Perfecting an Art
An Essay On Vidding

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DISCLAIMER: *Everything I discuss herein is entirely of my own personal opinion. No names are mentioned, even for positive examples.   This is not a 'let's stroke our egos' or 'let's point fingers' essay. This is an essay about the vidding process, what I believe to be things that make bad videos, and ways to improve an artist's work.*

<u>Introduction</u>

I have always seen vidding as an art form. Just like art, we are making visual representations of something about our fandom. Whether that representation is a 'ship, a theme, or simply eye candy is no matter. All vidders strive to entertain others for the roughly three and a half minutes they have a viewer's attention. Just like art, however, there are those who can paint masterpieces, those who can sketch comics, and those who struggle making a stick figure. A few of us are born to be vidders and know what to do the first time we make a vid (but we don't talk to those people, you know). The rest of us are constantly working to improve our skills one vid at a time. If your first vid looks a lot like your twentieth vid, you're either one of those Mozarts of the vidding world or you have not been working to improve your craft. Drawing a stick figure one hundred times will still net you a stick figure. The only way to work up to an individual's full capacity to make art is to move on to drawing three dimensional images. In the United States we say that making art is an inborn talent and some have it, others don't. If that is the case, then how come so many adults in Japan have the ability to draw nicely? Because they are taught how to draw and work constantly over a long period of time to improve their skill.

I have been thinking about all of these things and I realized that many of us can't or are not trained to spot mistakes or inconsistencies. I have taught one person how to vid from the ground up and have slowly given them advice, criticism, and encouragement and they have greatly improved over the course of several vids. I have also helped one vidder get started and met someone who made very few mistakes their first time out. In return, I have learned a great deal about vidding. Because I had to find mistakes and understand what was going wrong to help them, I learned not only how to find mistakes in my own work, but how to express in words what they are exactly and ways to correct them.

In writing this essay about what I've learned, I decided to go all out and do research on vids. I went on YouTube, searched the keywords 'Harry Potter slash' and randomly watched videos. I have watched dozens of bad fanvids and my mind's eye is hurting. But I came up with ten mistakes I saw over and over again, a general idea of what one can do to get better, and some thoughts about vidding and fandom. In fact, I went overboard and researched my own work.

The following lists and thoughts are entirely opinionated and I am by no means an expert on video making or an expert on anything, really. I just see what I myself like and I see what makes people like some videos and not others.

Ten Common Mistakes in Vid Making

1.) **Talking head syndrome**. This is when you see the movie characters talk and have a conversation but we don't know what they are saying because of course it's a music video. Using clips of characters talking is fine, even encouraged when you construct your video. In fact, it's almost unavoidable. But watching a scene of Harry, Ron, and Hermione talking at the library for ten or more seconds is not desirable. This mistake goes along with mistake #8 further down. It is very distracting to watch the things because we have seen the movies and know what they are talking about, which distracts from the theme of your video. It's okay to have clips of characters talking, but don't overdo it.

2.) **Reallllyyyy slllooowww clllipppsss**. This is where you slow down a small segment of clip so much that it looks ridiculous. Beginners tend to do this because they more than anyone else have trouble finding clips for their vids and want to extend the small scene to fit several seconds because they don't know what else to put. Slowing down and speeding up clips is a very tender process. Slowing down a clip a little bit can make a seemingly uninteresting clip a smart clip choice. A little bit of advice: Try to NEVER have overly slow or overly fast clips in your vid. Even if the clip you put after it doesn't feel right, it's better because viewers would rather see a doesn't-fit-quite-right clip that goes with the music than watch Harry frown for ten seconds. It's psychological, I think, because when we hear the music we expect the clips to flow with it and not suddenly slow down.. Which brings me to my next topic:

3.) **It's a techno song, but it looks like a love ballad**. A fast song with slow moving clips, or a slow song with clips going way too fast. You want your vid to have momentum, to move the way your music does. The more experienced you get the more able you will be at timing your clips to correspond with the music. This is the reason that beginners should probably do slow or medium-paced songs for their first vid. This is also one of those problems that affects some vidders and not others. Some vidders are

naturally able to synch music and motion while others have to consciously work hard to keep their vid flowing. Every vidder has their strengths and weaknesses.

4.) **Flickers**. A term I use to describe the following phenomenon: When you create a movie (I'm talking movie maker here, I'm not sure if it's true on all video editing software) and watch it, you see a nanosecond flash of some other scene and the result looks like a flicker.   This happens when you cut a clip at a certain point and a piece of whatever frame came before it or after it is still attached to the clip you cut out. The movie files do not have certain stop and start points and that little .01 second of clip can look pretty ugly on your finished vid.   On my "Cup of Coffee" vid someone said that the flash of clown in there was spooky. Confused, I watched the vid and realized she was talking about an accidental flicker I had kept in the vid. It had Harry standing before the Bogart/Clown and the next clip was of the clown and it got mixed in with the shot of Harry I originally wanted. It's kind of liking knitting a pretty sweater and you see that one thread has unraveled. That one flub breaks the pattern.

5.) **Look maw, it's slapstick!** So you want to do a video that's quirky. So you take a funny scene like Draco waggling his eyebrows and repeat the clip five times to look like hectic eyebrows. This is what I call slapstick, manipulating scenes for humorous effects. Now, sometimes you can use slapstick to your advantage, like if you want a really funny vid and you have the infamous Harry playing with his wand scene and you do that five times to look like… going for the euphemism here, "polishing his wand". Now, some people will like that kind of stuff, others will not. But using slapstick in normal circumstances is a killjoy and will more often than not cause your viewers to moan (in pain, not pleasure). Use with extreme caution and always ask yourself "Can I be just as funny without manipulating a scene to do it?"

6.) **I think I've seen this before…** Clip repetition is no one's friend. The surefire way to get the viewer to think that you are not creative is to use the same clip twice in one vid. Double goes for using the same clips for the entire chorus each time it occurs. Now, this isn't the same as using the same scene or even the same event. It's perfectly all right to use the Buckbeak slashing scene several times… just don't use the same shot. Okay: Harry walking away from Draco, then later on in your vid Harry *fixing* to walk away from Draco. Not okay: The walking away scene four times during a vid, each time the artist sings "And then I walked away."

7.) **Literally?** Sometimes a vidder can be guilty of being too literal. What do I mean by this? For example: You've decided to vid the song "Up Where We Belong" and you decide it would be wonderful to have Harry ascend to meet Draco for the remembrall fight. Now, sometimes it can be clever to use a really literal scene. For this topic, all I can really give by way of advice is to think about what you're doing and decide if it's appropriate. Chances are that if you are doing "Up Where We Belong", you will not want to use that remembrall scene because your song is bordering on the cheesy side already and there is no need to make it even cheesier.

8.) **Am I watching the movie or a fanvid here?** Ever watch a fanvid and a single scene goes on for about half a verse or so? It always has me go, "Wow, that was a good clip for that one line… five minutes ago when the clip began." Dragging out a scene is very common. A viewer will get impatient quickly if one of these is in a vid and sometimes it can be a deal breaker.

9.) **There was a clearance on special effects.** So you have a shiny video editor and it has all kinds of effects/transitions/borders/doodads that you'd think would be SO cute in your fanvid! What to do? The answer: Try not to use them at all. Yes, those cookie cutter transitions on movie maker or the cool borders from Sony Vegas are tempting, but they will make your vid seem silly. In fact, your best bet is to be as simple as possible. It's great to use black and white to designate something that happened in the past. Not so great to use the color spectrum effect to have Snape's face change into several colors. He does that just fine dealing with Harry's stupidity, you know. Abusing special effects is common and can give your video a cheesy and overdone look to it. Flashing twenty times to indicate a really fast pop beat will **not** make your vid look hip. Instead it will hurt your viewer's eyes and make them stop watching to regain their sight again. These video makers come with all of these effects to sell their product, not because people actually need them. All a good vidder needs is the movie clips and a small bag of trusty transitions/effects that are simple and move your vid along.

10.) **The definition of ADHD-** *And I will always love you….***Oh look, an owl!** This is probably one of the most controversial things in this little list because it is entirely subjective. You're watching a vid and the song says one thing and you're feeling an emotion when a strange clip is inserted and you don't know how in the hell it fits. Example: Most of the vid is going pretty good until you a hear a lyric that says "The moon will protect us" and they put a clip of Harry bumbling as he asks Cho to the ball. Now, the vidder may well understand why it was put there, or they may just have put anything at all because they didn't know what else to put. I actually came upon this in a video summary during my research: *"The song and the plot of the fanvid have nothing common, I just love it!"* The song, students, has EVERYTHING to do with the fanvid, even if the song doesn't even contain WORDS. Song choice should be the most important aspect of vid making. Sometimes I search through dozens of songs and find not one to vid and other times a song comes on and like a bolt of lightening I get inspired for a vid. No matter how it happens, the song is integral to the vidding process. Never vid a song you hate for a request unless you owe the requester money.

A Few Bits of Advice

- **Find someone to beta your vid**. As an English major, I can tell you that the hardest

thing to do is to proofread your own paper. We often don't see our own mistakes, mostly because *we* know what we mean. Find someone to 'proofread' your work, preferably someone you never talked to or someone you trust to tell you the truth. You don't need a cheerleader who says "It was great!" and nothing else. On the flip side, don't use someone who will tell you every damn mistake you've made. The healthy way to critique is to tell them a couple of things you like about their vid and a couple of things that you didn't like. That way you don't break someone's spirit.

- **Make little 'tester' vids**. You've got a vid idea and you shy away thinking that it may be a little overzealous or for some other reason. You don't want to vid the whole thing because what if it is a stupid idea or something. So make a small vid, maybe 30 seconds to a minute in length, possibly using the part of the song that you feel is going to be the best part of the whole thing. Then find someone who will look at that small bit and tell you if they liked it or not. Then find someone else. Get a few opinions and then decide whether to do it or not. In fact, if the opinions are negative and you still think it's a great idea, do it anyway. Even if no one else likes it, you like it and maybe your next one can be the Next Great Vid.

- **Vid a song without words.** I think the turning point in my own personal vid making was when I made a vid out of an instrumental song for the Smallville fandom. Instead of focusing on the words and finding clips to go with the song, I was suddenly using my imagination and telling an easy story with a certain feeling to the thing. What's even better was I became conscious of the music itself and used the music's rises and falls to arrange my clips to fit the mood. Now when I make my vids, I no longer place clips according to when a voice cuts off or when singing starts. Instead, I sometimes don't even *look* at my computer: I close my eyes, tap the beat and by instinct quickly cut my clip according to what the music does. It's a great way to discovered skills you never knew you had and expose any patterns that you are guilty of. What's the best thing about it? There is almost zero possibility of making the ADHD mistake because the viewer has no words to attach the clip to. It's like abstract art, you can just throw yourself into it like an artist dipped in paint throwing themselves at canvases.

- **Sell it.** You worked hard (I hope) on your fanvid and you're damn proud of it. But due to poor presentation no one seems to watch the thing or comment on it. In my research I stumbled upon the most amazing vid and it had only three lonely comments. I began to wonder why and I saw that, for one, their tags were simply "Harry Potter videos" and I guessed that they may not have posted about the vid to a community, forum or website. Always make sure that the title of your vid is eye-catching because it may be the only thing casual browsers of vids may see. If you title your vids by the title of the song you used, shorten long titles up and if the title of the song is short or doesn't fit the vid you made, don't be afraid to make up a title. Vid summaries are the second most important thing. Long or short, summaries all need to have at least three things in common:

1. They accurately describe what you are presenting in your vid.
2. They are original and unique.
 3. They are grammatically accurate. No one will take "*pleaz watch my vid u guyz!!! XDXDXDXD*" as a serious summary.

- **Being popular doesn't mean that your fanvids are good.** Upon researching I viewed a few of the more popular vids and was surprised to see that they often made one, two, all ten of the above mistakes. On the reverse side, I viewed vids with little or no comments, originally intending to find some of the worst vids on earth there. I stumbled across a wonderful vid that made no mistakes and the whole vid had a wonderful mood and feel to it, like I was transported right into a H/D fanfic where there was a coming war. Most vids that were good fit into the semi-viewed range, about 500 or so views and a few comments. Like I said in the disclaimer, I'm not writing all of this to make people popular or to point fingers (mostly because when you point one finger, four others point right back at you). I'm writing this because I see what I like and I've had two other fandoms in which the best vidders make none of the ten mistakes. Just because everyone else does it doesn't mean that we as vidders should be lax about it.

- **I think I suck, I'm quitting.** Don't give up! NO ONE is going to get it right the first, second or even twelfth time. Heck, sometimes we don't even KNOW we make these mistakes or we know but we treat it lightly. After I did all the research, I did a little personal research and studied my own vids. What I found was humbling and it was quite scary that I wrote this little essay and I'm just as guilty as anyone. First vid: Seven flickers, a repeated clip and an ADHD clip. Second vid: an dragged on scene, ADHD clips, a repeated clip and lots of flickers. Even a vid I thought was good used cookie cutter transitions and had a couple of glitches. But I'm not quitting, because I know that each vid I do gets better and better because I catch mistakes before they happen and have others tell me if something is wrong. The best thing I ever did was tell myself, "You are not infallible, but you're not a hopeless loser. Keep trying, you're having fun and maybe one day you'll reach that Mona Lisa you've been trying for, maybe you'll just make a few people smile."

- **What else can I do to get better?** Like always, keep trying. Practice may not make perfect but it'll get you there faster than staying static. There are lots of tricks and tips for those who want to get better, but here are a few things that come off the top of my head:

Random Musings

Problems I see in the fandom in general

I've vidded for three fandoms now and two of them were television shows (Smallville and Supernatural). The biggest problem I see in the Harry Potter fandom is not lack of talent or creativity, but hackneyed ideas. Understand that there are only (at the moment) four movies out there and thousands of fanvids. Your job as a vidder is to make something unique and to use what little footage is available in which to do it. The Harry Potter fandom also doesn't respect vidders the way the other two fandoms I've vidded for do. Most likely because the main medium for their fandom is video and ours is book. I think this is a shame because there IS talent out there and people who do amazing things with the movies… they just get swallowed up by the sheer number of vids out there. It's very hard to become a well-known vidder in the Harry Potter fandom. In fact, I'd be hard-pressed right now to easily name five. But I could name a dozen well-known Harry Potter *authors*. We're in the minority, people, but we're not to be shoved in the closet.

The two different types of vidders

I've always had a private belief that there are two types of vidders: Those who want to tell a story and those who want to show emotions. Now these are broad categories and some people have qualities of both, but there are symptoms of each type. A vidder who wants to tell a story often picks songs with very direct lyrics and will often have big summaries of their videos. These are very interesting because it's like reading a fanfic and is quite enjoyable. Vidders who want to show emotions often pick songs with dubious meanings and will tend to have shorter summaries because there is not much to explain. It is more dangerous to be this type of vidder because not everyone will be able to experience the emotions you are trying to convey. Both types of vidders can make wonderful (and horrible) fanvids.

Conclusion

The most important thing to remember is to enjoy yourself. Often it is veteran vidders who struggle the most. They have done enough so they can't use the newbie card and they often struggle with making the next vid better than the last. You should always aim at improving, but don't be so caught up in making your vid perfect that you start to hate it. Vidding is supposed to be fun and interesting. When the joy is gone, a vidder is done for. If you can improve a little bit each time and still have that same drive you had when you first started, then you, my friend, are exactly where you need to be.