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Figure 0.1. Original caption: “One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as ‘The Slender Man’. Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence.—1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986.” (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/slender-man>.)

Introduction

Fear Has No Face

Creepypasta as Digital Legendry

Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill

ON JUNE 10, 2009, THE PHOTO SHOWN HERE (on page 2), captioned as shown, hit the Internet. The user who posted the image, Victor Surge, uploaded a second photo as well. The images aren't scary or shocking as much as they are uncanny; it can take a moment to realize that there's something strange being depicted. The captions, referencing events and explanations that sound both alarming and plausible (the fire, the disappearance of the children, the missing photographer), add to the unsettling nature of the photos. Both images depict children in the foreground and a tall, slim figure in the background. The blurry creature appears to be male given its height and apparel, a plain black suit, although its features are largely indiscernible. In one photo (figure 0.1), there is a suggestion of tentacles emerging from its body—what the caption, in a perfect mimicry of official statements on disturbing events, attributes to film distortion. In the other photo (figure 0.2), the children are clearly upset and frightened, while the accompanying caption implies that they have fallen prey to the mysterious, faceless character lurking behind them. These two images were posted to the Something Awful web forum in response to a thread asking users to create a creepy paranormal image, inviting participants to craft something that could pass as believable and authentic. This was the birth of Slender Man.

Slender Man is, perhaps, the best example of an intentionally created legend that has hit all the right notes required to be believable, and while the character initially resided mostly in the corners of the Internet, he's been stepping into the limelight lately, with a growing notoriety that has intrigued folklorists and folk alike. The original photos posted under the alias Victor



Figure 0.2. Original caption: “We didn’t want to go, we didn’t want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time . . . —1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.” (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/slender-man>.)

Surge (real name Eric Knudsen) make excellent use of the legend genre’s predominant qualities of realism and plausibility—they are presented as largely unexplained, with missing details and fragmented origins. Had they been tidier, or more coherent, Slender Man may have been relegated to a small segment of Internet lore; as it is, Surge’s post captivated the imaginations of other users who embraced and ran with the new character, adding details and features through fan art, short stories, and multimedia.

Narrative and visual art of Slender Man were supplemented almost immediately by video-based additions to the burgeoning canon (or Slender Man Mythos, as it became known), with the YouTube found-footage series *Marble Hornets* appearing in 2009.¹ The series features a young man named Jay watching his missing friend Alex’s film school project and slowly realizing that Slender Man played a role in his friend’s disappearance. Jay posts clips of Alex’s films and begins making recordings himself to solve the mystery. Video games quickly became another major source of Slender Man exposure, with the popular game *Minecraft* incorporating a Slender-like figure known as Enderman, and several independent games emerging with a focus on Slender Man himself. The first game, a free, independently

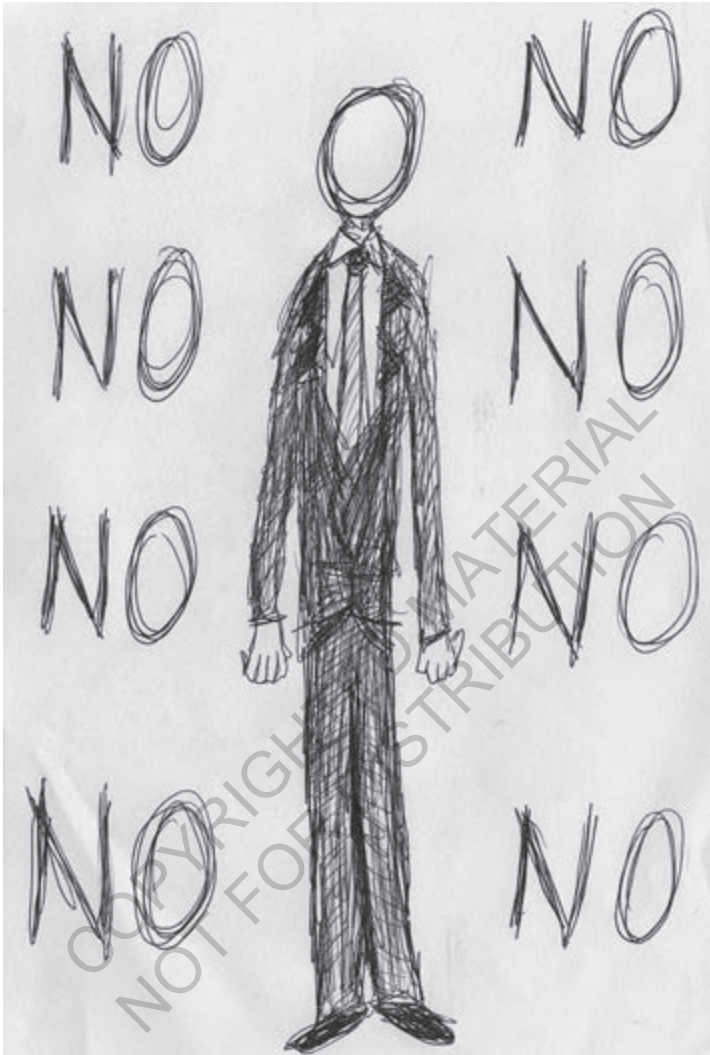


Figure 0.3. Pages from the *Slender* game show the style that has often been associated with Slender Man—scribbled writing and panicked tone.

developed first-person survival game called *Slender: The Eight Pages*, came out in 2012 and builds on some of the early established tropes of the character, such as his forest origins and disturbance of electrical devices (figure 0.3).² This game and its sequel, *Slender: The Arrival*, were and continue to be popular subjects for reaction and Let's Play videos, highlighting that the appeal goes beyond the experience of first-person play and extends into

a shared sense of mutual tension and release.³ More recently, indie game designer DVloper's *Slendrina* (2015) and *Granny* (2017) games have provided players with new elements to grow the Mythos; *Granny* is presented as Slender Man's mother-in-law, and *Slendrina* as his daughter.

The emic genre that is commonly referenced on the Internet for the Slender Man phenomenon and its many visual, narrative, and video-based manifestations is "creepypasta," a word that emerged on the Internet around 2007. Creepypasta is derived from the Internet slang *coppypasta*, which in turn derives from the phrase *copy/paste*, serving as shorthand for any block of text that is repeatedly copied and pasted to various online forums. In the process, the narrative texts often undergo modification, annotation, and/or reinterpretation by new posters in a folkloric process of repetition and variation. Creepypasta is, in short, creepy coppypasta. More specifically, it is an emergent genre of Internet folklore that involves the creation and dissemination of a particular style of creative horror stories and images. Targeted and circulated primarily to and by younger audiences, creepypasta draws on the disturbing, monstrous, strange, grotesque, and/or unknown while invoking the thematic and structural qualities of legendary narratives, including the use of personal narratives; ritual; ostension; familiar "real" settings, contexts, and ancillary characters;⁴ and an accompanying air of plausibility in an effort to elicit feelings of playful uneasiness, paranoia, and genuine fright among audiences. Emanating from the bowels of Internet forums, wikis, social media, and websites like 4chan and Reddit, the creepypasta genre has been sustained in large part by the repeated sharing or reposting/rewriting/reimagining of these stories, and further buoyed by subsequent discursive commentaries about the nuanced qualities of their contents or composition that have arisen in response to their circulation online. Slender Man is arguably the most well-known example of creepypasta in circulation, and the character's infamy was solidified by a tragedy that drew the digital bogeyman into the real world and into the national media spotlight.

Indeed, it wasn't until May 31, 2014, that the Slender Man stepped fully—and unfortunately—into a wider spotlight. On that day, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, twelve-year-olds Morgan Geysler and Anissa Weier lured their friend Payton Leutner into the woods, stabbed her nineteen times, and left her to die. Leutner managed to make her way out of the forest, where she was rescued by a passerby and taken to the hospital. When the two girls were asked why they had stabbed their friend, they claimed to have committed the crime for Slender Man, drawing inspiration from creepypasta.⁵ Overnight, Slender Man became the new leading man on the stage of contemporary legend characters, and "creepypasta" became a household term.

CLASSIFYING SLENDER MAN: LEGEND, MYTHOS, CREEPYPASTA

Many folklorists recognize that the online narratives about Slender Man fall into the broad category of legends: narratives told as true or possibly true, set in the real world and in historical time. The genre of legend is the form through which we rhetorically negotiate and examine questions of possibility and belief, and the digital setting of Slender Man's origins make the specific classification of contemporary legend especially apt. Classic definitions of contemporary legends often focus on the narrative form in addition to thematic content and methods of transmission that highlight the contemporary nature of the form: "A short traditional narrative, or digest of a narrative, that has no definitive text, formulaic openings and closings, or artistically developed form; alternatively described as modern, urban, or belief legends, folktales or myths . . . Frequently, they also are disseminated through the mass media, novels, and short stories or by email, fax, and photocopier and therefore have a wide international circulation" (Smith 1997, 493).

There has long been an understanding, however, that legends also exist in many nonnarrative forms. Legends may appear as visual images with limited or no text: photoshopped or recontextualized images that often circulate in the wake of current events, providing additional vernacular commentary on the situations at hand.

Legends are also often embodied through the process of ostension, the acting out of a legend (the term is derived from the Latin *ostendere*, to show, rather than to tell). Ostension is key to almost all contemporary legend complexes, but especially so in today's multimedia contexts of use and creation.⁶ Of the many narrative forms of folklore, supernatural and contemporary legends lend themselves best to ostension through their connection to present-day society and questions of possibility. Local legends can be investigated through "legend tripping," the process of visiting a legend site to explore and test the narratives. Contemporary legends can lead to action, such as boycotting or promoting a brand after hearing a story about the corporation's business practices. Other kinds of ostensive behaviors are examined in this volume—cosplay, pranking, and play—as well as "reverse, ostension" on the Internet, in which collective action leads to a narrative, rather than the other way around (Tolbert 2013).

While folklorists may call Slender Man legendary, there are other important emic terms in use by the people who create and share the content online. "Mythos" is a concept that is used widely to describe the entirety of a world (often fictional) that exists around a given figure or source. Fans, scholars,

and content creators work within the shared mythos of a given show, film, book or book series, game, or character to consume and develop that world further. A common example of this is the mythos of Cthulhu, a creature invented by American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft and expanded upon by numerous other writers, artists, game designers, and fans. The Cthulhu Mythos is larger than the creation of any one person, even Lovecraft himself as the originator of the idea. Fans and other writers have worked hard to develop the story and the worldview, and to bring aspects of Cthulhu to life, similar to the many versions of the *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft's fictional magical book, that have been written. The sense that a mythos has or takes on a life of its own helps to blur the line between official information and folkloric information about things like origins and precursors. The Slender Man Mythos incorporates all the creations that focus on him as a subject—the entire fictional, ever-growing world that he inhabits as well as the actual creative processes that have generated information about him. As Tim Evans points out later in this volume, the creation and acknowledgment of a mythos provides Slender Man a depth and significance that he might not otherwise achieve.

One popular addition to the Mythos has been the creation of historical precedents for Slender Man. Shortly after the original images appeared, stories of a German legendary figure known as *Der Großmann* (*Der Großmann* 2014) began to appear online, often appearing in the form of tidbits of information uncovered through research. An account supposedly translated from a 1702 source describes an alleged incident involving *Der Großmann*:

My child, my Lars . . . he is gone. Taken, from his bed. The only thing that we found was a scrap of black clothing. It feels like cotton, but it is softer . . . thicker.

Lars came into my bedroom yesterday, screaming at the top of his lungs that “The angel is outside!” I asked him what he was talking about, and he told me some nonsense fairy story about *Der Großmann*. He said he went into the groves by our village and found one of my cows dead, hanging from a tree. I thought nothing of it at first . . . But now, he is gone. We must find Lars, and my family must leave before we are killed. I am sorry, my son . . . I should have listened. May God forgive me. (*Der Großmann* 2014)⁷

Images purporting to be woodcuts from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries combine with these reports to greatly confuse readers and researchers alike (figure 0.4).



Figure 0.4. A doctored version of a mid-1500s original that featured a normal skeleton. (<http://www.slendermanfiles.org/home/16th-century-german-woodcuts>.)

Of course, not all examples of the Slender Man Mythos tie into historical posturing. In some cases, Slender Man is said to have been a victim of bullying (Kitta 2019) or a member of a family. One surprising element of the Slender Man Mythos is that he sometimes has a daughter, Skinny Sally—a young girl whom he is typically depicted as treating quite gently and paternally, although she is at times shown with multiple shallow wounds.

Images and stories about Slender and Sally are often taken as decidedly fictional, in contrast to other creations, like historically grounded narratives and photoshopped images, that aim for a confusing depiction of reality.

The focus on fiction here highlights one of the most intriguing aspects of Slender Man's existence as a legendary figure—legends, by definition, deal largely with belief and possibility, but the idea of a crowdsourced mythos speaks to a distinct awareness of fabrication. Slender Man is a new kind of creation: one intentionally created as a fiction, but one that has emulated the look and feel of legend so well that its emic categorization is understandably multivalent.⁸ This folk appropriation of Slender Man in creepypasta embodies what Michael Dylan Foster calls the folkloresque: “popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore,” asserting that it “refers to creative, often commercial products or texts . . . that give the impression to the consumer . . . that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions” (Foster 2016, 5; see also Tolbert, chapter 4). Expounding further, Foster notes:

A common aspect of a folkloresque item of popular culture is that it is imbued with a sense of “authenticity” . . . derived from association with “real” folklore. This capacity to connect an item to an established body of tradition has the effect of validating the work in which it appears, increasing its appeal to popular audiences. Because the folkloresque is often part of mass-mediated popular culture, in many cases it leads to greater exposure to a wider audience for local and culture-specific traditions; in some cases this inspires a feedback loop in which the folkloresque version of the item is (re)incorporated into the folk cultural milieu that it references. (Foster 2016, 5)

This feedback loop is often at the heart of vernacular discourse surrounding Slender Man and creepypasta in general. The nature of the information created about Slender Man is such that it denies its own creation—it is often as easy to find evidence for Slender Man's historical presence in antiquity as it is to find proof that he was created from whole cloth in 2009. Concepts such as “truth” and “proof” have become surprisingly permeable these days, and it is perhaps no surprise that concepts like fiction and reality can be reconciled fairly easily.⁹ The mediated environment of the Internet allows even fictional worlds to serve as shared spaces of creation and interaction (see McNeill 2015). Add to that the notion of the “Tulpa Effect,” the idea that collective thought can create reality, and it starts to seem inconsequential that Slender Man's fictional origins are so firmly verifiable.¹⁰ It is also important to note that there are many legitimate precedents in folk and

popular culture for Slender-like characters: the Pied Piper, Men in Black, the Silence (Dr. Who), the Observers (Fringe), the Gentlemen (Buffy the Vampire Slayer), the Blair Witch, and Jack Skellington (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*), to name a few.¹¹ Clearly, this is salient imagery for fear and horror.

Slender Man isn't the only character that represents a blend of online genres, though he is currently the most prominent. There are a number of types of creepypasta in circulation, some visual and some narrative, and some that take on unique forms, like the epistolary presentation of Kris Straub's Candle Cove, which first appeared online in 2009. Candle Cove is a short, fictional forum discussion, appearing to take place over an expanse of time (indicated by such realistic phrases as "Sorry to resurrect this old thread . . ."), apparently conducted among a group of several different people (none of whom know each other). They talk about a television show they all recall watching and being frightened by during the early 1970s:

SKYSHALE033

SUBJECT: RE: CANDLE COVE LOCAL KID'S SHOW?

Thank you Jaren!!! Memories flooded back when you mentioned the Laughingstock and channel 58. I remember the bow of the ship was a wooden smiling face, with the lower jaw submerged. It looked like it was swallowing the sea and it had that awful Ed Wynn voice and laugh. I especially remember how jarring it was when they switched from the wooden/plastic model, to the foam puppet version of the head that talked.

MIKE_PAINTER65

SUBJECT: RE: CANDLE COVE LOCAL KID'S SHOW?

ha ha i remember now too. ;) do you remember this part skyshale: "You have . . . to go . . . INSIDE."

SKYSHALE033

SUBJECT: RE: CANDLE COVE LOCAL KID'S SHOW?

Ugh mike, I got a chill reading that. Yes I remember. That's what the ship always told Percy when there was a spooky place he had to go in, like a cave or a dark room where the treasure was. And the camera would push in on Laughingstock's face with each pause. YOU HAVE . . . TO GO . . . INSIDE. With his two eyes askew and that flopping foam jaw and the fishing line that opened and closed it. Ugh. It just looked so cheap and awful.

You guys remember the villain? He had a face that was just a handlebar mustache above really tall, narrow teeth.

KEVIN-HART

SUBJECT: RE: CANDLE COVE LOCAL KID'S SHOW?

i honestly, honestly thought the villain was pirate percy. i was about 5 when this show was on. nightmare fuel.

The last post in the discussion thread reveals that the show was never real, that the kids were watching static the whole time. The implications are wonderfully chilling: a show that only children can see, with content that seems to push the nonsensical nature of children's programming to a terrifying level. Candle Cove succeeds for many of the same reasons that Slender Man does; a compelling yet incomplete picture has been created, one that *feels* plausible to readers and viewers. While there have been some evolutions of the original Candle Cove story on both the folk and popular levels (a few sample episodes created for YouTube, and a 2015 show on the SyFy channel), Candle Cove has not had the cultural impact that Slender Man has.

It is clear that not all creepypastas are equal. Much like any familiar offline legend, creepypasta is subject to the communal (re)shaping that all folk forms undergo. Just as some legends rise to the top and spread like wildfire, so too do some creepypastas. There's a clear sense of traditional competence that has developed in the creepypasta creator and fan communities over time; the emic term *crappypasta* highlights that not all pastas are going to be equally appealing or successful. As YouTuber HoodoHoodlumsRevenge describes them, crappypastas are creepypastas that are so horrible that they've become "adorable."¹² One (in)famously bad example, known colloquially as "Man Door Hand Hook Car Door," is based on the classic contemporary legend "The Hook." While this text sees a decent amount of circulation, it's entirely because it fails as a creepypasta:

Anonymous 06/19/12 (Tue) 00:38 No. 10311088

man & girl go out to drive under moonlight. they stop at on at a side of road.

he turn to his girl and say:

"baby, I love you very much"

"what is it honey?"

"our car is broken down. I think the engine is broken. ill walk and get some more fuel."

"ok, ill stay here and look after our stereo. there have been news report of steres being stolen"

“good idea. keep the doors locked no matter what. I love you sweaty”
 so the guy left to get full for the car. after two hours the girl say “where
 is my baby, he was supposed to be back by now.” then the girl here a
 scratching sound and voice say “LET ME IN”
 the girl doesn’t do it and then after a while she goes to sleep. the next
 morning she wakes up and finds her boyfriend still not there. She gets out
 to check and man door hand hook car door¹³

“The Hook” is now so familiar a legend that it rarely has the opportunity to circulate as potentially plausible the way that Slender Man now does.¹⁴ The epically bad delivery of a familiar text only serves to reinforce the failure of this as a successful “scary story” in the context of the Internet. Parodies of other classic legends have been portrayed similarly, as in the crappypasta known as “who was phone?”:

So ur with ur honey and yur making out wen the phone rings. U anser it n
 the voice is “wut r u doing wit my daughter?” U tell ur girl n she say “my
 dad is ded.” THEN WHO WAS PHONE?¹⁵

While this story does appear on Creepypasta.com, the first comment seems to set the tone for its reception from the community: *facepalm*. The popularity of “top ten”-type lists of crappypastas indicates that we enjoy watching the unsuccessful outcomes of the creepypasta process as much as the successful ones. There’s also an educational quality in these examples—lots of comments on early creepypasta attempts are encouraging, offering advice and suggestions for how to make the story better.

The message from the creepypasta community seems to be that the quality of frightening content must be stepped up on the Internet. Of course, new (and newly frightening) legends are still circulating offline, but the creative ability to mimic reality finds new outlets through technology, and often a good story succeeds best when accompanied by good pictures, videos, and discursive elements. Of course, there are parodies of Slender Man, too. Their existence is perhaps one of the best pieces of evidence that people have been truly frightened by the original. As Russell Frank explains in his examination of parody photoshops of Tourist Guy that surfaced in the wake of 9/11, the joke photos were speaking to the horror of the original image’s sentiment: “As horrific as it was, we had come through other horrific events. We would come through this one as well” (2011, 81).¹⁶ Thus, we can see the threat of Slender Man being mitigated in various ways online, as when a timely post noting the similarities between a blank-faced mannequin and Slender Man led to the latter’s acquisition of a brother,

Trenderman, and then an entire extended family, including Splendorman and Offenderman (figure 0.5).¹⁷

While the offline world has had to cope with the very real crime committed in Waukesha, the online world has appropriated Slender Man, and his mythos, into something not always so threatening.

SLENDY'S SUCCESS

While Slender Man is not the only creepypasta character that has inspired ostensive behavior, both benign and violent, he is definitely the most prominent. Perhaps motivated by the Wisconsin stabbing, other crimes involving young people, ranging from similar interpersonal violence to self-harm, have been attributed to the Slender Man, heightening his perceived influence beyond the realms of fiction and legend. Shortly after the Wisconsin stabbing, a thirteen-year-old in Ohio who was later discovered to have been deeply interested in Slender Man stabbed her mother. In September 2014, a fourteen-year-old girl in Port Richey, Florida, set fire to her family's house using bleach- and rum-soaked linens. Investigators reported that the teenager was "fixated" on Slender Man, presenting it as obvious that there was a connection (Moran 2014).

While the connection to Slender Man in the Florida and Ohio cases was drawn by investigators and the girl's mother respectively, it's not always external supposition that ties the character to troubled youths, many of whom, like the girls involved in the Wisconsin stabbing, report their own sightings of or beliefs in him. Instances of interpersonal violence are certainly frightening, but perhaps more worrisome is the connection of Slender Man to a rash of suicides among young people on a Lakota reservation in South Dakota. In May 2015, the *New York Times* reported that in the previous six months there had been nine suicides and over 100 suicide attempts made by youths living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As reporter Julie Bosman (2015) explains, "Several officials with knowledge of the cases said that at least one of the youths who committed suicide was influenced by Slender Man, a tall, faceless creature who appears in storytelling websites, often as a figure who stalks and kills victims." Prior to Slender Man's creation, there was a local belief in a "suicide spirit," variously known as the Tall Man, the Big Man, or Walking Sam, who would visit people and encourage them to kill themselves.¹⁸ The youth of Pine Ridge, often living with extreme poverty, difficult family situations, and a lack of mental health resources, have made an understandable, if unfortunate, connection between these precursors and the predominant frightening figure of their own time (Bosman 2015).

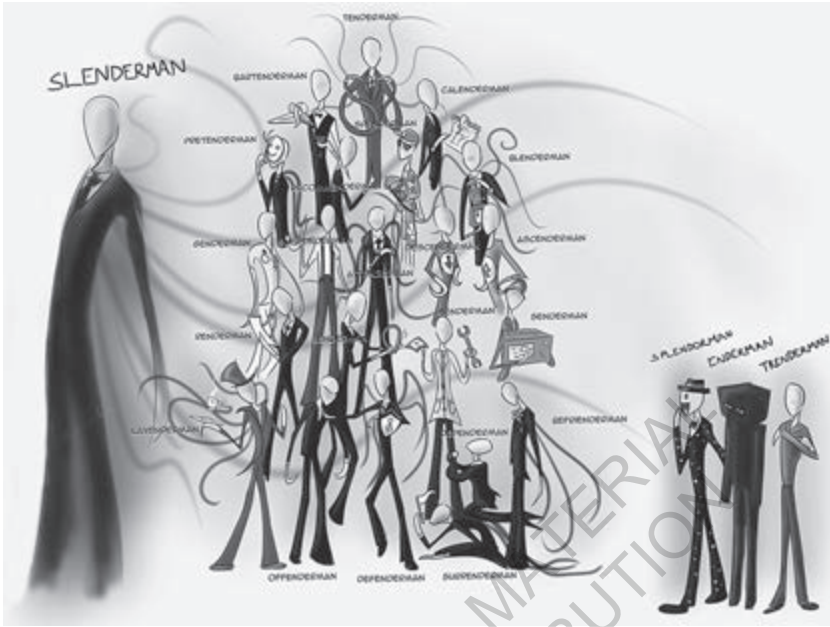


Figure 0.5. A depiction of Slender Man’s family. (<https://arvata.deviantart.com/art/The-Slender-Family-321174302>.)

What is it about Slender Man that makes him such a successful meme, both online and off? Folklore has no shortage of frightening figures: what leads this one to such prominence? As John Widdowson has noted, “The figures which symbolize or embody man’s fears seem to be present in every culture. They differ in name, form and concept from one cultural group to another, but they share a remarkable number of characteristics” (1971, 102). Widdowson divides frightening figures into three general categories: supernatural or invented creatures, human beings with “unusual characteristics,” and animals or objects. Slender Man seems to straddle the first and second categories. He is not a known member of the community, but his appearance is one that seems familiar, like a typical businessman in his dress and general form; add in the blank face and suggestion of tentacles instead of arms, and he moves firmly into the category of supernatural creatures.¹⁹ It is perhaps this categorical impermanence that explains the psychological success of Slender Man as a frightening figure—he both fits and breaks the mold, allowing users to adapt and contort the Mythos to suit their own expressive purposes.

Slender Man, for all the terror he provokes, is quite plain in appearance. Although he typically has no face, his human-like characteristics are

highlighted by his clothing—a distinguished-looking plain black suit and tie. Though stories and images often place him within the woods or wilderness (often the German Black Forest, a nod to traditional folktales), his urbane, bureaucratic mien highlights his uncanniness and distinguishes him from other humanoid monsters of the wilderness like the animalistic Bigfoot or shaggy wild men.²⁰ Slender Man's calm and tidy appearance provides a counterpoint to the menace that he projects. In many ways, Slender Man's external appearance features markers that contemporary society would suggest are evidence of someone trustworthy and capable: corporate, genteel, composed. And yet the uncanny elements—his lack of distinguishable features, his arms that are too long or too many—eat away at those comforting indices, reminding us that faceless, emotionless corporate powers rarely have our best interests at heart, and are lying in wait to grasp us in their many tentacles. The fact that Slender Man is often believed to target children and adolescents provides a strong commentary on the contradictory ways that young people are forced to perceive adults and institutions today—as caring, capable, and authoritative, but also as a faceless, unified power, manipulative and dangerous. The Slender Man is certainly a frightening figure for our times.

READING IS BELIEVING: THE ROLE OF FOLKLORISTS IN THE DISCOURSE

The digital tradition surrounding the Slender Man is enough to engage any inquisitive legend scholar, but Slender Man has slipped the confines of the digital context, emerging also as a figure of oral legendry and belief, despite his easily determined fictional origins. Any Internet user who stumbled for the first time across a report of Slender Man would, for several years after the character's initial creation, likely have found as much evidence that Slender Man was a long-standing legendary creature as evidence against it. Several of the chapters in this volume explore the complicated relationship that has grown between online fiction and offline belief.

Considering how folklore proliferates in the fibers of everyday life as a vibrant component of vernacular expression, it is unsurprising to find that a diverse body of people are at least familiar with Slender Man, and often with the legend's accompanying Mythos as well. By virtue of prolonged exposure in mass media and popular culture, general intrigue, the allure of the taboo or sinister, and/or the subtle influence of cultural osmosis, Slender Man has slithered into the peripheries of public discourse while becoming vividly embedded in the mindscapes of creepypasta enthusiasts

as well as of media scholars and folklorists. To be sure, the Slender Man phenomenon is greatly indicative of folklore in the digital age, where media convergence and hybridized cultural communication outlets afford individuals greater access to (and dissemination of) information, operational autonomy, and the provision of infinite choice while exploring a vast array of creative avenues, providing a platform to forge communal bonds interchangeably between online and face-to-face communication and blurring the boundaries between corporeality/virtuality as well as between folk, mass, and popular culture (Blank 2013, 2015, 2016; Howard 2008; McNeill 2009; see also Foster and Tolbert 2016).

Though the blogosphere has produced abundant insightful commentary, scholarship on the Slender Man phenomenon hasn't been immense, and what has been done has come from the fields of new media and communications. One of the more prolific early scholars to address Slender Man, media scholar Shira Chess, describes the phenomenon as an open-source horror story:

This genre is necessarily fictive, involving an unnatural threat to the 'fixed laws of nature' (Sipios 2010, p. 6). While maintaining these genre expectations, in constructing the Slender Man, the Something Awful forums both pulled in older media representations of horror to understand this new space (citing films such as *Phantasm* as well as the works of H. P. Lovecraft), while simultaneously debugging and reforming how to create the most horrific and terrifying monster they could collectively conceive (often, in the process, scaring themselves with their own fiction n.d.). (Chess 2011, 375).

Chess's reference to users "scaring themselves" highlights the role that folkloristics can play here: while Chess is assuming that Slender Man is tied to narrative or literary genres, the character has moved also into the realm of *belief*, and should be considered within that framework as well as the narrative or literary. Several folklorists have published on the Slender Man phenomenon, and it is clear that folklore studies should spearhead academic work in this area, an effort this book hopes to support.²¹ The hybridity of the digital context sets folklorists in a prime position to explore the nuances of the Slender Man's emergence and function in contemporary society.

This volume has been several years in the making, beginning with the presentation of select panels and papers at the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society from 2012 to 2015 that spanned the overlapping topics of creepypasta, belief, legend, children's folklore, and the evolving

dynamics of computer-mediated communication. As greater folk awareness of the Slender Man phenomenon began to take shape, particularly within the realm of popular culture and youth-oriented Internet discourse (and especially after the stabbing incident in Wisconsin), it became increasingly clear that folkloristic perspectives could bring valuable insights into the emergent cultural response.²² Accordingly, folklorist John Bodner organized and chaired a number of community events that culminated in a special panel with invited folklore scholars Trevor J. Blank, Jeffrey A. Tolbert, and Andrea Kitta, along with two enthusiastic undergraduate students, who presented “Slender Man Is Coming! Internet Legend, Hoax, and Attempted Murder” on March 23, 2015, at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Grenfell Campus, in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, to a lively and numerous audience.²³ In the wake of the presentation and valuable audience feedback that followed, Bodner and the visiting folklorists, along with Lynne S. McNeill (via Skype), began to hash out the necessary components of a specialized folkloristic volume on the subject of Slender Man and creepypasta. These discussions, enlarged by the growing body of metafolklore, cultural intrigue, and mass-media attention, ultimately brought forth a special issue of the journal *Contemporary Legend* (2015; Series 3, volume 5), which was the original iteration of this work.

The opening chapter of this volume, “‘The Sort of Story That Has You Covering Your Mirrors’: The Case of Slender Man,” is a reprint of one of the earliest scholarly articles to address Slender Man from a folklorist’s perspective (Tolbert 2013). In the essay, Jeffrey A. Tolbert importantly proposes the idea of “reverse ostension” to describe the process by which a narrative is formed through collective action. In the second chapter, “The Cowl of Cthulhu: Ostensive Practice in the Digital Age,” Andrew Peck extends the concept of ostensive action into the more expansive idea of ostensive practice, a model better suited to the collaborative potential of the digital setting, where individual actions aggregate into a communally understood body of practice. Through a conscious awareness of ostension (though not by that term), Internet users who seek to engage the Slender Man Mythos for themselves learn through rapid online consensus what kind of activities are considered correct or successful within the community. Peck emphasizes that most instances of Slender Man ostension are “fundamentally playful” in nature, in contrast to the depictions in the popular press.

Following Peck, Andrea Kitta’s “‘What Happens When the Pictures Are No Longer Photoshops?’ Slender Man, Belief, and the Unacknowledged Common Experience,” explores the reasons Slender Man is so often

reported to “feel real,” despite his widely acknowledged fictional roots. Kitta parses the distinct concepts of experience and “an experience,” arguing that Slender Man provides an articulable, more tangible way to express what would otherwise be a more abstract, generalized experience.

Jeffrey A. Tolbert’s second contribution, “‘Dark and Wicked Things’: Slender Man, the Folkloresque, and the Implications of Belief,” takes on the question of belief in the Slender Man, looking at precursors to this phenomenon in which fiction and reality were similarly muddled. Citing precedents from the 1938 radio drama *War of the Worlds* to the 1999 found-footage horror film *The Blair Witch Project*, Tolbert uses the concept of the “folkloresque” to talk about the thinning barrier between fiction and reality.

Mikel J. Koven’s chapter, “The Emperor’s New Lore; or, Who Believes in the Big Bad Slender Man?” continues the theme of belief but takes an opposing stance. Koven argues that Slender Man and the narratives about him cannot rightly be classified as contemporary legends, due mainly to the lack of actual belief at their core. They are, he agrees, appropriate for folklorists’ study anyway, even if the real fear isn’t of the creature himself, but of the susceptibility of our children. Timothy H. Evans, in his “Slender Man, H. P. Lovecraft, and the Dynamics of Horror Cultures,” similarly questions the generic placement of the Slender Man Mythos, suggesting that a hybrid of folk and popular culture, specifically “horror culture,” is best. He uses the figure of Cthulhu—Lovecraft’s popular invention that similarly broke the boundaries of fiction—as a comparison.

Next, Elizabeth Tucker’s “Slender Man Is Coming to Get Your Little Brother or Sister: Teenagers’ Pranks Posted on YouTube” considers the Slender Man phenomenon through the lens of children’s folklore scholarship, looking at teenagers’ prank videos as a type of subversive play. Play frames are common in children’s folklore, and Tucker provides a comforting message that most children are quite capable of distinguishing the difference between play and reality. In the final chapter, “Monstrous Media and Media Monsters: From Cottingley to Waukesha,” Paul Manning picks up the ongoing theme of ostension, seeing it as a sort of semiotic indexicality, a kind of sign that relies on the contiguity of photography. By emerging within the media of verisimilitude, Slender Man has become a perfect media monster.

It is imperative that folklorists embrace the influence of film, television, social media, and other forms of digital technology that continue to challenge and expand our long-standing notions of the field. We see this volume (and the special issue that preceded it) as the first coordinated offering

of a concentrated folkloristic response to the Slender Man phenomenon. As such, we welcome dialogue among readers and colleagues alike, and we call upon folklorists to tune their attention toward the murky confines of Internet forums, whispered discussions in hallways, discussions of belief and reality in and outside the classroom (and beyond), and to lend a voice to the unfolding conversation. After all, we wouldn't want to become some faceless character standing ominously at the edge of a cacophonous void. That job appears to have been taken already.

NOTES

1. "Found-footage" films are fictional works that typically purport to be authentic, recovered recordings that were previously "lost" or destroyed. They often involve supernatural phenomena and are usually shot in a documentary or "home movie" style. See Tolbert, chapter 4, for additional perspectives on found-footage films and folklore.

2. The game was originally titled simply *Slender*, but was renamed with the subtitle after version 0.9.7 came out to distinguish it from the sequel. In the game, the player is dropped in a dark forest with a narrow flashlight beam and instructed to collect eight pages. Players search through a foggy landscape, moving past and through mazelike trees and buildings, and tension builds via the soundtrack and the occasional static-laden glimpse of Slender Man himself. If the player takes too long to find the pages, or looks at Slender Man too long, the game ends. Slender Man is often depicted in videos as causing static on screen; thus, static becomes a warning sign of Slender Man's proximity in the video game. See http://the.slenderman.wikia.com/wiki/Original_Mythos for an overview of how the Slender Man canon evolved, including a comparison of early and later characteristics popularly associated with the character.

3. Let's Play is a genre of online video in which a gamer plays for an audience. Viewers see the screen as the gamer plays and talks over the experience, sharing their discoveries, observations, and challenges as they go. For a folkloristic application, see Buccitelli 2012.

4. Included within this grouping is the highly intertextual subgenre of creepypasta known emically as the "lost episode" format, which typically employs intricate stories that detail the mysterious or accidental discovery of shocking unreleased, unseen, or underground episodes of either fictional (user-created) or real, *actual* popular television programs in which major franchise characters are brutally harmed, killed, or both. Popular examples include Squidward from *SpongeBob SquarePants* ("Squidward's Suicide"), Bart Simpson from *The Simpsons* ("Dead Simpsons"), Willy Wonka, and even Mickey Mouse ("suicidemouse.avi"; the title's use of ".avi"—audio video interleave—itself alludes to emic knowledge of video file extensions and multimedia preservation, which serves to enhance its look of authenticity). In addition to describing the process of finding these clips within the narrative arc of the stories—many such descriptions taking readers down the proverbial rabbit hole en route to their expected foreboding conclusions—these stories are often, but not always, accompanied by user-created video or image stills for enhanced veracity, much like other forms of creepypasta. While not part of the "lost episode" format, similar motifs appear in other forms of creepypasta, including tales about encountering bizarre glitches or strange occurrences within certain video games, often suggesting or directly calling attention to supernatural forces. For an excellent example,

see “Majora’s Mask Creepypasta (BEN DROWNED)” at <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/majoras-mask-creepypasta-ben-drowned>.

5. This is not the only killing attempted in the name of a creepypasta character. In November 2015 a twelve-year-old girl from Indiana killed her stepmother, claiming that Laughing Jack, a demonic clown who replaces children’s organs with candy, told her to.

6. See Bird 1994; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983; Ellis 1989; and Lindahl 2005.

7. Note that the example includes explicit language pointing to the purported antiquity of the Der Großmann legend. The demarcation of “1702” and its unverifiability due to age help to heighten the subsequent story’s backdrop.

8. We might say that this “feel” carries the “odor of folklore,” as described by Foster (2016, 11).

9. As Elliott Oring reminds us, “Participants in legend communication must *entertain* the truth of the account” (Oring 1990, 163).

10. For an elaboration of the Tulpa Effect concept, see http://theslenderman.wikia.com/wiki/The_Tulpa_Effect.

11. In the documentary *Beware the Slenderman* (2017), literary critic Jack Zipes makes the case that Slender Man greatly incorporates some of the traditional motifs found in the Pied Piper tale, namely, the disappearance of children and ambiguity over whether or not the central character—in this case, Slender Man—is benevolent or truly evil.

12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwzXeqCvY0I>.

13. All spelling and grammatical errors in the example are in the original.

14. See Brunvand 2003; Dégh 1968; and Ellis 1994 for additional perspectives on “The Hook” legend.

15. <http://www.creepypasta.com/the-original-who-was-phone/>.

16. Tourist Guy is an Internet meme that circulated shortly after the events of September 11, 2001. It is a photoshopped image that depicts a young man standing on the observation deck of one of the Twin Towers, with a plane in the background, about to hit the building. The image originally circulated along with a story that it came from an undeveloped film canister found in the rubble.

17. Gothcraft, the creator of a different, but visually similar, image of Slender Man’s parodies, commented, “I love the idea that even a scary monster like Slenderman has irritating family members.”

18. Before Slender Man, this creature was often connected in appearance and behavior to Bigfoot. See <http://cryptomundo.com/cryptozoo-news/walking-sam/> and http://creepypasta-land.wikia.com/wiki/Walking_Sam.

19. It should be noted, however, that later iterations of Slender Man moved away from describing the character with tentacles.

20. Peter Narváez discusses the liminality of natural spaces in his consideration of fairy lore in Newfoundland. As he explains, “Specific folkloric mechanisms” have “established proxemics boundaries which demarcated geographical areas of purity, liminality, and danger” (Narváez 1991, 337). He goes on to note that spatial liminality distinguishes between “known space (purity) and unknown space (danger) where one might experience the benign or the malignant” (338). Slender Man’s presence in the woods, given his cultivated dress, highlights his malign and dangerous presence.

21. For previous work, see Peck 2015 and Tolbert 2013 as well as Tim Evans’s (2014) editorial in the *New York Times*.

22. This was made especially clear in the emergence of pseudo-folklore scholarship that misappropriated folkloristic terminology, methodologies, and scholastic identity.

23. See Curlew 2017 for a thoughtful expanded essay stemming from one of the undergraduate presentations. An archived video of the entire panel presentation can be found online at <http://research.library.mun.ca/8417>.

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