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Risk Management in Multimedia Production: Identifying and Overcoming Creative Project Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Multimedia production projects combine creative practice, technical complexity, tight schedules, and multiple stakeholder expectations—conditions that elevate project risk. This article examines risk management in multimedia production with a focus on identifying common creative-project challenges and proposing strategies to mitigate them. Using a qualitative meta-synthesis approach—drawing on published case studies, industry reports, and academic literature—the study develops a thematic understanding of risk types (artistic, technical, organisational, financial, and contextual) and presents a practical framework that integrates risk management principles with creativity-supportive practices. Theoretical foundations include project risk theory (PMI/PMBOK), contingency theory, and creativity and innovation theories (Amabile; Csikszentmihalyi). Findings yield seven core themes: ambiguous scope and shifting requirements; technology and interoperability failures; talent and team dynamics; time and budget pressures; intellectual property and legal risk; stakeholder misalignment; and external/contextual disruptions. For each theme, the article proposes targeted mitigation strategies—combining proactive risk identification, iterative development, flexible governance, psychological safety, and continuous stakeholder engagement. The paper concludes with methodological reflections, implications for practitioners, and directions for future empirical research.

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1. Introduction

Multimedia production projects—encompassing digital video, interactive installations, game development, augmented/virtual reality experiences, transmedia storytelling, and complex advertising campaigns—sit at the intersection of art, technology, and commerce. They are frequently interdisciplinary, dependent on specialised technical tools, and sensitive to rapid changes in platforms and audience expectations. These characteristics contribute to a high-risk environment where failures can be costly in monetary, reputational, and creative terms (Manovich, 2001; Grabher, 2004).

Risk management is well established in traditional project management literature (Project Management Institute [PMI], 2017; Hillson, 2002), but creative projects present distinctive challenges. Standard risk frameworks that emphasise predictability and control can stifle creativity if applied rigidly (Amabile, 1996). Thus, practitioners require approaches that simultaneously mitigate downside risks and preserve the exploratory conditions necessary for creative success (Kelley & Littman, 2005; Brown & Wyatt, 2010).

This paper addresses the research question: How can risk in multimedia production be identified, characterised, and managed in ways that both reduce negative outcomes and support creative processes? To answer, we conduct a qualitative meta-synthesis of scholarship and trade literature, integrate insights into a theoretical framework, and

propose practical, evidence-informed strategies for risk management tailored to multimedia contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 Risk management in projects and creative industries

Risk management literature differentiates between risk (quantifiable uncertainty) and uncertainty (non-quantifiable unknowns) and prescribes processes: risk identification, assessment (qualitative/quantitative), response planning, monitoring, and control (PMI, 2017). Hillson (2002) and Aven (2015) extend the discussion by foregrounding risk appetite and tolerance. However, creative industries scholars argue that the goals and processes of creative work complicate risk management: creative processes often involve experimentation, iteration, and serendipity, which traditional risk-avoidance strategies can suppress (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Florida, 2002).

2.2 Characteristics of multimedia projects

Multimedia projects have several salient features that affect risk: technological heterogeneity (multiple tools and platforms), interdependence of media elements (audio, video, code, UX), high specialisation of talent (artists, coders, sound designers), rapid obsolescence of tools, and multifaceted stakeholder groups (clients, producers, funders, audiences). Studies have noted failure modes specific to digital media, such as incompatibility between file formats, inadequate metadata management, and platform policy changes that disrupt

distribution (Manovich, 2001; Tschang, 2007; O'Donnell, 2014).

2.3 Creativity, teams, and psychological safety

Team dynamics profoundly influence creative output and risk. Psychological safety, trust, and diversity of perspectives are linked to higher creativity (Edmondson, 1999; Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Conversely, poorly managed teams—marked by role ambiguity or imbalance between creative and managerial priorities—generate conflict, schedule slippage, and quality issues (Sundblad & Brännback, 2018; Sawyer, 2017).

2.4 Agile, iterative, and hybrid approaches

Agile and iterative methods, long used in software, are increasingly adapted to creative production because they allow for frequent feedback, early prototyping, and course corrections—reducing the impact of late-discovered errors (Highsmith, 2009; Conforto et al., 2016). Hybrid governance models that combine stage-gate financial controls with iterative creative sprints are emerging as best practice for balancing control and freedom (Cooper, 2019; Denning, 2018).

2.5 Gaps in the literature

While there is abundant case literature and practitioner guidance, systematic frameworks that integrate creative-process needs with rigorous risk management tailored to multimedia production are limited. Empirical studies examining how specific mitigation strategies affect creative outcomes

remain limited (Tschang, 2007; deFillippi & Arthur, 1998). This study contributes by synthesising themes across disciplines to propose a practical framework grounded in both risk theory and creativity research.

3. Theoretical framework

The proposed theoretical framework synthesises three intellectual strands: project risk theory, contingency theory, and creativity-in-context theories.

Project risk theory (PMI, 2017; Hillson, 2002) provides the procedural backbone—systematic risk identification, assessment, treatment planning, monitoring, and governance. It emphasises that risks can be positive (opportunities) or negative (threats) and that risk responses include avoid, transfer, mitigate, accept, and exploit.

Contingency theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Donaldson, 2001) suggests that organisational practices (including risk responses) must fit the task environment. For multimedia projects, contingency implies tailoring governance and processes to project complexity, uncertainty, stakeholder composition, and creative goals.

Creativity-in-context (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) focuses on conditions that foster creativity—intrinsic motivation, autonomy, a supportive social environment, and domain-relevant skills. The framework holds that risk management must not destroy these conditions; rather, it should enable safe exploration.

Combining these, the framework identifies five primary risk domains for multimedia

production: Artistic/Creative, Technical/Operational, Organisational/People, Financial/Commercial, and Contextual/External. For each domain, the model prescribes diagnostic activities (how

to detect risks), assessment approaches (qualitative scoring, scenario mapping), and response strategies that are sensitive to creative needs (e.g., protective redundancy for technical systems; sandboxed experimentation for creative work).

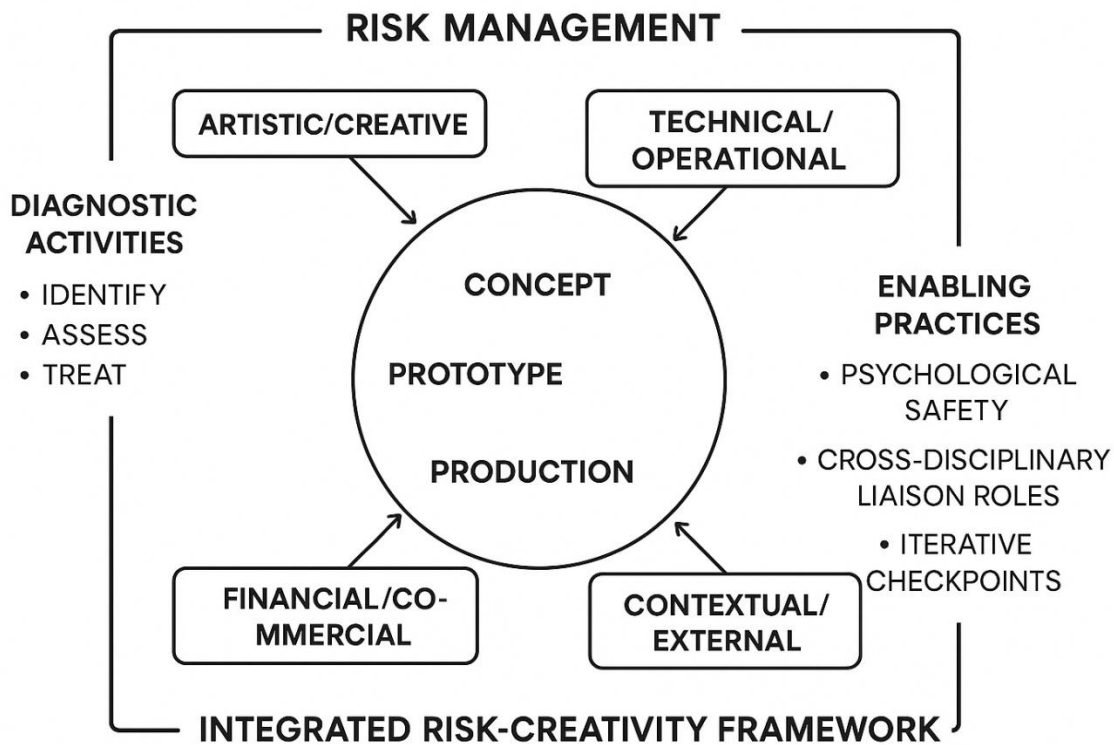


Figure 1: Integrated Risk-Creativity Framework

The Integrated Risk-Creativity Framework situates multimedia production at the intersection of creativity, technology, and organisational processes. At the core lies the iterative production cycle (Concept → Prototype → Production → Distribution), reflecting the cyclical and exploratory nature of multimedia projects. Surrounding this cycle are five risk domains—Artistic/Creative, Technical/Operational, Organisational/People, Financial/Commercial, and Contextual/External—each representing

sources of uncertainty that may disrupt project outcomes if unmanaged.

Artistic/Creative Risks emerge from ambiguous project goals, shifting creative directions, or client-driven changes. These are mitigated by progressive elaboration, mood boards, and iterative prototyping. Technical/Operational Risks encompass interoperability issues, software obsolescence, and infrastructure breakdowns, managed through standardised formats, version control, and technical spikes.

Organisational/People Risks stem from talent turnover, poor team dynamics, and knowledge loss, which require clear roles, cross-training, and psychological safety practices. Financial/Commercial Risks involve budget overruns and unrealistic timelines; mitigations include phased delivery, realistic forecasting, and contingency reserves. Finally, Contextual/External Risks arise from market disruptions, regulatory changes, or global crises, addressed through scenario planning and diversified distribution strategies.

Encircling the framework are governance processes—risk registers, change-control mechanisms, stakeholder review structures—that formalise accountability while protecting space for creative exploration. These are integrated with enabling practices: psychological safety, cross-disciplinary liaison roles, and adaptive learning cycles (retrospectives, post-mortems). The figure emphasises that risk management and creativity are not opposing forces; rather, when embedded into iterative cycles, risk processes become supports for experimentation rather than constraints.

Overall, the framework illustrates how systematic risk awareness and proactive mitigation can coexist with, and indeed enhance, the conditions necessary for creativity. It demonstrates that effective multimedia production requires a balanced approach—protecting creative autonomy while ensuring resilience against technical, financial, and contextual uncertainties.

4. Research methodology

4.1 Research design

This study uses a qualitative meta-synthesis approach—systematically collecting, analysing, and synthesising findings from empirical case studies, qualitative studies, trade reports, and practitioner literature on multimedia production and creative project risk. Meta-synthesis is appropriate for integrating diverse qualitative findings and developing higher-level theoretical insights (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

4.2 Data sources and selection criteria

Sources were selected using purposive sampling to capture variety across project types (film, digital storytelling, interactive installations, AR/VR, game dev), geographic contexts, and organizational settings (studios, freelance teams, educational projects). Inclusion criteria: (a) publications or reports that describe risks, failures, or risk-management practices in multimedia/creative projects; (b) empirical case studies, practitioner white papers, or qualitative research; (c) English-language sources. Classic theoretical works on creativity and project/risk management were included to ground the analysis. (Representative sources: Amabile, 1996; PMI, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tschang, 2007; Grabher, 2004.)

Note: Because the synthesis draws on published qualitative evidence rather than primary interviews, ethical review for human subjects was not required.

4.3 Data extraction and analysis

Data were extracted from sources into a structured matrix capturing: project type, setting, described risks, causes, consequences, risk responses, and outcomes. Analysis followed thematic synthesis procedures (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarisation with the literature, (2) coding of risk descriptions and responses, (3) generation of descriptive themes, and (4) development of analytical themes that map to the theoretical framework.

To maximise trustworthiness, the synthesis used triangulation across source types, iterative reflexive memoing to surface assumptions, and constant comparison across cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

4.4 Limitations

Meta-synthesis relies on the quality and scope of existing literature—case reports may over-represent high-profile failures and practitioner perspectives, and under-represent small-scale or non-English projects. The absence of new primary data limits claims about prevalence; instead, the study offers a synthesized conceptualization and practical propositions to be tested empirically.

5. Findings: Thematic synthesis

Analysis converged on seven core risk themes that recur across multimedia project types. For each theme, we describe the risk, typical root causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies supported by the literature.

5.1 Theme 1 — Ambiguous scope and shifting requirements

Description. Creative briefs and project scopes are frequently ambiguous, evolving, or open-ended—either due to client indecision, evolving artistic direction, or discovery during prototyping (Tschang, 2007; deFillippi & Arthur, 1998).

Causes. Poor initial scoping, insufficiently codified creative intent, changing stakeholder tastes, or new platform opportunities.

Consequences. Scope creep, schedule slippage, budget overruns, erosion of team morale.

Mitigation. Use progressive elaboration and boundary objects—documented artefacts that capture agreed constraints (e.g., moodboards, minimally viable prototypes). Implement iterative development cycles with formalised review points and change-control processes that differentiate core from experimental work (Conforto et al., 2016; Cooper, 2019). Employ clear acceptance criteria and prioritise features using MoSCoW or similar techniques to manage expectations (Highsmith, 2009).

5.2 Theme 2 — Technology and interoperability failures

Description. Multimedia projects depend on toolchains (editing software, game engines, middleware), file formats, codecs, and infrastructure that can fail or become incompatible (Manovich, 2001; O'Donnell, 2014).

Causes. Rapidly changing software versions, lack of standardisation in assets, insufficient

backups, and platform policy changes (e.g., API deprecations).

Consequences. Loss of work, rework, inability to deploy on target platforms, or degraded user experiences.

Mitigation. Adopt robust technical practices: maintain version control for assets and code; use open, documented file formats when possible; create technical specifications and compatibility matrices; schedule technical spikes to test integrations early; and invest in redundancy and automated backups. Technical risk assessment should be continuous and include contingency paths (e.g., fallbacks for deprecated APIs) (Denning, 2018; Highsmith, 2009).

5.3 Theme 3 — Talent, team dynamics, and knowledge transfer

Description. The availability and performance of specialised talent (artists, animators, sound engineers, coders) critically shape project success. Turnover and role ambiguity create risk (Grabher, 2004; Sawyer, 2017).

Causes. Freelance/short-term contracts, uneven workload distribution, unclear roles, poor onboarding, and a lack of knowledge capture.

Consequences. Loss of institutional knowledge, inconsistent quality, missed deadlines.

Mitigation. Create clear role definitions and responsibilities (RACI matrices), invest in cross-training and pairing practices, maintain living documentation (style guides, technical notes), and embed knowledge-capture rituals (post-sprint demos, design logs). Foster

psychological safety to encourage candid communication about risks (Edmondson, 1999; Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

5.4 Theme 4 — Time and budget pressures

Description. Tight deadlines and constrained budgets are endemic in creative production, increasing the temptation for scope reduction or quality compromises.

Causes. Underestimating creative iteration time, client-driven timeline compression, and competitive pricing.

Consequences. Burnout, poor-quality deliverables, compromised user experience.

Mitigation. Use realistic estimation techniques (reference class forecasting, buffer allocation), phased delivery with prioritised MVPs, and transparent budgeting that identifies contingency reserves for creative exploration. Adopt lightweight governance that protects creative sprint time (Kelley & Littman, 2005; PMI, 2017).

5.5 Theme 5 — Intellectual property (IP), legal, and ethical risks

Description. Multimedia content often raises IP and licensing issues (stock assets, music rights), privacy/data-protection concerns (user data in interactive experiences), and ethical questions (representation, consent).

Causes. Improper use of third-party assets, unclear rights assignments, and inadequate privacy safeguards.

Consequences. Legal disputes, takedowns, reputational damage, and financial penalties.

Mitigation. Conduct IP audits, maintain a license register, secure written releases for likenesses, consult legal counsel for contracts, and include privacy-by-design and ethical review checkpoints. Use open licenses or original assets where feasible (Lessig, 2004; Spinello, 2018).

5.6 Theme 6 — Stakeholder misalignment and governance failures

Description. Multiple stakeholders (creative directors, clients, funders, distributors) may have conflicting priorities: artistic integrity versus commercial metrics.

Causes. Poorly defined decision rights, lack of shared success metrics, and insufficient stakeholder engagement.

Consequences. Decision paralysis, conflicting directives, midstream rework.

Mitigation. Establish RACI for decision-making, co-create success metrics, hold regular stakeholder demos with audience-relevant data, and use steering committees with clear escalation rules. Align contracts with governance expectations (Serrador & Turner, 2015).

5.7 Theme 7 — External and contextual disruptions

Description. Market shifts, platform policy changes, supply-chain issues (hardware shortages), and pandemics can disrupt production and distribution.

Causes. Externality events beyond project control.

Consequences. Delays, lost revenue, need for re-strategising.

Mitigation. Build scenario plans, diversify distribution channels, maintain buffer resources, and cultivate adaptive capacity (mobile teams, remote workflows). Monitor external environment and maintain strategic partnerships for resilience (Aven, 2015).

5.8 Practical framework and recommended practices

Drawing on the thematic synthesis and theoretical framework, Table 1 (below) maps each risk theme to diagnostic indicators, assessment heuristics, and concrete response strategies (short/medium/long-term). The following paragraphs elaborate on cross-cutting practices.

Table 1. Cross-Cutting Practices in Multimedia Production Risk Management

Practice	Description	Contribution to Risk Management	Contribution to Creativity
Psychological Safety	Creating an environment where team members feel safe to express ideas and concerns.	Reduces hidden risks by encouraging open reporting and discussion.	Encourages bold, innovative thinking without fear.
Cross-Disciplinary Liaison Roles	Appointing individuals to bridge communication gaps between creative, technical, and commercial units.	Enhances coordination, preventing silo-based risks.	Fosters integrative, hybrid solutions.
Iterative Checkpoints	Regularly scheduled review sessions during concept, prototype, and production stages.	Allows early identification and mitigation of emerging risks.	Provides structured feedback loops to refine creativity.
Scenario Planning	Exploring “what-if” scenarios to anticipate uncertainties.	Prepares for external, contextual disruptions (market shifts, tech).	Sparks alternative creative pathways.
Knowledge Sharing Platforms	Using digital tools and collaborative repositories to store and share insights.	Reduces operational risks through collective learning.	Inspires new ideas by reusing past innovations.
Flexible Budgeting	Allowing adaptive allocation of resources to match evolving creative needs.	Minimises financial risks from rigid cost structures.	Supports creative experimentation within safe bounds.

5.8.1 Cross-cutting practice 1 — Early prototyping and safe-to-fail experiments

Rapid prototyping reduces uncertainty by revealing technical or experiential issues early. Use controlled safe-to-fail experiments for high-uncertainty creative elements—small-scale prototypes that are low-cost but high-learning (Hamel & Välikangas, 2003). This supports artistic exploration while bounding resource exposure.

5.8.2 Cross-cutting practice 2 — Iterative governance with stage-gates tuned for creativity

Combine iterative sprint cycles with a lightweight stage-gate system: gates focus on business-critical decision points (funding-release, distribution commitment) while allowing creative sprints to run with protected autonomy between gates (Cooper, 2019). This hybrid preserves creative momentum without sacrificing fiscal oversight.

5.8.3 Cross-cutting practice 3 — Technical hygiene and asset management

Standardise naming conventions, metadata, and file formats. Use centralised asset repositories and CI/CD pipelines where appropriate. Regularly run integration tests for asset compatibility and platform requirements.

5.8.4 Cross-cutting practice 4 — People-centred risk mitigation

Invest in onboarding, mentoring, and team rituals that surface stress and workload bottlenecks. Promote psychological safety so team members raise concerns early. When using freelancers, secure handover plans and mid-project knowledge capture.

5.8.5 Cross-cutting practice 5 — Contractual clarity and stakeholder alignment

Contracts should articulate scope boundaries, change-control mechanisms, IP ownership, payment milestones tied to deliverables, and governance structures. Include explicit review and sign-off criteria for each major deliverable.

5.8.6 Cross-cutting practice 6 — Monitoring and adaptive learning

Maintain a risk register with priority ratings and owners. Use retrospectives and post-mortems to capture lessons. Track leading indicators (e.g., number of unresolved technical defects, frequency of scope changes) to detect emerging risk trends.

5.9 Illustrative application: short scenario

Consider a mid-size studio producing an interactive AR experience for a museum. Key risks include technology (AR SDKs updating), team (artist turnover), budget (sponsor funding tied to schedule), and stakeholder misalignment (curatorial demands vs. UX goals). Applying the framework, the studio would:

- Run a technical spike immediately to test chosen SDKs and target devices (mitigates Theme 2).
- Produce a minimum viable experience (MVE) for stakeholder review within the first month to align expectations (mitigates Themes 1 & 6).
- Establish an IP/licensing register for 3D assets and audio (mitigates Theme 5).
- Protect two-week creative sprints with demo milestones; use a steering committee with curators to arbitrate changes at defined gates (mitigates Themes 1, 4, 6).
- Create an onboarding package and pair junior hires with senior staff; set up weekly knowledge-capture notes (mitigates Theme 3).

This application demonstrates that rigorous mitigation can be compatible with creative exploration.

6. Discussion

6.1 Integrating control and creativity

A recurring insight is that control and creativity need not be oppositional. Properly designed governance—lightweight, iterative, and focused on decision rights—can reduce existential threats (missed deadlines, legal exposure) without constraining the exploratory process that generates novel outputs (Denning, 2018; Amabile, 1996). The contingency lens suggests calibrating controls to project uncertainty: more emergent projects benefit from looser control with stronger feedback loops; more deterministic projects can adopt classical project controls.

6.2 The role of psychological safety and team practices

Creative risk is social as much as technical. Psychological safety and structured communication rituals emerge as central to early detection and mitigation of many risks—team members are better able to raise concerns about feasibility, scope, or technical integrations when trust is present (Edmondson, 1999; Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

6.3 Limitations of current practice and the need for empirical validation

While the synthesised practices are grounded in multiple case reports and established theories, there is a need for controlled empirical studies that test which combinations of practices most effectively

reduce specific risk types in various production contexts. Questions remain about measurement: how to quantify creative-value loss when risk-mitigation actions limit exploration.

6.4 Implications for practitioners and educators

Practitioners should adopt hybrid governance models, invest in technical hygiene, and cultivate team practices that surface risk early. Educators training media producers should include modules on risk literacy, version control, licensing, and stakeholder negotiation to better prepare graduates for real-world production constraints.

7. Conclusion

Multimedia production projects operate in dynamic, uncertain environments that blend creative uncertainty with technical and commercial complexity. This study synthesised qualitative evidence to characterise seven recurrent risk themes and proposed an integrated, creativity-sensitive risk-management framework. Key recommendations include early prototyping, hybrid iterative governance, robust asset and knowledge management, contractual clarity, and fostering psychological safety. Future research should empirically evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions across different multimedia domains and develop measurement approaches that capture both creative outcomes and risk reduction.

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