

# On getting things done



Writer-director Yulin Kuang discusses grappling with the desire to succeed, how to manage big projects, and being grateful for every opportunity

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As told to Kailey and Sam Spear, 3363 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Film](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Independence](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#).

**We're curious to hear about your journey as a writer and director. You started writing in fanfic and were very active in the YouTube community when it was a relatively new and exciting space for independent creators. We're wondering how you've found that experience has impacted your journey as a creator and where you find yourself today?**

Yeah, I think the points at which I was doing fanfic, and when I was doing YouTube, I didn't think about it as part of my journey, to be honest. I was like, "Eventually I'll get into traditional filmmaking and that'll be when I'm doing the thing that I'm here to do. These are just the things I'm doing to, I guess, stay in practice while I wait for that." It was also like chasing delight. I feel like that's what the fan-fiction was, right? It was me chasing delight.

But also I was taking it seriously because when I was 15, I made this deal with myself where I was like, "If I can get my fanfic on the Top 10 list of the end of year roundups for this one specific ship, then I will have a career for myself as a professional writer."

And I did and I do.

I think I needed that early boost. Now that I'm more established in my career, I look back on that time and I'm like, "Oh, that was absolutely when the clock started ticking." That was the early training that I needed to get to where I am now. I think from fanfic specifically, it taught me to really love characters. And that was how I fell into storytelling. It was, "What is a character that's appealing? What's a dynamic that's appealing? And what about that appeals to me specifically?"

When I work in adaptation, that is my way in. I look at, "What's the character that I'm gravitating the most towards? What is it about that character that I like so much? Is it someone I see a piece of myself reflected in?" And then, "What is my view of how this story should be told?" So the fanfic really correlates to adaptation.

It's been about a decade since my YouTube era and YouTube has changed so much. I mean, it was changing even as I was in it. I remember going to one of the early, maybe like the third or fourth VidCon ever, and it was still this kind of small convention thing.

And then by the time I was towards the end of my YouTube career-if we want to call it that-it was so corporate. UTA had a presence, Calvin Klein gave us all free clothes, there was a free iPad in the welcome basket. It was a very strange thing. What I remember feeling at that point in time was that if you were a YouTuber, and it didn't matter really which genre of YouTuber you were, whether you were a beauty guru or an adventure person, or a book YouTuber, whatever space you were in-if you had your own YouTube channel, you were kind of the CEO of your own media empire. It was up to you to decide "Where am I going to put my energy? Where am I going to put my

resources?"

And you had access to these incredible audience metrics. So I had a deep understanding of what my target demographic was, and it's always people like me, right? It's people who share my taste. But this was a kind of zeroing in.

I was lucky enough to be in the YouTube creator programs because I think the people at YouTube wanted, at that point in time, to encourage indie filmmakers. They noticed what I was doing on my channel, and brought me in. I remember them telling us things like, "It's okay for the audience retention to drop, that's going to happen. But what's good is to see if you can keep it sustained after that."

I think it helped me kind of look at storytelling in that sense of, "What is compelling to people?" Some people will decide early that it's not for them, but do you keep the people who stay after that point and are you pleasing them? I also realized early on that for people to care about the work in a field that's so crowded-and even then there were so many people with YouTube channels, so many people who had short films and things- why would they care about my thing? And, yes, I wanted to have good production values, I wanted to have tight, good, structure on my storytelling, but I've always also felt like I was more invested in the art if I knew something about the artist. I think that's the art I tend to gravitate towards, when there is a dose of the personal within it.

So that's why I started vlogging and showing the behind-the-scenes because I was like, "Hey, if you like this art, here's something about me. Maybe we have things in common." I was also trying to capture, I think, myself in the moment because I was like, "Well, what is it like trying to come up in indie film right now? In this moment?"

Now with a decade of remove, I look back and I'm like, "I think I captured something." It was like, "That's what it was to be an indie filmmaker in 2014."

**In what you've said, I get that you gave yourself a lot of time to play, but you've also been very strategic, even back in your fanfic days when you gave yourself the goal of getting into that Top 10. How do you find you balance creativity and strategy as a creator? And, like you said, "chasing delight"?**

I think I was chasing delight. Sometimes you hear about people who are like, "I wrote something and then I put it in a drawer and I didn't want anybody to read it." I am thinking of Emily Brontë specifically. She wrote all these poems and she never wanted anybody to read them. And her sister Charlotte found them and was like, "These are pretty good. We should publish them." Allegedly, Emily threw a fit. And that's not me [laughs]. I was more of the Charlotte.

I think of art as a message in a bottle that I'm sending out there. These are all the things that make me feel vulnerable and human and this is a secret I'm going to whisper into it. And I'm going to send it out into the sea, and hopefully somebody's going to come back and say, "Me too," waving from another island.

In order for me to hopefully find more like-minded souls, more kindred spirits, I had to widen the reach as much as I could. I think that's kind of how I thought about it. It was like, "Yeah, I want to write my fanfic, but also to get an audience, it has to be one of the Top 10. So what do I have to do to make it the best in its category?" I remember, at that point in time, it felt like I was squeezing. I was trying to squeeze all my talent into my fingertips and channel it into the document. And that's still kind of how it feels, honestly. It's like I'm squeezing all of my efforts and concentration.

I think because filmmaking is more of a team sport, there are other things at play, right? You can think about casting, you can think about... I hate the word "IP" [Intellectual Property], but that is part of adaptation, right? Breaking the fourth wall here, Spear Sisters, we have worked together on *Twilight* films, and that had a huge, massive audience. I didn't necessarily go after that because I was a *Twilight* fan. In fact, I felt like kind of a fraud. And I've told Stephenie Meyer all of this. I felt kind of like a fraud because I wasn't a huge *Twilight* fan, but I knew that it had a huge fandom.

I thought it was really interesting that Stephenie was supporting female filmmakers and giving us opportunities. I thought that was really cool of her, of Lionsgate, of the *Twilight* Saga. I knew I wanted to be a part of that, that hopefully it would give me a chance to play in a deeper end of the pool that I had never gotten to play in. It was kind of like, "Oh, this will be part of the official universe of something that has a huge, massive fandom." I knew as somebody who came from fandom that eventually I wanted to work in those spaces.

**Your career has spanned writing, directing, working in indie film, studio film, doing major book adaptations, writing your own novels... How do you decide which projects to focus on and when?**

I think I've been much less intentional in the past than it would maybe seem in the zoom out. I would say I was choosing what would pay me. That's how I was deciding what to focus on. But I think, at this point, I am being a lot more intentional about where I spend my time. I used to juggle a lot more. I think it came from a certain anxiety of having seen projects die in development, which is so sad. I used to not acknowledge my feelings about that—we're working with a therapist about that—but it is really sad to come up with these characters and these worlds and then take them however far down the development path they go. Sometimes you get quite far. You have to believe that it's going to happen, otherwise you can't give it your 100 percent. And then just to watch them die slow deaths over and over and over... God, it feels like murder!

**We also talk about that! About how painful it is to create whole worlds only to have them sit on the page, never move forward into the life they're supposed to have.**

**How do you feel you've managed to maneuver around the obstacles in the film industry and take control of getting your creative work out there?**

I think writing the book was a little bit born out of that frustration of having seen projects not come to fruition so many times. But I mean, I don't know... I'm still at this point where I feel like I can't give advice because I'm not through the other side of the mountain yet. I'm halfway through the tunnel, guys.

I think that's the best thing that you can ask for as an artist, is having that creative confidence. Because there've been times when I've had creative crises, and that's definitely not as fun.

**How do you work through those times?**

The creative crises? I think it depends on what form it is. If it's a block, then god, you've got to find a way to work through the fear. I think fear of mediocrity can push me into a place where I don't even make anything at all, and that's the piece that I have to work through. It's like, "Even if it's mediocre, it's still worth more than the perfect thing that exists nowhere but in your head."

It's a daily struggle when I'm in the throes of creation, which I currently am. So I'm like, "How am I dealing with it?" It's better on some days than others. In the past, I would probably use verbiage like, "I pushed through", but that doesn't feel like what it is this time around. It feels like... it's like every day I'm showing up and I am meeting the page and kind of training my brain to be like, "The only way out is through." So I guess it is, "You push through." But when I'm living through it, it feels like I am chipping away through a mountain with a single chisel. That's what it feels like right now.

**Have you found any little tricks to make that process more enjoyable?**

Right now, specifically right before we got onto the [call], I've been fiddling with a new process, because the last one wasn't working for me. So I have a notebook for every project. I've got a little sticker on the notebook because that makes it feel... I don't know, it's part of the process. I've selected a notebook, I've selected a sticker to put on top of it that represents something. And then, because currently I'm working on a novel, I stole this from [Sarah MacLean](#), one of my favorite historical romance novelists - she creates this grid where it's roughly... I think it's 90,000 words, and then every square [represents] a hundred words. So every time you do a hundred words, you draw in a square.



I remember when I first saw that, I was like, "Surely she means like 1000 words." And then I was like, "Oh, no, a hundred." And I think that has really helped me because a thousand words on some days feels impossible, but a hundred words, I'm like, "I could do a hundred words." And breaking it up into those little chunks helps.

In my notebook, I've been doing this thing where I'll start with writing about my mindset, like, "Where's my brain? Mentally, what am I thinking about?" It's kind of athletic motivation where I'm like, "You will do this, you can do this." It is affirmations. And then on the next page, I'll start writing in cursive the beginnings of the next interesting part that I want to write. And that'll kind of get the creative juices going a little bit more.

**You talked before about feeling like a fraud and we all know many creatives struggle with imposter syndrome. Is that something that you have dealt with?**

Imposter syndrome? Oh, constantly yes, absolutely. And I think the greatest advice I ever got about it- which is the same advice I put into my book, which was, "You reach a certain point where it's unseemly." And I think that triggered my people pleaser mentality where I was like, "Well, I don't want to be *unseemly*." But yeah, I've definitely struggled with that. And I think it's just a thing that you kind of have to be like, "Well, they let me in the room and this is what we wanted. So let's see what we're going to do with the opportunity."

**What do you find is your best thing to combat the burnout or to regain energy when you're going through a trickier time?:**

So, burnout is very real. Something I didn't experience to this extent until recently. Last year, I had a lot of

creative projects that I was juggling. I had a book coming out, and I think I was also trying to push myself and write the next book. I hit the end of that year just completely depleted. I think part of it had been, I wasn't giving myself time for my hobbies. And I was really hard on myself in terms of the self-talk in my head where it was just like, "If you just push for six weeks, you're going to be able to be done and then you can take a break." And it was not very good for me because I would reach the end of six weeks and I would still be pushing, but I hadn't clocked it.

That's part of why I [dyed my hair] blonde, because they told me, "You'll have to get a checkup every six to eight weeks." And I was like, "Oh, that'll be good for me to have a way to measure time in this way."

So, how am I combating the burnout? I think right now I'm trying really hard to be easier on myself in some ways where it's like, "Oh, okay, we got a hundred words in today. That's fine." I am struggling with it as I'm saying that out loud, because I think there are these very loud voices in my head where if I take a weekend off, I'm just yelling at myself being like, "You're so lazy." And I'm like, "No, because we tried it the other way and we didn't end the year with the book we wanted." So I think rest is necessary. Burnout is real.

You know what it is? At one point in time, I thought writer's block was fake, and you just had to push through—like the way I thought about mental blocks was, "Oh, so it's just in your head, it's not real." That's kind of how I was thinking about them. It feels like that scene in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* where they're like, ["You best start believing in ghost stories, Miss Turner... You're in one!"]—"You better start believing in writer's block... You're in one!"

#### **How has your definition of success evolved over time?**

Oh, my definition of success? I mean, I still have goals. I was talking to a friend about this at one point, and she was like, "You're so competitive." And I was like, "I don't think of it as being competitive. I think of it as having goals." There are certain things that I want [to achieve], but at the same time I'm like... How do I want to say this? Because I think defining success... There can be a very toxic route that you can go. I think I have experienced that journey before where it's like, "I am entirely defined by my work and my achievements, and I only have as much worth as those things."

I won't say that led to happiness because I've achieved some of those things and then, at the end of it, I'm like, "I'm still burnt out." It didn't fill whatever hole that it was supposed to fill.

So I think of [success] as a more balanced thing now. It's making time with my husband, time with my cats, and time for my hobbies that I find deeply fulfilling. I figure skate. I think at one point I was like, "What are the things that I want in my life?" At one point I wrote something like, "A beautiful garden." So there are all of these things that, to me, are happiness. A successful garden is one that's going to reap fruit, hopefully, and grows over time. I love Bonsai because it's a collaboration between nature and time and you.

But success is hard to talk about because I think there are still... I would be lying if I wasn't like, "Yeah, there're traditional markers of success that are goals for me." I think those are still things that I look at and I'm like, "Why not me?"

#### **Yulin Kuang recommends:**

**Sinners** by Ryan Coogler - I saw it three times in theaters and now it's available on streaming!

**This popovers recipe** - I've been making it all year!

**Swan Lake** (ballet) - I saw Swan Lake performed by the Boston Ballet as it was touring through LA and I think I was transported through a portal of time and experienced the sublime during Act II.

**Beachcombing** - I've never been a beach person but I took myself on a beach vacation for the first time as research for 'Beach Read' and in the Outer Banks, I discovered beachcombing (walking and searching the beach for shells and other objects) - what a joy, I have a whole box of scallops to sort through and figure out how to display.

**Crochet** - I've been thinking about getting into crochet, should I?? Not that I need a new hobby but I have this fantasy of being one of those women who crochets her own clothes every summer and now I want to go to the beach next summer in something I've crocheted.

Name

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Vocation

writer, director

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