

Prince2 Project Management and Interactive Media: Is there a fit?

Elaine England ATSF October 2006

with contributions from:

Barret Stanboulian, Hasmodia Matt Sharpe, Tribal DDB Nigel Hudson, ADASIS, and Aleks Puxley, CIMEX

Background

Prince2 is a project management methodology that is gaining popularity in the UK, Europe, and Australia, and has recently sparked interest in China. It originated from work done at the CCTA (Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency) in the UK in 1989. Prince2 stands for Projects IN Controlled Environments. The 2 denotes that it is an updated version of the methodology from 1996 and 2005. Originally used for IT projects, it has been revised to become a set of generic principles that can be applied to all projects. The CCTA changed its name to OGC (Office of Government Commerce) and Prince2 has become the standard project management approach for government projects whilst also becoming the de facto standard for general project management in the UK for non-government projects.

Interactive media companies have not had a good reputation for employing project management approaches of any type. However, through experience many of them have recognised the need for process control over projects and clients – particularly when coping with changes to the brief. Increasingly the sector has become more positive about the possible strengths that project management principles offer.

Interactive media companies that work with government or government agencies have also found themselves required to use a Prince2 qualified project manager as part of their work contract. This has raised the profile of project management within the sector even though the precise detail of what it can offer has remained elusive. Gradually, the interactive media sector is trying to understand the implications of the Prince2 methodology and recognise where it fits within their development processes. These insights have proved controversial.

What is Project Management and its relationship with Interactive Media?

It is the application of a set of processes to a project to aid its definition, design, development and successful deployment. In other words, it helps in the planning and execution of the project and with focusing the diverse mix of people involved in the project on the joint objectives.

Interactive Media comprises several splinter groups covering web design, e-commerce, advertising, e-learning, mobile, emarketing, iTV, online hardware and software developers, middleware producers, among others. Sometimes they have emerged out of other sectors such as IT and advertising; sometimes they have developed directly through the technology infrastructure success. They have had different workflow processes. When something is innovative – and many have been innovators in their fields – it breaks boundaries and work patterns. In this climate, project management can be seen as restrictive, almost counter-productive. This accounts for some of the negative reaction to the concept of project management, and by association, Prince2.

However, as the sector matures and some work patterns are reproduced for new clients, many interactive companies have revised the ways that they work. They have introduced more structure to streamline the process, to work more effectively and efficiently with new clients. Simultaneously, as interactive companies grow from small entrepreneurial beginnings and recruit more staff, increased size leads to the need to have more formal structure to work processes. This partly explains the increasing adoption of certain work patterns that reflect a project management approach.

What is Prince2?

It is a set of best practice principles that has been refined into a framework used as a standard for Project Management. It is designed to be tailored to fit the project and its particular needs. In this way, it is flexible, and can be applied across project subject boundaries.

Prince2 offers a structured approach with eight core processes.

- Starting up a project (SU)
- Initiating a project (IP)
- Directing a project (DP)
- Controlling a stage (CS)
- Managing product delivery (MP)
- Managing stage boundaries (SB)
- Closing a project (CP)
- Planning (PL)

The processes are extensive with their own inputs and outputs being defined as well as needing documentation. This is a bare summary for illustrative purposes here.

The rationale behind applying the processes begins with establishing the importance of the business case – the reason for the project. Then the controlling influences on a project are established through the Project Board. This needs to have representatives from the business, the users and the suppliers as the key drivers or stakeholders. The project manager establishes lines of communication, roles and responsibilities, as well as the reporting procedures the board wants about the project progress and variations. The production of the project is broken into stages to be developed accordingly. Production progress is reported regularly.

How does this fit with interactive projects?

The process makes perfect sense. The common difficulties of projects—lack of direction from the client or inadequate brief, non-involvement of users, muddled lines of communication and the how and when of reporting procedures—are given a structured methodology. But under this structure all these should be put in place prior to the sub-contractor who develops the product being involved.

The interactive sector company is often the sub-contractor. So shouldn't it be the client who has a Prince2 project manager to establish the first stages of the methodology? Then that project manager can relate to the production/development (Prince2) project manager from the interactive company to continue the stages. This then poses a dilemma. If the client has not employed the Prince2 approach from the initiation of the project idea within their company but has sub-contracted the development and is expecting Prince2 to be employed as the methodology, the sub-contractor has to try and work backwards to cover the previous stages of the project from outside the client company and with less leverage because they are external.

A Prince2 approach expects processes from the very beginning of a project even at the point where the idea is sold into the originating company through whatever means is usually used to win budgets. The Prince2 process tries to ensure the relevant spread of stakeholders are kept focused and keep backing the project for defined business reasons.

The production process within Interactive Media companies can fall prey to difficulties if the initial stages of Prince2 have not been applied. There are usually a few people involved from the production company such as a director, account manager/project manager and then design and delivery personnel. It is often the Account Manager who has the day to day contact with the client with all this means in terms of changes to the brief, internal power struggles of the client, changes to the personnel inside the client company, lack of user involvement and so on. Should it be this person or equivalent that applies the first stages of Prince2 if the client hasn't?

One of the differences that has been applied to Prince2 and other project management methods is that it has a process approach but is not activity driven. Interactive media is activity driven because the companies supply/develop the product. The production stages of the project can be defined, broken down into tasks, costed and timed.

There can be a clash of mindsets between the activity driven interactive media people and the process driven Prince 2 managers unless they understand each other's needs and where each relies on the other to complete a successful project.

Insights from Prince2 project management applied to Interactive Media

1. Employer's perspective: Barret Stanboulion, Hasmodia Ltd, (www.hasmodia.net)

Hasmodia is a creative consultancy who see developing original new media formats and cross-disciplinary project-management as natural bedfellows. Facilitation is important to enable creativity in this climate and one that Hasmodia has coveted since its inception in 2000.

Barret discusses the application of Prince2 to a large complex and expensive project that spanned several interactive media delivery platforms—new technology development was needed—and it included innovative production practices as well. This took place in the broadcasting sector and he contracted an experienced Prince 2 practitioner who had not specifically had prior interactive media project experience.

What did you expect from Prince2?

From using the process, I expected rigour and to keep the fixed functional requirements controlled whilst allowing the creative elements flexibility. Since there were many organisations involved, the approach provided cohesion as they all accepted the Prince2 methodology. From the Prince2 practitioner himself, I couldn't expect more than acting as a good executive programme manager who would acknowledge the different specialist skills that were involved and pull together the different threads.

What was your experience of employing the approach?

The main difficulty was locking off the functional requirements without hamstringing the creative ones. The back-end needed robustness and we tried to avoid bespoke coding by using off-theshelf packages. It was difficult to get some of the commissioners to understand that the Prince2 structure was put in place for their benefit. My Prince2 manager could not come to terms with the common practice in media commissioning of committing work in terms of giving resources, ideas and time long before contracts are signed. This seemed alien to other management practices outside media.

On the positive side, Prince2 gave us the 'comfort' factor by providing sufficient rigour and accountability. It forced everyone to use a common parlance because we found that difference disciplines use the same terms but with different meanings.

What structure did your Prince2 manager employ?

I contracted an experienced practitioner who tailored the Prince2 process to suit the disparate requirements. This meant encompassing software development, 3D, gaming, content production and management, Java, back-office engines and so on.

There was an issue with the communication process because the approach was too traditional for the new products perhaps. We needed the fusion of experience and the interdisciplinary nature of the project to infuse the creativity, but the requirements for technical plans, business plans and so on appeared to dampen creativity instead. It lacked a process to heighten creativity. In some senses it might appear to play into the hands of large commercial companies because small creative companies cannot sustain the cost in terms of manpower, time and effort to refine their ideas into commercial documentation. I suppose the question that needs answering is how to engage creativity without management control processes stifling it.

Did your clients employ Prince2 managers as well?

Operationally, technically, and legally, yes. They were large organisations that had such sections. Otherwise, no. These people tended to operate outside our direct contact and any personnel involved with the creative processes did not recognise the Prince2 methodology or its benefits.

What would you do for future projects?

I reckon you have to be realistic about the leverage you can get and offer to such large clients. You can't afford to educate the market, but maybe you should be bolder and more succinct in your offer or pitch. Damn the consequences. Make it clear at the beginning whether they want to be risk averse towards the future or creative and 'have a go'. It'll depend on their culture. In terms of Prince2, I have learnt its strengths and weaknesses for such ventures and would employ it selectively again.

In this case the requirements of compliance and methodology soaked up too many resources that should have been focused on creative activities within our window of opportunity. It was a salutary lesson in the process-tail wagging the innovation-dog! Something that might be increasingly familiar to us all!

2. Practitioner Perspective: Matt Sharpe, Prince 2 Senior Project Manager, Tribal DDB, London, UK (www.tribalddb.co.uk)

Matt explains his experience of qualifying for, and then using Prince2 in interactive media projects in his present job at Tribal DDB London. Tribal is an interactive agency—part of the Tribal DDB Worldwide network. It is 10 years old and is Adweek's interactive agency of the year for 2006.

When did you qualify and what level Prince2 qualification do you have?

At the beginning of 2003—nearly 4 years ago when I worked in IT development, I did a one week residential course and found that if you had experience it made it easier. I sat and attained the full Prince2 Practitioners' qualification at the end of the week doing the Foundation exam in the morning and the Practitioner exam in the afternoon.

What is your experience of applying the Prince2 principles to interactive media projects?

Initially, Prince2 appears as a behemoth, full of processes, rules and documentation that seems daunting and complex to apply in any environment—let alone a fast paced interactive media environment where the drive is more client focused, and there's pressure to constantly reduce processes to speed up turnaround times. So from a purist theoretical approach, it can seem complex.

However, once you are on the ground and managing real projects, you can begin to appreciate that it needn't necessarily be complex. Prince2 is eminently scalable and can fit in to virtually any project environment, large or small, across all industries. It can be as simple or complex as you want to make it.

The key is knowing and understanding how to apply Prince2 appropriately. I don't know of any examples where every part of Prince2 is applied to a project—apart from the very big engineering-type of projects, it would simply be overkill and would reduce effectiveness and efficiency.

In terms of applying it to interactive media projects – by the nature of the work, you have to strip down the process and use the nuts and bolts—you need to make it simple, and you need to make it fit.

Do you apply Prince2 principles in your present work?

Personally, I do use selected Prince2 principles in my present work, although not overtly so. I am used to working in environments that are not Prince2 however, so the key is applying it where and when I can within the constraints of existing processes, suggesting and contributing to any discussions around ways of improving process. To suddenly become a Prince2 purist when working with a team unfamiliar with the process can lead to more problems than it solves—so any implementation needs to be managed carefully and without altering too drastically processes that pre-exist, are proven to work, and people are comfortable with. As already mentioned, the key to using Prince2 effectively is to understand where to use it, and where not to use it—and tailoring the method to fit the environment in which you work. There are entire books written about how to tailor Prince2, but the key concept to the successful implementation is introducing Prince2 by gradually changing work processes and mind sets. From a theoretical approach, I would suggest that the following is a sensible method of how to introduce and apply Prince2 concepts:

Step 1: Recognise the vital elements, and use those straight away – maybe calling them something different to use terminology that the team is comfortable with. Some pre-existing documents and processes could be updated and tweaked to become more 'best practice' focused. As a result they are more Prince2 friendly too.

For example:

- Restructuring a Statement of Work template to make it more akin to a PID (Project Initiation Document).
- Introducing post-project review meetings, to those required by the project evaluation process in Prince2.
- Encouraging projects to be broken up into discrete, measurable stages—thus engendering the idea of Controlling a Stage, Managing Stage Boundaries, and ultimately the core Prince2 concept of management by exception.

Step 2: Start to introduce and drip-feed the less vital, but still important principles into the pre-existing process. So this could include introducing new templates that encourage people to think about measuring and reporting more regular progress and therefore forecast if tolerances are likely to be breached, or working with the client and account management teams to suggest a more effective way of managing projects by setting up a project board and introduce concepts of Directing a Project.

Step 3: Once people are more comfortable with a more structured approach to project management, you might consider introducing them to Prince2 terminology and processes—by which time, they should recognise that what they are already doing is best practice driven and Prince2 compliant. By that point, the sitting of a Prince2 qualification by other project managers would become almost a formality.

Which Prince2 principles are invaluable for interactive media projects and why?

I don't necessarily believe that an interactive media project is drastically different in terms of invaluable and necessary principles than a project from any other discipline.

At a bare minimum, Prince2 demands that certain processes must be followed, albeit tailored to fit requirements, but without which a project is at a higher risk of failure. Some of these include:

Starting up a project. This process can be combined with initiating a project for typically fast turnaround projects, but is absolutely essential. Without a defined, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed approach, documented, understood and agreed by the project board, then no project should proceed.

- Risk and issue management—often these are not documented the way they should be, but in an environment where changes can happen fast, estimates prove inaccurate and scope creeps, keeping on top of the impact of these is essential—knowing, forecasting and monitoring what can go wrong is the best way of stopping it before it does.
- Managing stage boundaries. Whilst understanding tolerances and stage boundaries are sometimes a more difficult concept to grasp, managing interactive projects in this way again allows the PM to keep on top of the project—knowing where to measure progress, when to report back to the board, and when to raise issues ensures that the project remains on track, and stops it going into tolerance exception before it gets too far and forces failure.
- Management by exception. This is the culmination of the processes discussed—minimising project board involvement only to points where exception or stage boundaries are reached. This has the dual advantage of reducing the time required of the board, and the resultant interference, as well as where an exception incident occurs, passing on the ultimate responsibility and decision making on the project to those who control the budgets and strategy.

Are there Prince2 principles that are less applicable for interactive work?

Yes and no. All principles in Prince2 should be at least considered at the start of any project. Whilst it is likely that some processes will not be used, or used only minimally, it is important to understand and justify why that process should not be used.

Typically, some of the less useful processes that I tend not to use in the interactive media environment include:

- The Managing Product Delivery and work package components. This is sometimes unwieldy when you typically have a small team or single deliverables, where the need for accepting work packages from the PM is redundant.
- Some of the reports—such as reporting stage end, reviewing stage status, approving exception plans etc—these are not always necessary, and can slow the process down where there may be a single stage one week project for example. Typically, a lot of these reports can be done verbally or in a quick email.
- In short projects, the need for a separate start up and initiation process is often unnecessary. These can be combined, so long as the PID is produced and signed off at the end.

There are others, but again it is project dependent and up to the PM and project board how stringently each process should be observed.

Do your clients have Prince2 qualified people and does this make a difference to the projects or your relationship?

I have yet to work with clients that have Prince2 experience. This is an area that I hope will gradually become less of an issue across all industries as Prince2 and other structured PM methodologies gain wider understanding and acceptance. In theory, training a client to use Prince2 can form part of the Step 2 I mentioned above. Once the client understands project management best practices and by implication Prince2 and its concept of management by exception, this should improve efficiencies on both sides, reduce the client's workload and worries and make everyone happier!

A lot depends on if a client is open to the concepts. Many clients would benefit from having a Prince2 manager. Very often their project manager may not have managed such a project before. It would be good to work together with understanding of the Prince2 processes.

Do your fellow interactive PM's have Prince2 qualifications and does this make a difference to the projects or your relationship with them?

I have worked with PMs that have Prince2 gualifications and with those who do not. In one of my previous roles, it was a departmental goal to implement Prince2—first by acclimatising other PMs to the concept of formal management processes, and then moving towards the formal introduction of Prince2. An entire PM department familiar with and actively using Prince2 would be a formidable one indeed, but it isn't always easy, particularly when day-to-day work will always take priority over instigating new processes. It can be easier working with other Prince2 managers, particularly in terms of handing over/covering projects. However, even when you are not working with a manager who knows Prince2, you can be flexible with the way in which they work and apply that to your own application of Prince2. In addition to Project Managers knowing the principles, it is also key for Account Managers to know the Prince2 processes as well. There are even special Prince2 courses for Account Managers now.

What wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of PM's of interactive media projects? Is this affected by your Prince2 outlook?

Prince2, whether you're an interactive media PM, an architect, engineer, or setting up a business is invaluable. It seems daunting at first look, but for anyone familiar with running a project all it is a framework that brings together best practice principles from years of experience. It works, and once you use it is guaranteed to make your job and your life easier! I wouldn't be as effective as a PM had I not learned the principles of Prince2, and I would encourage all PMs to consider looking into it!

3. Practitioner Perspective: Nigel Hudson, Group Manager, ADASIS, Wolverhampton, UK. (www.adasis.co.uk)

ADASIS is the Interactive Solutions arm of the ADAS Group that has 22 branches across the UK. Nigel is a Chartered Marketer specialising in advising clients how to use the Internet to achieve marketing, sales and data management objectives.

When did you qualify and what level Prince2 qualification do you have?

October 2005, Practitioner level.

What is your experience of applying the Prince2 principles to interactive media projects?

We apply Prince2 as standard for larger (£100k+) projects, especially government ones. The methodology helps to protect us as a contractor when agreeing product descriptions and stage plans. Project tolerance is important to keep a grip on as clients tend to make a lot of amendments to website projects without understanding the time or cost consequences.

Do you apply Prince2 principles in your present work?

Yes, but in varying degrees. We find that quoting Prince2 in tenders helps us win government work, but when we win it the client doesn't always want it (full Prince methodology can dramatically increase the project management costs of a project. 10-15% is acceptable, but any more becomes expensive bureaucracy in their eyes). In practice, we apply the principles or Prince (especially that projects are about outcomes not activities).

Which Prince2 principles are invaluable for interactive media projects and why?

I find product descriptions, stage plans, and highlight reports most useful because communications are essential when bringing non-IT clients and IT technical staff together.

Are there Prince2 principles that are less applicable for interactive work?

The Business Case—documenting this can be frustrating for the client. The simple fact that they've asked you to quote for some work means they want the product. However in government projects they've probably already written something similar to their bosses in order to get the funding. Then, as I mentioned before, the added expense of full Prince2 documentation and methodology isn't always welcomed so these have to be taken into account.

Do your clients have Prince2 qualified people and does this make a difference to the projects or your relationship?

Yes, definitely. We have a predominately public sector client base where Prince2 is a prerequisite. It's especially useful when dealing with a client's Quality Management representative, as Prince encourages project stages and documentation.

Do your fellow interactive PM's have Prince2 qualifications and does this make a difference to the projects or your relationship with them?

Yes, my web developer is a qualified Prince Practitioner and we encourage all ADAS PM's to be Prince qualified. Some use it more than others but it's especially helpful when delivering into a programme of projects.

What wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of PM's of interactive media projects? Is this affected by your Prince2 outlook?

Don't let your specialist IT knowledge or enthusiasm overwhelm what the client wants. You're creating a solution for them, not the other way around. Get to genuinely understand what they need and then use Prince to map out how you are going to deliver it. Communicate with the client regularly—keep them informed and enthused about the work you are doing. If you apply Prince properly then you will create an IT solution that matches the client's needs and everyone will be happy.

Do you have any other insights that you feel is appropriate for Prince2 and interactive media project management?

IT media projects are often very fast paced. Prince can slow things down, however this is often a good thing.

4. Aleksandra Puxley, Head of Project Management, CIMEX, London. (www.cimex.com)

Aleks heads up the Project Management team at CIMEX. She is passionate about Project Management and discusses her experience of implementing Prince2 methods there. CIMEX is a 60 strong award winning agency that provides interactive solutions and e-learning across many industry sectors.

When did you qualify and what level Prince2 qualification do you have?

In February 2004, and I have both qualifications: foundation and practitioner

What is your experience of applying the Prince2 principles to interactive media projects?

I guess my experience has been straightforward. Although now, when I think about it, sometimes you find yourself having to justify the time for planning, sign off of documentation, and the need for change management as there is a constant pressure to speed up the turnaround times.

Do you apply Prince2 principles in your present work?

Yes, the Prince2 principles I try to apply are:

- Organizational Structure/Communications/Reporting I believe that establishing an effective organizational structure for the Project Management Team is crucial as a project needs direction, management, and control for communications to be successful. Through this reporting process a communication matrix is established that identifies who needs to give and receive information throughout the projects.
- Management Controls
 Different Controls are used throughout the Project to Control the Project.
- Planning
 I use this to identify products that need to be delivered, their activities and their dependencies.
- Change Management
 This is vital to manage change throughout the project and especially to identify its impact.
- Management of Risk Used initially to identify risks, then we need to evaluate them and identify suitable responses.
- Configuration management Used for Version control, which is even more necessary in fast-paced projects like interactive media.
- Quality
 I use this to establish Customer Expectations and Acceptance Criteria. It makes everything clearer about the project objectives—for your team as well as your client.

Closing a Project

This is very necessary to get ongoing operational and maintenance acceptance, and to map out potential future developments/recommendations. It also gives you the time and space to identify lessons learned that add to your own self-development and that of your team.

Which Prince2 principles are invaluable for interactive media projects and why?

I think all of the ones above but if forced to choose between them I would choose:

- A Prince2 project is driven by the Business Case Study Each project must have a stated business case indicating the benefits and risks of the venture together with a properly defined and unique set of outcomes or products including overall timescales and the costs to achieve these. All these contribute to the business case and are valuable inputs to the brief that we receive.
- Planning

For each of the products there is a corresponding set of activities defined to construct them and then you assign the appropriate resources to undertake these activities. This is important as it clarifies what is being delivered. It provides resources from the client side to give direction, and identifies sign off nominees for the client requirements. As people say: 'A plan is the backbone of every project'.

Organizational Structure/Communications/Reporting Projects must have an organisational structure with defined responsibilities. It also needs a set of processes with their associated techniques which will help plan and control the project to bring it to a successful conclusion. It is important to define organisational structure, roles and responsibilities to help control a project as some projects go wrong if there is confusion about who is responsible for signing things off. Any delays here will have an impact on the timescales of course

Are there Prince2 principles that are less applicable for interactive work?

I guess not, but then it depends if you are on the client side or supplier side.

If you are on the supplier side then 'Starting up a project', 'Directing a project' and the 'Business Case Study' principles can be less applicable to interactive media companies as they don't necessarily get involved in these. They are mainly the client's responsibility. However the outcome of these processes and their principles provide important input for the Project and the supplier.

Do your clients have Prince2 qualified people and does this make a difference to the projects/ your relationship?

Most of them don't have Prince2 managers. It does help if the client has Prince 2 qualified people as they appreciate the process that the project needs to go through, the requirement for documentation and the time required for it.

If the client does not have Prince2 qualified people, it helps if they have an awareness of the processes the project needs to go through and the time required for certain stages of the project.

Do your fellow interactive PM's have Prince2 qualifications and does this make a difference to the projects/your relationship with them?

Some do and some don't. It is not necessarily the Prince2 qualifications that they have that helps the relationship, but the understanding of basic principles of Project Management. With that in place and an openness towards different ways of working, methodologies like Prince2 provide tools to control projects and make working together a more integrated process. For example reporting and handover processes are much easier when there are tools in place like the ones Prince2 offers.

What wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of PM's of interactive media projects? Is this affected by your Prince2 outlook?

- Lead your team by example and work together. Somebody once defined Team as Together Everyone Achieves More.
- Aim to be part of a high-performance team with energy, direction, shared values and trust.
- Invest your time in client relationships and keep the 'big picture' in mind.
- Work with Prince2 as it helps you control your projects and define your day-to-day work more easily, but don't forget to use your common sense.

It is a combination of lots of things as well as my experience. However the Prince2 course made me realize how much I enjoy Project Management and how I can make my job easier and enjoy it more by using the tools Prince2 offers.

Do you have any other insights that you feel is appropriate for Prince2 and interactive media project management?

I guess I'd just like to say that they work well together. The challenge for the project manager is not to get too overwhelmed with the project administration and to apply Prince2 principles on a project-by-project basis.

Conclusion.

It seems clear that Prince2 is valued as a structured approach that can help interactive media companies. It needs to be applied carefully and intelligently to each project on its own merits. There are issues from the sector that need addressing such as:

- innovation and creativity not being stifled through processes
- whether clients should take the lead in applying Prince2 methodology to their parts of the process from initiation to managing production
- how the fast pace of the sector and increased pressure on project turn-around can be accommodated by Prince2 methodology
- how exactly the interactive media production teams can integrate the processes into their working practices.

It would appear that both sides—clients and suppliers—would benefit from understanding each other's needs better. Even general understanding of project management principles would be of benefit to level the playing field between the parties. It is evident that a balance is needed between commissioner and supplier—a balance that comes from understanding, valued and trusted relationships.

Have your say

Do you have any insights on Prince2 and interactive media projects? Do you agree or disagree with what has been said here?

Please send in your comments including your name, job title (if appropriate) and email address to elaine@atsf.co.uk. We'll post them and keep updating this to reflect what is happening in the sector with Prince2.