gurrupanamirr*) and contract-receivers (*djugu'-mārranhamirr*). This introduces a key concept we will use throughout the remaining episodes to describe how a person playing pokies has control of the outcome. That person is a 'contract-giver' to the machine, who can choose to give or not give a contract (money). But if they do, the contract-receiver (that is, the owner of the machine) is always the ultimate winner.

In this episode, the concept enables us to lay out in a concrete way how the gambling industry works. There are customers (contract-givers), who go to the casino or pubs/clubs to gamble. Through this relationship, the venue owners (the contract-receivers) make money, and some of the money goes to the government, as the license-giver.

We explore what these contracts between pokies gambling venues and the government look like. The government sells a license for many pokies machines (currently 600) to SkyCity, who made \$59million through its pokies last year. The Government also licenses a maximum 10 pokie machines to hotels and a maximum 45 to clubs, which also make millions through these licenses.

Through the revenue derived from pokies licenses, the Government makes \$23 million/year, contributing to a total \$58million/year from gambling revenue generally. It gives \$10million from this amount to help educate people about gambling, through programs like this, via the Community Benefit Fund.

Throughout this story, when we talk about the money made through pokies, we describe it as money from players' pockets. In total, \$162million went from people's pockets to the owners of NT pokies, last year.

The second half of the program connects the apparatus of the gambling industry to the losses from players. We reintroduce the concept of *djäl* – desires – and describe how gambling causes people to become ruled by *djäl*. We discuss how a *nyira'* – a magic power in the machines – entices that *djäl*. The music, lights and atmosphere send a message to the player: "Come here and play!"

If a 'magic power' exists inside pokies, and inside venues where pokies are found, there must be someone who 'holds' that power. We describe that person as the *nyira'-wataŋu*. These are the owners of the casino (shareholders, people like James Packer etc.), or the owners of the pubs and clubs. They are the ones who buy pokies because they know this nyira' works on both Balanda and Yolŋu.

Through this contract-giver/-receiver story, we can now see how djäl for money – by players, venue owners, and government – results in players forgetting they're in a position to control their spending.

### **Episode 7: Yolthu ŋuli yuwalktja rrupiya mǎrram gambilingur? – Who really wins from gambling? (11:52)**

We've started to tell the story of what draws people to pokies, and what hooks them. In this episode, we start explaining why the machine (and therefore its owner) always wins.

We compare gambling to hunting, and see that there is a key difference. If I am a good hunter, with the right knowledge and equipment, I know I can hit the target with some certainty. The casino and pokie machines suggest gambling is the same – their message is, 'Come here and win'. But what many gamblers don't know is they are really saying, '*Come here and lose*'.

We talk about how there are two games going on, in all types of gambling. One game is on the surface, and one is hidden. On the surface, it seems like anyone playing can win. But the hidden story is that certain people always win. In pokies, it is the machine and the machine's owners that always win. This also happens with card games in communities: any player can win a few games, but at the end of the day, it is always 'big name' (*yäku-dumurr*) players who take home the winnings.

This is a story about 'odds'. In the surface game, it appears you have an 'even' chance of winning. But the hidden game means you really only have an 'odd' chance (a small chance). When you're playing a pokie machine, you can't see the other players. But there are thousands of others players you're playing against, and this means the odds of winning are very small – you have, essentially, no chance. The hidden game means the machine always wins.

We are now 'laying out' (*minḍhalam*, or *bularrmaram*) how gambling really works. We are showing all the parts, so that nothing is hidden. The way we're telling this story accords with Yolŋu worldview, which achieves two important things: it's not making Yolŋu feel ignorant; and it's showing how there is a consistent story across different types of gambling (which prevents listeners from just thinking of gambling as meaning card games (*dopulu*)).

## **Episode 8: Pokies girri' wanhal nurru-yirri'yurr? – The history of the poker machine (8:54)**

We return to the casino again, with Gawura relaying what impressions the pokies gave him. Their colours and sounds had a powerful effect on him. The reason for this is to entice us to play, because the owner of the machine always wins when we play.

We want to explore this story more deeply. So we discuss the history of pokie machines, starting with the first machine made in America in 1891. We learn that it has always been 'deceitful' – it used to be called a 'one-armed bandit'. We learn that most people lost money, and only a few would win – which really means, the owner of the machine is the only real winner. And, also like today, the fact that a few players won sometimes, was a hook, to keep you playing.

Clubs and hotels realised this was a good way to strengthen their businesses, so pokies spread around the world and developed in complexity. In 1976, the first computerised pokie machines came out – hence the name, Electronic Gaming Machine.

The first machine came to Australia in 1956, and to the Northern Territory (at Don Hotel Casino) in the 1980s. Back then, only the casino had a license, but by 1996 clubs and pubs were able to buy pokies licenses too. Now there are 2,000 pokies in the NT.

## **Episode 9: Nyira'puy dhäwu pokies-gu – The secret story about pokies (14:37)**

We've already introduced the belief held by Yolŋu that machines have a *nyira'* – a power. In this episode, we explore how this *nyira'* works. In *Balanda* terms, we're unpacking what is described as 'losses disguised as wins' and the 'return to player'.

Firstly, we link the *nyira'* with Government, since the laws for pokies are made in Parliament. Consequently, the 'power' (*nyira'*) is also a law (*rom*). This is important, because it means the outcome will always be the same, that is, according to a law.

This law allows poker machine technicians to set a minimum amount of money that is returned to players. We explain that, for example, a machine can be set to give back 85c of every dollar received. But this is shared between lots of players – not just between the machine and the player – which is why you usually lose money. The machine keeps the remainder, which goes to its owner (the *nyira'-waṭaju*).

We say that the license for a poker machine, which always wins for its owner, is therefore 'a license to steal'. Meanwhile, a portion of the money received by the *nyira'-waṭaju* goes to the Government, because

they provide the license and the regulation around it. This is not a hidden story – it’s publicly available information as an article of law – but many people don’t know it.

In the second half of the program, we explore another way the nyira’ works – how the design of the machine makes you want to play, and keep playing. The lights and sounds, and the promise of winning big money, entice you to play. We make another analogy to fishing, which Yolŋu are generally familiar with. The machine is like a lure to a fish – it entices the player to play, with its flashing colours, which hides a hook (*bekar*). The lure tells you you’re going to get a feed (win), but the reality is it will hook you. And the lure doesn’t go away when you lose – it stays in front of you, and after chasing it a few times, you become hooked – addicted.

### **Episode 10: Nhä ŋayi pokies - manyak wo yätj? – Are pokies good or bad? (12:07)**

We’ve explored the deeper story about how pokies work, and it’s a multilayered and confusing story. So we want to tie together some of these discussions, and find out: what’s the *true* story about pokies?

We start by noting that Yolŋu players often think pokies are good, because it’s one of very few ways to make badly needed money in Darwin. But we also know that some players end up *buku-watharr* – obsessed with the White House.

We talk, for the first time, about the characteristics of such a player:

- His/her pockets are always empty – the machine always wins, and s/he keeps playing but loses every time.
- S/he can’t stop him/herself from playing, even though s/he’s losing.
- S/he keeps asking family for money, to gamble with.
- S/he’s selfish – only thinking about him/herself.

All of this means that s/he becomes *märrmiriw* – ‘without social or spiritual credit’. Becoming *märrmiriw* is the most problematic impact, from a Yolŋu point of view. It means that when you are addicted to gambling, you are not following a lawful pathway, as defined in Yolŋu law (*ŋurrŋgitj rom*). You are blindly following your desires (*djä*), which has overcome your ability to think about law, and behave lawfully. You are thinking and acting wrongly, incorrectly (*djarrpi*). To Yolŋu, this can only mean one thing – pokies are very bad (*yätj*).

We also discuss that sometimes people don’t realise their gambling is causing problems. They might think they are not doing anything wrong. But because they’re preoccupied with gambling, they’ve forgotten that doing the right thing means to take care of your family.

So, we conclude that pokies are problematic. But with whom does the problem lie? We ask the question: is it the fault of the person gambling? Or the fault of the gambling industry?

Because we know that gambling is designed to hook a player, we decide it's gambling that is problematic. There is problem *gambling*, rather than problem *gamblers*. We objectify pokies as the problem, rather than objectifying players or Yolŋu.

We're also seeing that this problem is increasing. Right now, Yolŋu and Balanda are losing \$11billion to pokies in Australia. Next year, more people will get hooked, and this amount will grow further.

### **Episode 11: Warrpam dhäwu pokiespuy – Summary (19:06)**

There's been a lot of information presented so far, so this second-to-last episode aims to summarise some of the key storylines we've identified.

We first remind ourselves that the gambling industry is a problem, and why this is. Even though the Government knows gambling causes problems, they also benefit from it, as it is a big business that is important to the economy. Many private businesses also benefit from it and want it to continue. And players also want to gamble, and believe it is their right. This results in regulated gambling – and we remind listeners of the difference between regulated and unregulated gambling, such as card-playing in remote communities.

We then reiterate what problems regulated gambling (and especially pokies) causes, and how these problems arise. For Yolŋu, problems with gambling arise when they become addicted. Specifically, this causes problems like players spending all their money and money given to them by family; and forgetting about their families and their traditional law responsibilities.

So how do pokies lead people to become addicted? We summarise how machines are rigged so that only the owner of the machine or venue ever wins all the time. However, players don't usually see this hidden story, they only see a surface-level story which suggests they can win. Pokies also use lights, sound and near-misses to attract players to keep playing. These factors lead players to become 'hooked'.

Who can solve this problem? Big business won't, because their only interest is making money. And Government is unlikely to, because as we've discussed, they don't want to completely stop gambling, just manage the harms it causes through regulation. Even if they did try to ban pokies, history tells us that banning something doesn't succeed – it just pushes it underground.

So we can see that any solutions to problems caused by gambling have to be Yolŋu-led.

### **Episode 12: Nhaliy dhu Yolŋuy yutjuwalakum mari beŋur pokies-ŋur? – Solutions (10:41)**

This episode centres Yolŋu voices, who reflect on where solutions might lie.

We agree that the gambling problems and pokies causes serious problems. What can Yolŋu do to tackle these problems? Gawura says the answer lies in *raypirri'yunmirr*: the ability for individuals to discipline themselves; to follow *rom* (law) rather than just their *djäl* (desires).

For the first time, we trace the roots of pokies gambling problems to *dopulu* (card-playing) in community. Njulpinditj describes how when she was growing up in Milingimbi, elders had a strict policy not to allow children to play pokies. They did this, she believes, because they understood that maturity is required to deal with the complications involved with gambling.

Gawura tells a related story – about how he began gambling for small change at a young age, through childhood games like 'Silver'. This illustrates that children are getting a taste for gambling at a young age. Their *djäl* is starting at that time, and perhaps this leads them to the casino/pokies when they grow up.

Gawura points out that previous elders' restrictions on children gambling was a form of Yolŋu regulation (*nunŋaṭmaranhamirr rom*) for cards. Like the Government does for regulated gambling, Yolŋu elders enjoyed gambling and benefitted from it, but they regulated it because they knew it carried problems as well. Maybe the lack of regulation in *dopulu* today, is resulting in more children growing up and playing pokies. Strengthening Yolŋu regulation of *dopulu* is therefore seen as a primary solution to reducing pokies problems.

Gawura and Njulpinditj also suggest that those Yolŋu who understand the deep story about pokies and gambling, as explored in these programs, should educate others. The more people who know this story, the less likely they are to fall into the pokies' trap. Because ultimately, individuals have the power to stop themselves. They can choose to give or withhold money to the machine. Are they going to keep mistakenly thinking of themselves as fishermen, and continue in reality to be a fish, getting hooked by the machines?

We know it's going to be very difficult for this story to have an effect on players who are already hooked. The main solution for these players is to get them back to their homes, and especially to their homelands (outstations) – away from the pokies and where they can reconnect with traditional law and lifestyle, and receive traditional guidance and discipline.

We finish the series by emphasising that Yolŋu have the power to solve any problems they see arising from gambling.

## 7 Outcomes

ARDS is pleased to report excellent progress in meeting the goals outlined in our initial project application. Our application stated that we would “produce a series of radio programs investigating poker machines (‘pokies’). These programs will be produced in Yolŋu Matha and will be broadcast on Yolŋu Radio”.

As described in our application, the project has been produced with significant input by Yolŋu staff. This included, most notably, Gawura Wanambi, who was the primary content development facilitator and program presenter along with Howard Amery. Other Yolŋu involved in content development/presenting included Sylvia Nulpinditj, James Wapiriny, and Ruth Nalmakarra.

Their involvement has resulted in programs that are underpinned by a Yolŋu worldview, and is Yolŋu-led in terms of both problematisation and problem-solving. To our knowledge, it is the most significant and comprehensive resource about gambling to ever have been produced for and by Yolŋu.

The programs were completed in July. They have been added to Yolŋu Radio’s broadcast schedule, and the entire series is currently being played once a week. They will remain on air for years to come. They can also be streamed and downloaded online from ARDS/Yolŋu Radio’s Soundcloud page, at <https://soundcloud.com/ards-2/sets/pokies-story>.

We consulted with Amity Community Services at the outset of the project, in order to inform the content of the programs. Now that the projects have been completed, we have contacted Amity management to arrange a meeting to discuss the programs, and any further opportunities that may exist to partner using the content and our learnings from it. We will also make the Key Themes, Key Learnings and Program Synopses available to Amity. We look forward to engaging with other service providers who may find the resource and its insights useful to their work.

While it is too early to ascertain the effectiveness of the programs, we have played the recordings to a small number of Yolŋu consultants. Their feedback suggests these programs will achieve our goals of ameliorating problem gambling by “providing ... crucial information [about] gambling” to “potential problem gamblers, who are yet to use pokie machines or [use them] to a problematic degree” as well as by “offering support pathways and tips for gamblers and their families”.

The NT Government’s sponsorship has been acknowledged in every episode, in English and Yolŋu Matha, and in the program description on the ARDS’ Soundcloud page. The project will also be promoted on ARDS’ website, Facebook pages, and Annual Report.

## **8 Expenditure of funds**

ARDS will provide the Northern Territory Government with an Audited Statement and Expenditure Statement by October 30, 2017, as per our project agreement.