

Alone, Together

Convergence Culture and the Slender Man Phenomenon

by
Robert Travis Morton

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	Jessica Maddox Assistant Professor
Supervisor	John Savarese Associate Professor
Internal Member	Ken Hirschkop Professor
Internal-external Member	Jennifer Whitson Associate Professor
Other Member(s)	Andrew McMurry Professor

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This project engages in a close examination of the Slender Man phenomenon, an online practice in which a community of pseudonymous enthusiasts share scary stories featuring a faceless, long-limbed, humanoid monster in a black business suit. The stories take various forms, including text-based narrative, amateur video, doctored images, and games. They are presented with an affectation of folklore, and treat the accounts as true testimonies of encounters they (or others they know) have allegedly had with Slender Man. This is a self-conscious effort on the part of its creators to manifest Slender Man as a "real-life legend." Resulting from this effort, several individuals have carried out acts of real-world violence in the name of Slender Man, or with some connection to him. In response to these acts, and the ensuing moral panic, members of the community defensively stated that it was the responsibility of their readers to be able to know the difference between "fantasy and reality." Yet, as this dissertation demonstrates, the Slender Man phenomenon itself is predicated on using digital media to blur this distinction.

Through readings of Slender Man in various media forms, this dissertation shows how it blends horror aesthetics with the online cultures of "trolling"—in which individuals intentionally misrepresent themselves in order to mislead and antagonize others, allegedly "for the lulz"—that is, for the laughs, pranking or joking. Trolling has however produced many serious consequences, from individuals targeted for harassment to bad-faith political movements that disrupt existing institutional functions more broadly. In its origins, trolling began as apocryphal storytelling designed to mislead others into believing they were true and expose the ignorance of "newbies." Notably, the sites in which this occurred evolved to become the fora from which the similarly apocryphal stories in the Slender Man text community originate, such as 4Chan. These same pseudonymous fora have acted as safe havens for bad actors that have gone on to become notorious for their promotion of real-world violence, from Erik Minassian's violence in the name of the "incel" community to Elliot Rodger's misogynistic manifesto posed to 4Chan.

In short, this dissertation argues that Slender Man texts act as a "canary in a coal mine," and that the mechanics of online horror communities lay bare the underlying strategies of trolling or "post-truth" internet culture more broadly. I undertake a close aesthetic and ideological examination of Slender Man in image, text, video and game, to offer a portrait of the community that shares them. The stories offer a glimpse into the anxieties, tensions, and alienation experienced in life online as a result of hypermediacy, premediacy, and anonymity. While much has been written regarding the potential for collaboration online and the possibilities for grassroots organization and community-building, the positive ends this "convergence culture" offers are offset to some extent by the kinds of anxieties emerging from a disaffected and alienated community. Ultimately, this project offers an account of the evolving relationship between interactive fiction, trolling, and political disaffection, a media ecology that is becoming ever more urgent to understand in twenty-first century society.

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Dedication

To my two little boys, Sandy and Mars. I hope to leave the world a little better for you than when I found it.

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Introduction

Online Legends

On May 30th, 2014, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, two twelve-year old girls, Anissa Weier and Morgan Geysler invited their friend Payton Leutner to sleep over at Geysler's house. The following day, May 31st, Weier and Geysler led Leutner into the nearby Nicolet National Forest for a game of hide and seek. They then produced a six-inch kitchen knife they had taken from Geysler's kitchen at home and assaulted Leutner, stabbing her nineteen times and leaving her in the forest to die. They were apprehended by police seated near Interstate 94 over four hours later. Upon their arrest and subsequent confession, they claimed to have attempted to kill Leutner in order to "appease the Slender Man" (Fantz).

The Slender Man is a moniker given to an Internet legend: a boogeyman that appears as a tall, thin, faceless man with white featureless skin, disproportionately long-limbed, and dressed in a black business suit. Occasionally, he appears with indistinct black tendrils or tentacles emerging from behind him. His actions and motivations are markedly inscrutable, and he appears without warning, most often in liminal spaces between urban and natural landscapes such as in civic parks, national forests bordering towns and cities, isolated housing developments, or abandoned buildings. He is shown to stalk his victims, though what he does when he captures them is rarely if ever canonically depicted. Often his victims are not seen again, sometimes they disappear or are found dead, and sometimes his victims escape with no memory of what had occurred. Other times, they reappear as the Slender Man's servants (or "proxies") that serve to aid Slender Man in tormenting his victims. These victims are most often young, middle-

class, American, and white, and are predominantly male. His stories are told in medial fragments, as evocatively captioned images crafted to appear indistinct or historicized, or as video clips of hand-held camera footage featuring only glimpses of him and tell-tale electronic distortion in the video that he purportedly exerts. Since his arrival in 2009, he has been featured in two computer games, several long-running series on *YouTube*, and a Hollywood feature film. References to him have appeared in several productions, including TV shows and in video games such as Mojang's extremely popular game *Minecraft*. He fell out of popularity in 2018 following the Hollywood film's theatrical release that same year. The story from Waukesha is certainly a sensationalized account of the power of this strange figure, and the cause of no small measure of moral panic. It was also to some extent singular, in that it was complicated by Geysers's latent schizophrenia. Whether or not Slender Man is capable of inciting violence directly, the events in Waukesha are illustrative of what is at stake in the interplay of fantasy and reality that exploring the Slender Man online text community appears to entail. It appears likely, however, that users engaging with this paradigm are expressing anxieties that are, for many, contributing to violent ends.

There are innumerable enthusiasts online producing thousands of stories—most often taking the form of posts to social media fora that prioritize pseudonymity, such as *Reddit*—as well as home videos, manipulated images, original artwork, and many other forms which, taken together, correspond to a loosely-organized body of texts or what is sometimes called a “Mythos.” The Mythos is widely discussed by scholars researching Slender Man as resulting from the overlap of shared cultural inventories of many different contributors, in this case their inventories of horror tropes, themes, and characters.

In his essay on the subject, Timothy J. Evans draws on Sylvia Grider's definition of a "media narraform," in which media is supplying the content for modes of text production and circulation (a form) particular to oral tradition. This is an inversion that an archetypal Mythos exhibits of a more common model in which medial forms organize content derived from oral tradition, such as in horror films (Evans). The Mythos' texts share many common features, and are determined by the Slender Man text community to be either canonical or non-canonical depending on the level of respect to certain key features those stories possess.

This dissertation offers a study of Slender Man as a distributed media practice. A key feature of Slender Man is that, unlike many other fan cultures that make canon determinations with respect to certain key producers, such as a television show's creator or its various writers, Slender Man is considered decentralized. The canon's boundaries are loosely defined, as it has been apparently derived from several unaffiliated sources, many of whom have not or did not for some time make their true identities known to the public. Most significantly, in all cases of Slender Man text production, the stories are not presented as fictive, but rather as legend—told as if true, or presented within an allegedly true context, though without substantiation. Creators in the Slender Man community consider these stories to be similar to campfire tales, in which stories are presented as truth, but tacitly assumed to be taken by the audience as a whole to be fiction. According to folklorists, however, legends do not possess this tacit assumption of fictitiousness. However apocryphal, legends are taken explicitly by both audience and narrator to have actually taken place in history and to possess relevance in and to reality (Koven, "The Emperor's New Lore; Or, Who Believes in the Big Bad Slender Man?"). As

this dissertation will show, this quality of fiction masquerading as fact imbues Slender Man with a particular tension—for both audience and narrator—based on the text's unstable connection to truth. That tension brings together Slender Man's textual form, the media situation in which the texts are produced, and its ideological underpinnings in connection with internet "trolling" culture.

Whitney Phillips, in her work *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, offers a comprehensive exploration of what internet trolling and trolling culture is. At the simplest behavioural level, she states that trolls seek to "disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioural tools are available," and that this kind of activity is a "nasty and outrageous business," making use of "expletives, sexual and scatological references, and accounts of shocking or otherwise threatening behaviours" (2-3). She draws on Lewis Hyde's work on trickster figures as a point of comparison for trolling, in which tricksters are "boundary-crosser [...] both culture-hero and culture-villain. He--and trickster is almost always gendered male--invents lies to preserve the truth. He is amoral, driven by appetite, and shameless; he's held captive by desire and is wildly self-indulgent. He is drawn to dirt, both figurative and literal. He fears nothing and no one. He is creative, playful, and mischievous. Trickster also has the uncanny ability to "see into the heart of things," making him somewhat prophetic. But not prophetic in the traditional sense, as trickster spends very little time actively reflecting on his own behaviour and almost never editorializes" (9). Phillips is quick to differentiate, however, adding that "however crude or amoral trickster might appear, the trickster tale genre presumes moral order, making trickster a pawn in a very specific cultural ethos.

Trolls on the other hand actively embrace amorality, and are, or at least profess to be, pawns in the service of nothing but their own amusement" (10). In spite of this caveat, in order to understand the political affordances of trolling behaviour and what we might discern of the impact these affordances may have on the Slender Man text community, the capacity of the trickster to "reveal" in this way should be understood as foundational to trolling activity. Certainly online trolls can be shown to possess an anarchic sensibility that belies trolling's capacity as an instructive tool, but only under a set of preexisting social conditions and architecture against which the kind of rupture they seek to create must transgress. Phillips orders her central argument with this same assertion, stating that "trolls' behaviours provide an implicit, and sometimes outright explicit, critique of existing media and cultural [systems,]" and that these behaviours are "widely condemned as being bad, obscene, and wildly transgressive, therefore allow one to reconstruct what the dominant culture regards as good, appropriate, and normal" (7). Trolling, in other words, exists and operates already within the tension I will establish and explore between what is real (vis-a-vis what is 'normal') and what is fantasy (by way of what is transgressive). I would like to state as clearly as possible at the outset, however, *that Slender Man texts are not explicitly trolling in this sense*. They engage with similar tensions, emerge from similar sites, and users to some degree involved with trolling activity are implicated in Slender Man's creation and emergence. The instances of storytelling themselves, however, are best understood as nothing more than acts of creative play. My argument is that through close reading and understanding of these and texts like them, we can better understand the genealogical relationship these stories have with this particular sector of users and online activity, as well as what kinds of pressures we

can map that might have some influence on both this kind of storytelling, as well as trolling activity.

This tension between fact and fantasy in Slender Man stories, I argue, is exacerbated by its broadly online circulation and its status as a collaboratively developed Mythos. Participants eager to create a Mythos for the Slender Man take inspiration from the Cthulhu Mythos of H. P. Lovecraft, whose works maintained a similar sense of fabrication. Evans draws a significant parallel between the two Mythoi, claiming that Lovecraft “manufactured authenticity in his stories by creating ‘fictitious legends,’” and was aware that he was creating folklore. In an early act of ‘medial narraformation,’ he created false scholarly articles, fictitious towns, and an imaginary mythology of gods and monsters with which his stories interacted. Evans also notes, however, that Lovecraft considered his Mythos to be a game, claiming that it was “a kind of playful interaction with his writer friends [...] in which they shared references to extraterrestrial gods, degenerate cultists, books of occult lore, decayed New England towns, [etc.]” (Evans 133). He goes on to describe how these internal references were also “in-jokes within Lovecraft’s social group and among informed readers.” Evans describes the effect of Lovecraft’s Mythos on that of the Slender Man through their parallel interest in the unknowability of their monsters. Using Lovecraft’s signature vocabulary, Evans draws on his opening passage to “The Call of Cthulhu” to argue that his work is constantly implying that were we to fully perceive the monsters, “if we were able to understand the connections between the detailed, realistic fabric of his narratives, the unnerving alterity of his language, and the hybridity of his monsters, it would destroy our sense of reality and

therefore our sanity.” Evans links this capacity with the way in which Slender Man is collaboratively and nebulously produced and imagined, to the extent that he exists online in a realm connected with the material world but separate from it in a similar way that Lovecraft’s bestiary is. In this way it corresponds with what Trevor J. Blank calls “the cognitive hybridization of reality [...] the dissolution of the need or ability to separate the material from the virtual,” such that the narrator has either “become insane or accepted a new way of thinking that enables him or her to perceive new and different [realities,]” (Evans 135). Evans also argues that Lovecraft’s Mythos incorporates racially coded language so that it exhibits “themes of racial menace, [...] commonly through themes of miscegenation and racial and cultural corruption presented through metaphors of extra-terrestrial menace and material and mental decay.” Evans’ observations are key to grasping how a Mythos can serve as a code, to the extent that it situates readers and enthusiasts on a spectrum between the uninitiated and those that are fluent in the coded language of the internal mythology, racial coding included.

This creation of an adept in-group will be one of the key ideological aspects of Slender Man on which this dissertation will focus. For Slender Man as for Lovecraft, audiences are framed either as the unwary masses and the enlightened few. In the case of the Cthulhu Mythos, this does not necessarily mean that these insiders are participants in the underlying allegorical racial menace as well, but as these themes are predicated on segregation by qualified classes of individuals, the Mythos’ paradigm that distin-

guishes those classes—either “in on the joke,” or not—invites a segregationist perspective.¹ The fabular Mythos of Slender Man does the same as in the Cthulhu Mythos, creating an “in-group” of users fluent in the allusions and symbols particular to it, and separates them from those users that are not. In this way, creators identifying themselves as a part of this in-group create the means by which they might imagine themselves as superior to others, having undertaken a “cleansing of the doors of perception, [...achieving] an ability to perceive the universe (and humanity) in new ways” (Evans 135). This in-group practice of reading is in keeping with strategies of textual interpretation, and in fact is reflected in how a critic like Blank differentiates between Slender Man’s fantasy and reality. Blank argues that:

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. [...]

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. (Blank and McNeill, *Fear has No Face* 10)

¹ Not to be confused with African American segregation, as the classes in this case are undefined.

This view is premised upon believing that because Slender Man texts aspire so convincingly to being read as genuine folklore that it should be treated as such by scholars. Cloaked in the vague language of reconciliation, Blank encourages what appears to be a commonplace practice in the text community; that their work can be dismissed as fiction on one hand, but mistaken for fact on the other, achieving a badge of honour for lifelike verisimilitude. In striving for this result, authors cross the line from fiction into outright falsehood. Evans' argument is that Lovecraft's use of extraterrestrial menace and fixation with material and mental decay—which the Slender Man Mythos directly echoes—is part of a complex (and often openly regressive) set of allusions to what Lovecraft considered to be the social issues of his day. In this case, Blank equates the photoshopped and historicized images of Slender Man with proof of his 'presence in antiquity', and this demonstrates Evans' argument. It hints at an occult capacity Blank (or any user) might possess in order to discern reality from a range of indistinguishably fantastical texts, and this is reflected in his use of opaque terms like "understandably" and "surprisingly permeable" to denote imprecise feeling states rather than deterministic evidence. Given that he and McNeill are aware of Slender Man's fabricated nature, this is a willing suspension of disbelief through the same rhetorical mechanisms by which Mythos participants both admonish the uninitiated for their inability to differentiate at the same time that they actively confuse them. The Slender Man stories possess similar ideological affordances affecting insiders as readily as it possesses the capacity to distort reality for outsiders that unwittingly stumble upon it. Among its most compelling effects of this paradigm of class division within the Mythos is the expansiveness with

which adepts can apply its internal mythology to the broader world. Because it is presented as a new reality known to an exclusive class of media producers, it makes possible a reactionary commentary on the world as it normally appears; it positions Mythos insiders in opposition to outsiders that are portrayed as ignorant, often characterized as part of the cultural mainstream. Blank notwithstanding, critical study of this Mythos involves an awareness of the implicit indoctrination into a privileged class of readers undertaken by creators and enthusiasts. This produces a framework of alterity in which Mythos participants are positioned against the mainstream, and it is in light of this class distinction that we must consider any aspirations the Slender Man has to universalized and historicized folklore. I argue that this implicit distinction, regularly invoked in Slender Man texts, obviates the Mythos' ability to reflect contemporary social issues universally, as they imagine folklore to be capable of doing. Like Lovecraft's writers' circle, Slender Man enthusiasts' internal mythology reflects a corresponding internal ideology, and one of the central aims of this project is to identify and characterize the specific and localized (or "ecotypified") body of users for whom the Mythos' allusions and commentary are resonant. In the remainder of this introduction I will characterize these users based on the web sites from which Slender Man emerges as creative spaces mediated by social structures and social histories. I will also consider the medial relations inherent to the Internet in which these structures and histories have evolved, as well as how those medial relations have informed an atmosphere of anxiety, alienation, and mistrust within these particular spaces. I will also gesture to how these users risk conflating this atmosphere with society as a whole, and how it has informed both their creative production, such as Slender Man, as well as their alarming socio-political apparatuses.

Slender Man and His Users

At its core, then, this dissertation is a study of Slender Man as a media practice and how users manipulate that media practice. Against the scholarly tendency to align Slender Man with the universality of folklore, I argue that the Slender Man text community is an identifiable and ecotypified group of users. It is an interest group which gathers in several loosely affiliated locations on the Internet, particularly on sites which privilege the anonymity of its users, specifically sites such as *Reddit*, *4chan* (and its derivatives), *SomethingAwful*, and a network of historical Usenet groups and IRC channels which are most readily associated with computer gaming. This group is informally organized, and most closely resembles a body of users united by what scholar Henry Jenkins calls medial “convergence” (Jenkins, 2). Distinct from a traditional definition of medial convergence as a technological phenomenon where new technology assimilates the functions of multiple devices to accomplish different tasks at once, Jenkins’ definition refers specifically to the shifting online social paradigm in which consumers are encouraged to actively seek connections between dispersed media content. This is often enabled by technological convergence, but often results in interest groups emerging organically from the shared experience of seeking similar connections in content. Slender Man’s distinct point of origin is Eric Knudson, AKA Victor Surge (an online handle), who shared two images of the Slender Man alongside evocatively cryptic captions as an informal contest entry on the website *SomethingAwful*. The contest was to compete to produce the most fearsome paranormal images contestants were able in the vein of (to their credit, I would argue) collaboration rather than competition, and users became swiftly enthralled by the Slender Man, and continued to create Slender Man content on

multiple online platforms, gaining particular traction on *4chan*'s “/x/” paranormal board, and in multiple *Reddit* groups, in particular the group “/nosleep,” devoted to creepy-pasta.² The degree to which the Slender Man text community is ascertainably connected to the prevailing political and ideological climate these sites have exhibited (particularly those of recent years) is difficult to discern.³ However, through the texts' language, the arrangement of symbolic imagery, their influences, allusions, and the modes and methods by which they are circulated and collaborated upon, it can be observed that the text community considers Slender Man to have taken on a sort of reality.

In the discourse, Slender Man has been called a form of “tulpa,” a creature that, as many online communities believe, emerges from Tibetan folklore. The tulpa is particularly appealing for this user, as it can act as a symbol of mythologized relativism in which they might reorganize reality itself according to their prejudices, as the tulpa is an entity actively imagined into existence, and therefore offers these users the possibility of control. This is, once again, a historicized fantasy in which the medial has preceded the oral mode. As author Nick Redfern in his book *The Slenderman Mysteries* describes it, “the phenomenon of the *Tulpa* has its origins in the ancient teachings of Buddhism,” suggesting through evocative words like “ancient” an enduring practice with a storied tradition (Redfern 32). Humans imagining beings into existence is in fact a Theosophical

² Creepypasta” is a name derived from the common computer operating system functions “copy” and “paste,” in which stories could be circulated online by copying and pasting unverified stories to different fora or bulletin board systems. The portmanteau “coppypasta” was used to broadly identify such stories, with “creepypasta” being a common derivation for those circulated stories with a particularly frightening affect.

³ Text community” is a term used to denote invested Mythos participants, i.e. they are to some degree “initiated.” While the term is often used holistically in this project, it is meant to describe an orthodoxy to which users conform to varying and necessarily imprecise degrees, as with all instances of groups organized through medial convergence. When referring to the text community in this way, it is used to denote a prevailing attitude, perspective, vernacular, etc. that appears to conform by degrees to users' relative level of observable investment and/or involvement in the Mythos.

inversion of the traditional concept by which the Buddha or other celestial beings emanated other entities into existence. As scholar Natasha L. Mikles argues in hers and Joseph P. Laycock's essay "Tracking the *Tulpa*: Exploring the "Tibetan" Origins of a Contemporary Paranormal Idea":

[One] claim was that Slender Man originated in Knudsen's imagination but that the attention and belief of thousands of Internet users had given it a literal, supernatural existence. Proponents of this theory invariably invoked Tibetan tradition, claiming that in Tibet imagined entities can become real and even turn on their creators. Within Western paranormal discourse, such beings are known as *tulpas*, and some claimed that numerous sightings of Slender Man proved that *tulpas* are a real phenomenon. Although the *tulpa* is associated with Tibetan Buddhism, philological and archival evidence suggests that the encounter between Tibetan Buddhism and Theosophy—involving both Western Orientalists and their Asian informants and translators—shifted the meaning of certain Buddhist terms and concepts. As a result, concepts of "emanations" found in Mahāyāna Buddhism came to resemble Theosophical metaphysics as well as Western tropes of creations run amok found in such stories as the golem legend and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). (Mikles and Laycock 88)

This notion, which would propose a fundamental mutability of reality itself speaks to their sense of the universalized qualities of the Slender Man legend. The text community imagines Slender Man as a reckoning that the unwary mainstream now faces for what the text community sees as its intellectual and institutional hubris. This is why Slender Man's victims are so often preyed upon for their efforts to investigate and verify his existence, particularly by modern means such as through *YouTube* videography. The reality, however, is far different. Individual members of the text community may or may not imagine Slender Man to be a genuine supernatural presence. If they do, he serves as an instrument of justice. If they do not, he serves as an act of "trolling," or an in-joke at the expense of the mainstream that are taking him seriously. In either case, the Slender Man becomes a mythologized symbol of this community's power over the unwary mainstream, and an affirmation of superior status.

It is the central aim of this project to show that the Slender Man mythos is not folklore promising occult revelation as the text community and scholars alike appear to take it to be, and hence that it is misleading to focus on the supposedly deeper, universal human qualities its would express as folklore. It is instead, on my argument, a collective fantasy shared by members of this text community, and it reflects distinctive psychological and ideological tensions resulting from the stressful material conditions of online social life I refer to using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's term, *hypermediation*. By their definition, the term denotes a plurality of media modes experienced simultaneously to enable a sense of *immediacy*, or of closing the distance between the subject and object by rendering the media as transparent as possible, such as through the

privileging of live streaming content over video-on-demand on sites like *YouTube*. Hypermediacy, they argue, is the antecedent to immediacy, in that it is a medial form that presents various objects (or perspectives and concepts relating to the *same* object) simultaneously, and thus allowing for “random access” by the reader or user, meaning they have multiple sites of engagement and disengagement with the medial object, and thus precluding a linear progression. They draw on examples such as magazine layouts which feature panels, captions, editorial comments arranged simultaneously on a two-page spread and which allow the reader to pick and choose what to read and in what order, thus diminishing the role of the media in organizing the information for the reader. Similarly, they argue that a hypermediate mode is inherent to “windows” or “panes” commonly used in computer operating systems, or tabs in Internet browsers. At the same time, they refer to hypermediacy and immediacy as contradictory logics. A complex interface may enable random access from amongst dozens of functions a computer may be undertaking at once, or links that a web site might offer, but however transparent, the limitations of the interface are what ultimately govern the actions of the user. This produces a complex illusion in which users are less and less aware of the interface’s limitations to the point that mediated reality becomes indistinguishable from unmediated reality, and thus enabling and encouraging them to anticipate a similar governing interface for reality itself, however invisible. This is the media situation that Slender Man captures, and for which it provides a mythology.⁴

⁴ This part of the project speaks to its title, borrowed from Sherry Turkle’s work of the same name, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, in which she explores the effects of the internet and mass media on broader society, specifically the indeterminate nature of communication with AI or “chatbots.” I felt that this paralleled the tensions of fantasy and reality this project explores, but also gestures to the anxieties proceeding from this kind of socialization, and which I argue inform much of the activity I explore in the pages that follow.

To this end, I would like to add a secondary condition to Bolter and Grusin's definition of hypermediacy in which users experience reality in an *excessively mediated way*—a condition which is stressful and alienating, and which primes users to anticipate medial frameworks at work in reality itself. Much like the inversion in modes and content that Evans (via Grider) demonstrate, these users experience a warping of reality to fit medial narratives. To use a brief illustration, this is why stories in the Slender Man Mythos will frequently privilege the literary past tense, but slip into present tense as a gesture to authenticity via immediacy. User stillakilla's story "The Abandoned Elementary School 'Scarecrow'" directly addresses the reader, "It was facing toward me and where the head would be, I could see a blank, lighter-coloured space. Think of Slenderman," striving to anticipate users' interpretation as though it were a discussion occurring immediately and intimately. It is also why the line, "It's a small building, maybe the length of a football field and two stories [sic] high. Emulates the size of our small town perfectly," suggests a similar premediacy, as well as gesturing to a history in video gaming communities.⁵ Stillakilla uses the term "emulates" to say that the size of the building *mirrors* the size of the town, whereas the term more accurately describes a technical capacity to *simulate* something. This term is not commonly used in mainstream parlance, and was popularized within gaming subcultures online by "emulator" programs, designed to simulate gaming consoles such as the Nintendo Entertainment System or Sega Genesis, allowing for users to share and play games from those systems on their home computers, often through video game piracy. This story can be found through Reddit's "/no-

⁵ See Bolter and Grusin

sleep” forum, and is hypermediated both to the extent that it is in a random access database and imagines itself within just such a context, using quotation marks in the title and bold and italic typeface to mimic speech rather than storytelling so as to entice readers to engage with it, but it is also hypermediated to the extent that it is excessively mediated. It is pseudonymous, and the tense slippage and use of gaming terms denote a language trending toward modification for an abstract Reddit audience, comprised of a great deal of users and content connected with gaming and piracy (as a common form of anti-capitalist dissent and alterity among the broader gaming populace). This, I argue, is a result of a persistent sense of alienation which, in anticipating readers’ responses, indicates some degree of anxiety.⁶

This project will rely on this expanded definition of hypermediation, which explains the practices of the Slender Man community but might also speak to a wider array of online users invested in cults, conspiracy theories, alternative science and medicine, magic, and occult knowledge.⁷ The effects of this hypermediacy underpin not just the Slender Man Mythos or the text community alone, but render them by-products of a broader, decentralized (i.e. convergent,) online socio-political movement whose aims are indistinct, yet consistently appear both anti-authoritarian and reactionary. The decentralization this movement exhibits and the broadly anonymous and distinctively obfuscatory way in which they coordinate and interact online makes it difficult to ascertain

⁶ A proportionately smaller quantity of such indicators could cast sufficient doubt that they are not simply the product of bad writing. The number, degree, and situation of such indicators are probative examples of a demonstrable conflict in the text’s authorial voice between storytelling and localized public speech.

⁷ While Bolter and Grusin leverage this theory in *Remediation* to argue how content producers can use this state of engagement to effectively “get ahead” of events and messaging in order to “remediate” events to suit producers’ agendas, Grusin expands on their theory in his work *Premediation* to describe users’ sense of an anticipated mediacy to explore how events users experience through medial means are now preceded by an interpretation of those events supplied by that medial mode itself. By my expanded definition, I argue that users are conditioned to anticipate not just a supplied interpretation, but mediation itself, to the point that they process events occurring in reality in mediated terms.

a clear sense of scale, demographics, and organization, but their existence is verifiable by the common ideological affordances of the texts around which they organize, including the observable wave of Slender Man popularity and text production from 2009 to 2012. The broader pool of organizing texts vary considerably as to length, content, and form, but they emerge from the same loosely-affiliated metatextual environments, such as *4chan* and *SomethingAwful*. Their work demonstrates consistent ideological attitudes, namely disaffection, detached irony, and relativism. They emerge from the same psychological tensions—isolation and disembodiment, particularly online. These factors, and the history of the relatively narrow sector of the Internet from which these texts emerge, all suggest a consistent demographic makeup of broadly affluent reactionary young white men. These are not exhaustive criteria mainly due to the same challenges of scale outlined above, and are only broadly consistent for the same reasons, with internal disputes mediated by users with more established credibility (within their paradigms of authority) and most often in a manner consistent with the above criteria. This project will use the multiform Slender Man mythos to demonstrate each of these criteria and present them as ways to categorically organize the texts produced by this movement. In this respect, Slender Man stories act as a public text corresponding to this movement's values and aims, which in turn reflects the most troubling aspect of their intertextual relationship—criminal acts, often violent, perpetrated in the name of those values and aims. It is this intertextual relationship that allows the stabbing in Waukesha to resonate with the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand in March of 2019 in which the perpetrator's live-stream of the shooting to Facebook included shouting the Youtube-related phrase "subscribe to PewDiePie," and the 2014 murders in Isla Vista,

California, USA in which mass-murderer Elliot Rodger published a 140-page manifesto to *4chan* espousing political ideologies consistent with those reflected, albeit passively, in Slender Man texts.⁸ Before concluding this introduction, I would like to turn briefly to a response from one prominent sector of the Slender Man text community to the attempted murder in Waukesha, which characterizes how the community perceives itself in light of these medial practices.

Violent Acts and Discernment

On June 5th, 2014, an anonymous announcement was posted to the website CreepyPasta.com, entitled, “Narrators uNIGHTed Charity Drive & Streaming Project.” In this post, the author details a charity effort to support the victims of the Waukesha stabbing incident only six days prior:

The assailants claimed that the attack was attributed to summoning Slender-man in the nearby forest and wanting to become proxies. [...It] is a duty to be vigilant and provide a respite for the victim and to assuage concerns about the concept of literary horror and urban myths on the internet. [...] In the wake of this cruel event,

⁸ A commendable body of scholarship connects the acts to which I refer to the emergence of alt-right activism, though I question their assertion that the movement emerges from a broader alt-right polity, speculating instead that the reverse is true—that the political movement owes the traction it garnered in the late 2000s to this online movement of disaffected and hypermediated young white men. In 2014, for example, alt-right media outlets such as Alex Jones’ InfoWars used oracular statements from anonymous user “Q” (a *4chan* handle) to speculate on apocryphal phenomena as justification for extreme right-wing ideology. Researcher Travis View suggests that that ‘Q’'s assertions, referred to collectively as QAnon, is designed to imitate the methods of real-world cults, and that it competes not in the marketplace of ideas, but in the marketplace of realities. That Q posted his assertions to *4chan*, and the nomenclature of ‘QAnon’ emerges from *4chan* ideology, ‘Anon’ being a *nome-de-guerre* for activists in the anarchistic online movement I propose exists, strongly suggest that its cult-like persuading others of the existence of an alternate, ridiculous reality is, in actuality, an act of trolling.

many people have begun pointing fingers at the Slender-man mythology and by guilt of association, the Creepy Pasta sub-genre of horror. It is creativity at its root. A set of stories written by some and enjoyed by others. Much akin to our urban tales of old and the books written by our literary giants. It is imperative to understand that these things, like almost all works of the horror literary genre, are fiction. Many of these stories yes, are filled with an illusion of reality to them in an effort to make them much more unnerving. However, that does not change the fact that they are concoctions of fantasy. Sure, some of these stories are based on historical events or based upon a well documented case whose elements are terrifying. But these accounts are again: for educational entertainment and are well documented for their truth and real life consequences. It is considered by many that common sense is applied to fantasy and history. We do not repeat the actions of real life monsters. We do not attempt to replicate the fantasy. We do not in any way condone those who fail to realize the line between fantasy and committing an atrocity. Nor do we condone a lack of security on the parts of the minds of those who read them. Many times when accountability is called into question, the blame is placed not on the perpetrators, but on the supposed fictional root causes. In most cases, the accountability and responsibility is to the teacher who failed to impart the wisdom of what is real and

right, and most importantly, failed to pay attention. Please take this moment, if you haven't, to remember that many things can be avoided, if you teach and to listen. A long time ago, we used to gather around campfires and tell stories to spook ourselves. We used to gather around each other at sleep overs and dare each other to go into the bathroom and chant Bloody Mary. We did these things to entertain ourselves and creep each other out. However we always remembered that the sun still rose in the morning in the woods, showing nature's splendor and breathing warmth and life. The darkness of the bathroom was quickly banished by the flick of a light switch, and what was once a silent black room would quickly be replaced by the smiling and laughing faces of you and your friends. Please come together so that those who are struggling to smile, can find those smiles and friendly feelings again. (Creepypasta.com)

The post illustrates this tension between truth and fiction throughout.⁹ It groups "urban tales of old" with literary works together as if they share the same relationship to truth and fiction, though they do not: legends are taken as truth, whereas the literature the post refers to is not. It admits that these stories falsely allege their basis in reality with

⁹ Despite the author's indefinitely intended argumentative falsehoods and grammatical errors, the post appears well-intentioned, and several more positive sentiments have been removed from this quotation for brevity and to more clearly isolate and illustrate the author's disposition toward these stories and their narrative form, though it is not my intention to alter the intended tone of the post. However, my own perspectives on this post are broadly and demonstrably negative.

the intention of rendering them “more unnerving” without acknowledging that disturbing quality’s debt to its being taken as truth by its audience.

Using the term “educational entertainment” without a firmly expressed definition as to what it purports to teach furthers this tension again, as part of folklore’s historical purpose has been to provide explanation for natural phenomena that its various narrators could not. Folk tales were circulated in order to teach children how to avoid the perils of those phenomena. In that sense, Slender Man stories are to be taken as truth. On the other hand, if it is instead considered entertainment, this is diametrically opposed to its being taken as legend, as it is not necessarily meant to have any bearing on real life in the way that folklore is understood to. Their being “well-documented” as fiction is patently false—these stories are almost all predicated upon this legendary status, and determining the degree to which the authors of these stories intend them to be taken as truth at the time of posting is exceedingly difficult. The post makes clear that it does not condone the actions of the perpetrators. Its defensive phrasing, however, suggests that it is heavily invested in placing the blame for the event on those twelve year-olds’ inability to apply “common sense” to “fantasy and history” and distinguish between fact and fiction in a way that even an author old enough to establish, promote, and retain legal responsibility for a charity effort fails to demonstrate. The subsequently dramatized section in which the author assures the audience that their childhood games of Bloody Mary were easily banished by “the flick of a light switch” is historically, histrionically, ideologically, and culturally myopic. Older cultures did not have the convenient means by which to dispel myth that this generation of creators do in the availability of information offered them by the Internet. This is a demonstrable instance in which a member of the

text community assumes a medial way of processing events in real life, and assumes not just a universal capacity to do so, but a universal imperative. The means by which they build 'common sense,' however, are derived from a localized culture with its own distinct language, acumen with a particular medial methodology, and ideology, and a degree of difference in any of these capacities a reader may possess is capable of destabilizing the discernible relationship between truth and fiction in these narratives.

The author does, however, identify the stories ultimately as fantasy. Creepypasta predicates its uncanny affect upon its status as legendary, and for enthusiasts, what they appear to be seeking is this destabilization of truth that it provides. Nevertheless, this effect that they seek is fantasy, and what this community does offer is a fellowship of disparate, anonymous users whose works contribute to, strengthen, and harmonize that shared fantasy between them, and which affect those community members profoundly, rendering them an elite caste. Whatever might be said about that community's relative demographic homogeneity and its attendant cultural sensibilities that allow them to distinguish in common between fantasy and reality, its content is easily accessed by a far broader public-at-large, many of whom are not so easily capable of such distinctions, and that makes this particular fantasy capable of delusion, inciting, inadvertently or not, acts of real world violence.

This destabilized relationship between truth and fiction as it is employed in creepypasta is exhibited in content as well as in mode. The Slender Man shares many aesthetic characteristics with traditional forms of narrative which themselves borrow from broadly folkloric traditions. The Slender Man has been described by his creator, Eric Knudson, as having borrowed several design elements for his creation from the

works of American weird fiction author H. P. Lovecraft and from the 1979 film *Phantasm*. These texts exhibit horror predicated to some extent on cultural conflict, drawing upon the same specific and influential era in American horror in the early twentieth century, when German expatriate filmmakers, unable to show their Expressionist films in Germany, brought those works to the United States, and indelibly affected American horror cinema and the popular imagination for almost a century afterward. For instance, the fixed state of the Slender Man's featureless face shares an aesthetic with the rictus grin of Bill Finger and Bob Kane's incongruously violent *Batman* comic book villain, the Joker, created in 1940, and whom in turn borrows from Paul Leni's *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), itself based on an eponymous 1869 novel by Victor Hugo. Hugo's own story borrows many of its uncanny elements from a folkloric legend of nomadic outlaws he calls 'comprachicos' who forcibly manipulate the bodies of captives.¹⁰ The term, as John Boynton Kaiser, in his 1913 essay "The Comprachicos" points out, Hugo created. Kaiser also argues that Hugo used his knowledge of history and the law to inform the fictional elements of his stories, and may indeed have had evidence for just such a folk myth. Hugo's use of the Gorge of Pancorbo in Spain as one meeting place for these comprachicos Kaiser cross-references with John D. Fitzgerald's *Rambles in Spain*, which identifies the gorge as a site in which a band of child kidnappers were encamped. Kaiser also notes, however, that Hugo may have been performing a similar act of historicization that Lovecraft would in the century following. He writes that in Hugo's story he "cited the *Laws of Alfred and Godrun*, the *Anglica Charta* of 1088, the *Consuetudo*

¹⁰ This legend likely borrows to some extent from the European and Asiatic tradition of head-binding, in which crania were forcibly bound so as to unnaturally elongate the head in growth. This was distinctive of several groups of European and Central Asian peoples as early as the 5th century, including many groups such as the Gauls that were culturally opposed to that of the contemporary Roman empire, who saw practices such as these as barbaric. (Bakker)

britannica, the *Leges Inae*, and the *charter* and *statutes* of King Adelstane. [...These laws] all deal with the stealing or kidnapping of slaves, freemen or their children. [...]

The anacronism of invoking these laws in the eighteenth century goes without saying, but, is it possibly a conscious satire on Hugo's part on the reverence of the law for its own ancient and out-worn precedents?" (Kaiser, *The Comprachicos* 256-7). In this example, we see an extant genealogy into which Slender Man's aesthetic projects, and which reflects even the potential for a similar, ironically detached form of social commentary offered by Hugo via reactionary historicized mythmaking. Each of these, as well as many other genealogically related texts from similar genres have contributed to a media bricolage that Slender Man creators borrow from for their productions, and which informs an oral (and supposedly authentically folkloric) *mode*, but not, critically, *content*. Aesthetic elements such as these are utilized by many writers in the Slender Man Mythos, and certainly inform what are arguably some of its most canonical texts such as the *Marble Hornets* YouTube series and many of the principal written stories. This genealogy is visibly embedded in the texts themselves. Among the earliest circulated images of the Slender Man was a historicized image of a German woodblock print that had been manipulated to appear as though it depicted a version of the Slender Man called "Der Grossman." Critically, this historicization is offered and presupposed by mythos contributors to be universalizing, and disconnected from any particular modern cultural-historical context. It is representative of such a context however (in this case, ambiguously central European, arguably German,) and that context brings with it a raft of ideological sensibilities that are perhaps shared by mythos contributors, but which bear the

weight of positional culpability when works exhibiting those sensibilities incite others to acts of violence, whatever the weight of fault for those acts we might ascribe such texts.

Whether or not it is folklore, it has demonstrated at least a tendency to be taken as such by the text community, both by young devotees like Geysler and Weier, as well as by academics like Blank and McNeill. In their essay collection, *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*, they argue that “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” (16). They expand:

Considering how folklore proliferates in the fibers of everyday life as a vibrant component of vernacular expression, it is on surprising to find 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 periphery 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. (16-17)

Their argument is that despite its situated fictional origins, because users discover the stories and take them to be true in an organic way, and because this mimics the organic way in which traditional folklore is thought to be circulated—the intent behind its creation notwithstanding—we should disregard the potential for bad faith that these creators may be indulging. This appears to misread Marshall McLuhan’s statement that “the medium is the message,” applying the circular reasoning that disregarding the false content of the message entirely should justify study of the medium as if the message were true, even if that medium only functions in the presented model by taking the message authentically. The stories are not folklore, but if they were, it would circulate just like it. But it isn’t, so it doesn’t. This raises the question, what does it do *instead*?

“Nothing is to be Taken Seriously”

Understanding what the Slender Man Mythos is doing (if not speaking to the collective human unconscious, as its creators might attest) requires consideration not only of the Slender Man’s genealogical-historical context, but that of his creators as well. Creators in the Slender Man Mythos possess discernible and ecotypified ideologies and methodologies which inform both the creation and transmission of Slender Man stories. They emerge from a class of affluent and indolent young white men in English-speaking countries, more particularly Canada and the United States, many of whom are among

the first to establish online societies.¹¹ While this is not universally the case, it is enough to establish a narrative orthodoxy from which other mythos contributors might deviate from or acclimatize to—in other words, it is enough to establish a canon. Where there is a determined ideal for narrative production, each shared text within the Mythos becomes part of an exchange practice with attendant value in cultural and social capital.¹² In this way, users' relative fluency in navigating the taxonomy of cultural bricolage that comprises the Slender Man Mythos establishes a hierarchized exchange economy with discernible value metrics. This necessitates a fluid state of internal social class as well, where some members possess more authority than others, and those members become the principal class from which the stories' ideological sensibilities are derived and embedded. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, however, those mechanisms by which this internal system of capital is established can only function where the “homology remains hidden, and if the pairs of adjectives that in practice express and structure perception are the most socially neutral oppositions in the dominant taxonomy” (37). For example, while the dominant, “mainstream” taxonomy would treat the distinction between the common artifact of online speech “lol” and the intentionally malformed “kek” as neutral,

¹¹ While ‘indolence’ may appear to be invective, I argue that it is necessary that those affluent enough to introduce their children to the Internet at this early age must also afford for those children freedom enough from material concerns that they seek actualization in new online spaces without the requisite mediation by those material concerns such that they obtain primary significance. Those children must possess freedom and affluence enough to *be* indolent.

¹² A term coined by Pierre Bourdieu to denote a system of relative authority derived from long-term adherence to the attributed values believed to be held by the range of social classes within a given environment. Bourdieu believes it is based on containers of linguistic praxis. Using the example of academic excellence, Bourdieu writes that the “academic taxonomy, a system of principles of vision and division implemented at a practical level, rests on an implicit definition of excellence that, by granting superiority to the qualities socially conferred upon those who are socially dominant, consecrates both their way of being and the state. [...] It is in fact by means of this classification system that academic forms of classification establish the correspondence between social properties and academic [positions....] This collocation of agents into hierarchized academic positions constitutes in turn one of the primary mechanisms of the transformation of inherited capital into academic capital.” (Bourdieu 36-37)

within the localized taxonomy of communities on sites such as 4chan, the use of the latter term signifies a certain greater level of socio-cultural capital within that community, and may, in conjunction with a network of similar taxonomic practices, articulate that user's position within a higher or locally dominant social class. The same is true of the further localized Slender Man Mythos. For example, the Slender Man video series (and Alternate Reality Game) *Tribe Twelve* possesses many characteristics common to Slender Man stories, but gains a higher degree of cultural capital within the text community by including symbols such as a circle with an "X" drawn through it.¹³ This symbol had been used previously by another series, *Marble Hornets*, to represent "The Operator" (their version of Slender Man). This inclusion announces their affiliation with the broader text community and elevates their status within the text community in light of the mainstream taxonomy that treats Slender Man ephemera such as the "escutcheon" symbol uniformly. Varying degrees of cultural capital establishes class, and the locally dominant social class, however indistinct, is not derived solely from its contributions to the Mythos, however. In applying McLuhan's statement more accurately, the evolving media by which these stories are traceably distributed to members bears with it an existing history of localized 'netiquette' which signifies for others a large part of a given user's extant cultural capital, such as the above example "kek." The use of much of the "in-language" of this group is derived principally from some of the earliest Usenet groups, alt.folklore.urban (or AFU), and has evolved and been disseminated to its linguistic inheritors, the pseudonymous fora of SomethingAwful.com, 4chan and its many successor-splinter sites such as 8Chan, and Reddit, including in particular its 'nosleep' subforum. While the

¹³ See Chapter 3.

Slender Man text community can be considered a splinter group from the broader community to whom these linguistic conventions are applicable, these sites represent the texts' primary point of origin, and thus share linguistic practices. Other sites which share Mythos material also demonstrate an affinity for similar linguistic practices, including Creepypasta.com and other fiction-sharing platforms, as well as a number of pages devoted to the same material on other major social media sites such as Tumblr, YouTube, and Facebook. The Mythos expands rhizomatically from its early roots in the first three spaces and is eventually disseminated on the later, more mass-audience media as part of a broader wave of meme culture imported from those same sources.¹⁴ I argue that this fluency with in-language and the use of memes is the majority of their cultural capital due to the way in which that netiquette is not only indicative of a user's familiarity with the media in question, but in the earlier media (AFU, SomethingAwful, and 4chan), this netiquette served also as a mark of tribalistic affiliation. For example, a guide to AFU from the 1990s explains that the use of some obviously misspelled words and a lack of punctuation is an early act of what would become known as "sockpuppeting," where individuals impersonate users ignorant of locally orthodox opinions and materials exchange practices (such as the correct ways of formatting posts, correct adherence to site structures i.e. the fora in which they are posted, correct forms of address, post length, appropriate use of internal terms and grammar, etc.). This sockpuppeting is a

¹⁴ 'Meme culture' refers to the widespread social practice of sharing comedic captioned images online in various contexts, often disconnected from distinctively humorous topics. The comedy is often employed to lampoon or otherwise undermine the seriousness of the topic, content, or idea into which users insert memes, most often in the form of a reply. Paradoxically, the humour is often used as a vehicle for (often biting) social commentary on the contextual object. This is paradoxical because it simultaneously discourages seriousness itself through mimetic comedy at the same time that it strives to stand for serious arguments offered by the poster. In accordance with this paradox, meme culture is not considered a "culture" in that in making a tacit argument against seriousness imbricates the poster in denying their own positionality. Meme culture does not draw solely from those listed sources, but shares many ideological attributes with "Chan Culture" (more readily identified as a localized culture), and sites like *4chan* and its successors were and continue to be the point of origin for a relatively massive percentage of memes proliferated online.

form of “trolling,” now a widely-used term, the nuances of which are not widely understood, but the origin for which is definitively AFU.¹⁵

Trolling is a complex social practice which, when successful, signifies a user’s tribal affiliation with the media’s localized social orthodoxy. Misspelling words like ‘tragic’ as ‘targic’ and common abbreviations like ‘lol’ (or, ‘laugh out loud’) as ‘kek’ (see above) signifies one’s affiliation with communities such as 4chan in particular from which the latter of these examples emerges. In a form broadly unique to postmodern art movements such as punk music, a user’s affiliation is not necessarily signified by their affirmation of the defined orthodoxy (such as the recitation of oaths), so much as by exclusion.¹⁶ By embodying the fool, they gesture to its antithetical ‘wise man’ without invoking it or clearly defining what that wise man is. Consequently, given the limited vectors for communication via text-based interaction as opposed to in-person interaction, i.e. through body language, tone, and many other factors, the ephemeral idealized orthodoxy becomes nearly impossible to detect. In their charity drive response to the Waukesha stabbing, the hosts at Creepypasta.com invoke a contingent ‘common sense’ by which users differentiate between fantasy and reality. The boundary criteria it goes on to present, however, are demonstrably false as the site’s content operates by mystifying those boundaries in order to unnerve and destabilize audiences. This common sense is just such an invisible quality attributed to the orthodoxy shared by the text community. It is gestured to by exclusion (“we do not...”), and when called upon to exhibit

¹⁵ As described on an archived page from Alt.Folklore.Urban entitled “The Den of Iniquity.”

¹⁶ See Eriksen, “Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory”

clarity, instead dissemble via humour, outright falsehoods, or platitudes, as this is the sole recourse these users in fact have.

The above statement appears reductive for two reasons. The first is that the orthodoxy I am proposing is predicated upon loosely-defined demographic qualities its authoritative users allegedly share. If they do not share those features, the orthodox position might not be as ideologically cohesive as I am proposing it is. The second reason is that the inability to position that orthodoxy clearly (other than by shared cant) is a constant, which if it is not constant renders its users' positionality far more apparent and thus irrelevant as a factor for study.¹⁷ The first of these propositions is true because the ideological implications of utterances made both in these texts and in the metatextual environment (i.e. the comments section, relative interpreted metrics based on internal media systems such as 'like' and 'dislike' buttons, retweets/posts, etc.) serve to both define the attributes of cultural capital within that community and position the texts within its ecology (See Chapter 2). The second concern, that it is reductive to claim that users can never clearly identify the orthodox position, is central to the organizing structure of these early media that spread virally to the broader Internet public. This is true in particular of 4chan, which published a trolling meme known as the "Rules of the Internet." This widely-distributed list of dubious 'rules' is, in the manner of sockpuppeting, a consciously myopic artifice, many of the list items being internal jokes, references, and other such dissembling.

¹⁷ That is, to the extent that the motivations users such as Weier and Geysler had for attempted murder would thereby be informed by an extant ideological position they found persuasive and acted upon, which would be comparatively straightforward. Instead, I argue that they read texts which imparted to them via subtext an exclusionary ideological position they participated in defining in coordination with the broader text community and which reflected an underlying and pervasive socio-ideological fantasy experienced by a particular social class, yet taken to be universal (as folklore), and thus presenting a distorted image of the social conditions of the real world.

Rules of the internet.

1. Do not talk about /b/
2. Do NOT talk about /b/
3. We are Anonymous
4. Anonymous is legion
5. Anonymous never forgives
6. Anonymous can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster
7. Anonymous is still able to deliver
8. There are no real rules about posting
9. There are no real rules about moderation either - enjoy your ban
10. If you enjoy any rival sites - DON'T
11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored
12. Anything you say can and will be used against you
13. Anything you say can be turned into something else - fixed
14. Do not argue with trolls - it means that they win
15. The harder you try the harder you will fail
16. If you fail in epic proportions, it may just become a winning failure
17. Every win fails eventually
18. Everything that can be labeled can be hated
19. The more you hate it the stronger it gets
20. Nothing is to be taken seriously
21. Original content is original only for a few seconds before getting old
22. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
23. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
24. Every repost is always a repost of a repost
25. Relation to the original topic decreases with every single post
26. Any topic can be easily turned into something totally unrelated
27. Always question a person's sexual preferences without any real reason
28. Always question a person's gender - just in case it's really a man
29. In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents
30. There are no girls on the internet
31. TITS or GTFO - the choice is yours
32. You must have pictures to prove your statements
33. Lurk more - it's never enough
34. There is porn of it, no exceptions
35. If no porn is found at the moment, it will be made
36. There will always be even more fucked up shit than what you just saw
37. You can not divide by zero (just because the calculator says so)
38. No real limits of any kind apply here - not even the sky
39. CAPSLOCK IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL
40. EVEN WITH CRUISE CONTROL YOU STILL HAVE TO STEER
41. Desu isn't funny. Seriously guys. It's worse than Chuck Norris jokes.
42. Nothing is Sacred
43. The more beautiful and pure a thing is - the more satisfying it is to corrupt it
44. Even one positive comment about Japanese things can make you a weeaboo
45. When one sees a lion, one must get into the car.
46. There is always furry porn of it.
47. The pool is always closed.

Figure 1: Rules of the Internet

Seeded throughout, however, are articles which illustrate the ideological orthodoxy to a limited extent, but are by no means clear. One much-circulated article is central to this project's purposes: "20. Nothing is to be taken seriously." This article broadly informs all others on this list, including the code of silence imposed by the first two, the justification for abuse in article six, rules eight and nine, and many others, though pointedly, consequences persist in article nine, and this validates the presence of an obscure orthodoxy which remains evident through articles such as twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and many others. There are numerous documented incidents in which this code has been invoked as a form of dissembling with regard to the articulated positionality.

The website KnowYourMeme.com refers to rules one and two as being “inspired by the 1999 cult film *Fight Club*,” where similarly-phrased rules are used to conceal the characters’ involvement in an anarchic and anti-authoritarian organization bent on social upheaval by way of vandalism and economic sabotage. Their activity as it appears in the film is quite similar to acts of collective online trolling, where the existing socio-economic infrastructure is obliquely criticized while obscuring the group’s organizing principles.

The broader creepypasta community to which the Slender Man text community belongs is a splinter group with a genealogical relationship to the broader 4chan community which is demographically ecotypified. The members defining the authoritative orthodoxy are typically young, white, affluent, North American, and male. These are attributes typical of early computing generations who were privileged enough to engage in online society, but one critical component is the longstanding anti-authoritarian sentiment that persists from those earliest days. This sentiment is borne to protect the freedoms that unregulated online space afforded those early users. Of particular historical significance is Operation: Sundevil in 1990 where American federal authorities seized hard drives and other hardware from several prominent members of the early computing community, and in which the term “hacker” became widely known by the broader American public. This operation demonized these individuals in the popular imagination, spawning numerous references in television such as *The X-Files* and *Law & Order*, and in film, such as in *Hackers* (1995) which presented hackers as anarchic outlaws, and computer experts as frequently deluded and myopic malcontents.

While Operation: Sundevil corresponds to the spreading adversarial relationship between the early computing generations and the American federal authorities, clashes

between the two preceded even this, and as early as 1986, Lloyd Blankenship, AKA The Mentor, shared what he called the “Hacker’s Manifesto” with the magazine Phrack, an online ‘zine publication for self-described hackers.¹⁸ In it, he articulates the early computing generation’s adversarial sensibilities, the ramifications of which would inform similar sensibilities in the years to come via 4chan and “The Rules of the Internet.” He writes, “I made a discovery today. I found a computer. Wait a second, this is cool. It does what I want it to. If it makes a mistake, it’s because I screwed it up. Not because it doesn’t like me.../Or feels threatened by me.../Or thinks I’m a smart ass.../Or doesn’t like teaching and shouldn’t be here.../Damn kid. All he does is play games. They’re all alike.” Blankenship’s manifesto illustrates a generation gap where each stanza ends in a refrain, “Damn kid,” which is meant to represent the voice of an elder, particularly a parent (he claims his world “begins with school”) and goes on to present the online world as one in which liberty is the principal virtue and his own mastery of the technology is positioned in opposition to a real world in which he is dismissed: “[A] refuge from the day-to-day incompetencies is sought... a board is found./‘This is it... this is where I belong...’[...] You bet your ass we’re all alike... [...] We’ve been dominated by sadists, or ignored by the apathetic. The few that had something to teach found us willing pupils, but those few are like drops of water in the desert./This is our world now.”¹⁹

¹⁸ The concept of hackers preceded this by the internal community as early as the 1960s, but the term and its conceptualization among the niche computing enthusiasts at the time began circulating in 1983 with academic references to ‘hackers’ and the summer film *WarGames*, which featured young hackers infiltrating NORAD. The concept can be said to have been fully concretized in the broader public imagination as early as 1990.

¹⁹ It may appear incongruous that Blankenship’s manifesto reads “my crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not of what they look like,” and the later “Rules of the Internet” include the article “30. There are no girls on the internet.” This gestures to the central misconception this project explores in which this community takes the ideological affordances of creepypasta to be universal, rather than ecotypified. As this project will address in later chapters, in the early 2010s this community was confronted by this misconception which fostered their libertarian regression.

This community of disaffected users frequenting BBS systems, form the basis for the growing community of demographically-similar computer users that would evolve to become the sector of online society sometimes referred to obliquely as the 'old internet'. It is in this complex exchange of anonymous or near-anonymous posts exhibiting trolling language which obfuscates the distinction between fantasy and reality that Slender Man and creepypasta emerge, and the stories in which he is featured share a 'common sense,' or a common social sensibility informed by a history of online engagement and which is emblemized by varied anarchic and anti-authoritarian influences, images, and texts, which help us to situate the Slender Man stories such that acts of violence perpetrated in relation to him are more readily understood as being in service to—wittingly or not—this same anarchic disaffection.

This dissertation will seek to demonstrate the ways in which the Slender Man becomes a mythologized symbol for a large subset of Internet users. He acts as an artistic expression for these users which reflects a view of society affected by a particular set of medial relations online in which they may envision themselves as a separate and superior class awakened, they believe, to the fundamental mutability of perception and reality. These medial relations, however, distort their worldview in ways which foster alienation, mistrust, and ultimately, nihilism. Each of the proceeding chapters will explore different kinds of Slender Man texts and demonstrate how those texts gesture to and engage with this distorted worldview and anticipate an audience versed in it. Chapter 1 will examine several stories taken from the wide array of creepypasta featuring Slender Man and demonstrate how these users attempt to imitate the mechanisms of traditional folklore, yet are instead performing what is sometimes called a folkloric fallacy. Chapter

2 will examine the intersection of the Slender Man text community and the wider world of online gaming through the wealth of celebrated YouTube videography playing games featuring Slender Man. This chapter will demonstrate how these now famous personalities are influenced by this community's worldview and share a distinct point of origin with Slender Man in pseudonymous fora online, as well as how the history of these fora inform their shared lineage and sensibilities. Chapter 3 examines the insular world of Slender Man Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), in which users employ the model of medial convergence offered by Henry Jenkins to explore the contours, characters, spaces, and images in these games, and how they become proving grounds for the in-group of users to demonstrate and react to this distorted worldview. Finally, the conclusion will explore the root community and the associated movements that emerge from the same fora that Slender Man does and how those movements reflect the medial situation that imperils the social environment.

Chapter One: The Folkloric Fallacy

Slender Man stories are exchanged within internet fora that share certain important criteria. Most importantly, they prioritize anonymity, such as 4chan or Reddit. This anonymity (or pseudonymity) possesses a number of affordances, one of which is the broad apprehension community members seem to accept that what they are exchanging are pieces of online legendary folklore. Among the most privileged justifications for this view is that the stories shared in the text community are presented as descriptions of real events. This is not the case, of course. Slender Man stories, or at least their relative believability, act as implicit commodities for social exchange within the text community that interpellates them into a specific ideological architecture in order to assess their quality. The term “interpellation” is coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, referring to the way in which objects, both material and ephemeral, become introduced into an ideologically-derived exchange paradigm localized to a particular community. ideology. In this case, Slender Man stories act as expressive art products competing within an economy of attention, governed by mechanisms such as likes, re-tweets, etc. Evaluation of such stories is informal, and based on such an internal ideological paradigm that assesses these stories based on their aspirations to authenticity.²⁰

This chapter will demonstrate how that aspiration to authenticity shapes Slender Man stories, with a particular focus on text-only fictions in the “Creepypasta” genre. In this social metatext, Slender Man stories are given an indefinite liminal status in being treated by that community as both an accounting of true events and as artificial fiction.

²⁰Among other significant factors to be explored in later chapters.

This status is a challenging and paradoxical superposition of fiction and truth claims, afforded by the anonymity of the fora in which they are exchanged. Because users are encouraged, often vehemently, to treat these texts as authentic, Slender Man texts are produced in multivalent registers. It is possible that any one user composing a Slender Man story could be sharing an account they take to be true in good faith, no matter how deluded that might make them seem. As this project will argue in later chapters, it is ideologically embedded in the text community that reality can be in some measure relative and malleable, as this enables much of the unease Slender Man offers. It is also possible that the users composing Slender Man stories are using their aspirations to authenticity as an act of trolling, a practice widespread in the communities from which the Slender Man text community emerges in which users engage in practical joking by mocking or misleading others, or misrepresenting themselves to comedic effect. Occupying the range of possibilities in between these two poles are those users engaging to various degrees in what folklore scholars Linda Dégh and Andrew Vazsonyi refer to as “legend-tripping,” in which participants suspend their disbelief so as to indulge the possibilities of legendry, however implausible it may seem. The paradoxical tension between these modes are part of the uncanny affect that they offer enthusiasts, mirroring the imprecision of the legend itself. The uncertain relationship between composer and reader is a common tension in pseudonymous fora, I argue, as they feature few if any indicators of sincerity. This is a major component of the anxiety users experience in hypermediated fora, as user anonymity is one way in which users are *mediated excessively*.²¹ In order

²¹ Paul Virilio, in *War and Cinema*, describes how images appearing on screen simulate similar evolution of the experience of warfare. He describes the shift as moving from “fighting [...] conducted by the naked eye and with bare

to gain traction and recognition, members of this community that interpellate these liminal texts into an order of trolling must do so in accordance with the community's comedic sensibilities—one of the most probative factors in assessing those communities' ideological inclinations.

As trolling, these stories are broadly shared so as to fool outsiders into believing that the Slender Man is indeed real. The purpose of their writing is unclear in each instance of composition, as it can at once be a deliberate desire to manifest an actual legend in the minds of readers, to explore the boundaries of reality by tricking themselves into believing these stories to be real (thus enacting a legend-trip), or it could be an instance of trolling, wherein casual readers are made to appear foolish by believing it—or even simply believing the authors to be writing in earnest. Were these stories to be written without demonstrating any ideological inclinations, this liminal state for readers, writers, and stories alike might be maintained, but they do not. There exists a wide array of indications both in the text and in the metatext that point to specific ideological ends, and which are reflected by other acts of trolling performed by the same online communities. The possibility of the stories' artifice, however, renders them inert as folklore. The authors are widely aware that the Slender Man is artificial and are therefore performing a "folkloric fallacy" by giving fictional texts historicized folkloric qualities, modes, and artificial metatextual conditions. This term, borrowed from Mikel J. Koven from his work

weapons gave way at the beginning of the century to a camera obscura in which face-to-face confrontation was supplanted by instant interface, and geographical distance by the notion of real time." Where earlier warfare was predicated on the division of space, the division of time became the norm in war, where "the surprise effect came from the sudden appearance of pictures and signs on a monitor, and where screens were designed to simulate, rather than dissimulate, a war that ever more closely resembled non-stop cinema or round-the-clock television" (72). The indeterminate nature of Slender Man is very well heightened by the same effect, appearing and disappearing in an unbounded way. In a state of hypermediacy, users adopt a state of traumatized vigilance—as much against the need for their attention as against the appearance of something frightening (and perhaps threatening) like Slender Man.

Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends, is meant to denote the misapprehension of historically situated and negotiated objects as genuine through the reading of folkloristic texts (in his case Julius Caesar's account of pre-Christian Celts) as folklore. The last of these applications, artificial metatextual conditions, is crucial, as it is a mischaracterization of the fora in which these stories are being shared as unmediated or non-localized—they are both mediated and localized, and provide us with the clearest picture of the stories' collective ideological architecture.

Contemporary scholarship demonstrates a desire to situate Slender Man as folklore, or more specifically, as a legend text. Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill, in *Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet* draw on Paul Smith's definition to classify Slender Man texts in this way:

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. [...] '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....].' (Smith, qtd. in Blank, 7)

Blank goes on to expand Smith's definition to include practices more specific to Slender Man, including images, legend-tripping, and ostension.²² He does not, however, restrict the definition. Similarly, Thomas Pettitt speculates on the existence of a "Gutenberg Parenthesis," in which modern publishing practices constitute an extensive interruption of human text exchange practices, which in their natural state is more akin to the above, more organic definition of folklore. He describes it in an interview with *NeimanLab* in 2010:

So the idea clearly was that in books, you have the truth. [...]
What's happening now is there's a breakdown in the categories.
[...] Informal messaging is starting to look like books. And books
are being made more and more quickly. [...] We can no longer as-
sume that what's in—we're not distinguishing so much: 'if it's in a
book, it's right,' 'if it's in writing, it's less right,' and 'if it's in speech,
it's less reliable.' We don't know where we are.

Pettitt argues that his "parenthesis" is primarily a temporary social apprehension of the presumed authority commanded by books vis-a-vis publishing standards and that it is breaking down as those standards have diminished with an increased capacity for individuals to distribute published material directly. He suggests that texts like those of the Slender Man mythos' are a stable indication that online communities allow for the reversion to a prior state of pseudo-orality in which they can challenge notions of reliability.

²² Ostension is a term in folklore scholarship denoting a practice in which supposedly observable effects are offered as proof of the existence of their purported cause. In studying Slender Man's authenticity, authentic accounts of encounters with him might be offered as ostensive proof of his existence. As they can only aspire to appear authentic, they can only *affect* ostension, and is imprecisely qualified by scholars as "ostensive practice" in that the texts are treated by the text community as ostensive. See Dégh and Vazsonyi 6.

The scholarly consensus, then, is that Slender Man texts are a modern form of folklore in an age where textual reliability has degraded. The reason for this perceived degradation is derived from a phenomenon of mass text production and distribution facilitated by the Internet and digital book publishing. This is in keeping with broader changes in the reading public. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner argues that texts of all kinds demonstrate a certain degree of publicity. He claims that the term “public” is often regarded and addressed as a “kind of social totality,” (65) but is more often used specifically under the auspices of Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which Warner describes as follows: “This [sovereign-aristocratic] kind of publicity yielded to a newer model of publicness in which the public is composed of private persons exercising rational-critical discourse in relation to the state and power” (47). Warner uses several socio-political movements to illustrate a more specific use of the term public in which it is:

a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer onstage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports even, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action.”

(66)

By this definition, the term public can refer to a more specifically bounded body of people *in relation* to a particular object, such as an event or performance. He goes on to specify a still more particular definition: “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (66). Warner uses this definition to argue that certain texts not only coordinate with and attune to particular publics, but can even *manifest* a public or a “counterpublic” of outsiders in relation to that text’s public. By virtue of Habermas’ transformation, publics can reflect differing perspectives on rational-critical discourse, and “public texts” can be written to speak to those publics or to counter them. This provides for multiple niche markets from which text exchange economies result—publishers profit from distributing texts to these publics, and with more affordable book production and distribution methods, they have done so. This economy realizes Habermas’ transformation, and allows for a multiplicity of written perspectives that, in effect, diminishes the old sovereign authority commanded by aristocracies. This is the end of Pettitt’s Gutenberg Parenthesis in which the assumed authoritative stability of book publishing standards have diminished and in which the public sphere is now turning to online fora for a sense of authenticity.

In light of Warner’s proliferated public textuality, Pettitt’s argument about textual reliability is persuasive, but the notion that the Slender Man is reliable as an indicator and reflects the folkloric forms of the past is not. It is tempting to view the Slender Man storytelling phenomenon as a return to traditional folklore, and that it is a window through which we might grasp the unmediated experience of the sublime Lacanian *Real* in an online culture in which textual reliability is degrading.²³ However, this is performing

²³ See Lacan, Žižek

a folkloric fallacy: it is another vector for ideology masquerading as folklore, which, in the apprehension of the community and scholars such as Pettitt or Blank, are apparently ideologically vacuous. In fact, on my reading, Slender Man texts pointedly utilize mechanisms of online discourse (such as anonymity) to represent themselves as authentic. For that reason, I propose that their practices are more consistent with Walter Benjamin's definition of "second technology," more demonstrative of political praxis. There are also significant deviations from Blank's definition of folklore as well, as the Slender Man mythos displays a number of qualities derived from modern horror traditions and a similar degree of their attendant ideological considerations. This does not, however, preclude the Slender Man mythos from reflecting the degrading reliability of public texts. Instead, it contributes to the destabilizing of the cultural literacy on which ideology is built.²⁴ In this sense, the political affordances of the Slender Man mythos are characterized by an anarchistic nihilism with weak referential gestures to older, outmoded ideological models.²⁵ In the following subsections, this chapter will examine three examples of text-only creepypasta in the Slender Man text community and will demonstrate implicit ideological affordances in each as they attempt to artificially embody what Walter Benjamin describes as an 'aura of authenticity', yet upon examination reveal their situation within a localized set of medially-generated conditions. The chapter concludes with a reexamination of each to demonstrate their shared and particular employing of the uncanny in service to common ideological ground.

²⁴ See Chapter 3

²⁵ Throughout this chapter, it may appear as though 'politics' and 'ideology' are interchangeable terms, but this is not the intention. Politics and political praxis in this sense are being used to denote the exchange practices of cultural capital (Jameson) within a largely internally-consistent ideological system, most often as it is represented discursively.

Authenticity

Curiosity gets the better of me and I decide to go look on the side of the cabin where I hear the banging and what I see immediately makes me want to puke. Sure, the sound was rats. Being nailed. To the wall. There are half-eaten rat carcasses all over the wall, surrounded by those same scratch marks that I had seen the day before. That was enough for me. I start yelling for my husband to show him. (MoonbabyX)

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility*, Walter Benjamin notes that the mechanical quality of mass-produced art diminishes what he calls the “aura” of a work of art. That aura is filled with a traditional schema of values reflective of its culture and forms which is, for Benjamin, an inherently valuable component of that work. He emphasizes that the authenticity of the non-reproduced work of art includes its historical situation. He agrees, “[the] authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. [...What] is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition” (21). Furthermore, Benjamin argues that in the absence of tradition, the production of art can only act in service to a political agenda: “But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (25). In “Knock in the Night” (quoted as the epigraph of this section), as well as many other stories in the Slender Man mythos, there are a number of aesthetic qualities servicing a similar perspective to Benjamin’s that serve to heighten or emphasize their authenticity through a similar sense of historical situation, and diminishing a sense of their mechanical reproduction. These qualities point to a forged authenticity designed to emphasize

the liminal state of these texts as both authentic account and as fiction. This intention is, as Benjamin suggests of art in fact *absent* of historical situation, necessarily political, and thereby ideological.

In the above example “Knock in the Night,” which appeared in the Reddit forum “nosleep,” there is an unnecessary tense shift designed to indicate informal writing and manifest historical situation. However, by virtue of its conscious arrangement as such, the text actually indicates its opposite—political manufacture. The present tense is often used in such stories to signify a conversational tone which implies a sense of time and place in which a particular person is telling a story. The post in which the story was told has a time stamp, suggesting as much to the reader. There are several narrative turns that, while not strictly in error, suggest an unpolished, unedited approach in its inconsistency, such as in pacing: “We agreed, looking forward to a weekend alone and out of the heat. Thursday evening we pick up the keys from him and pack up our truck to leave early in the morning. Friday morning we’re headed up there and stop in a small town at the base of the mountain to get some gas and snacks.” These events are narrated in the same paragraph and are skimming certain details that a speaker might forego for the sake of brevity, but which an edited piece of writing would pace more patiently for the sake of a reader’s ability to keep up with events, in the vein of Pettitt’s account of textual reliability, to the extent that written works like these appear more like casual speech with all the rough contours required to lend it a measure (albeit artificially) of Benjamin’s aura of authenticity. Similarly, there is nothing to indicate the object in the statement “we picked up the keys from him,” other than the reference to the cabin having belonged to her husband’s grandfather in the beginning of the paragraph. This is an

ambiguity that formal editing would dissipate, clearly identifying the grandfather. Moreover, the omission lends itself to the manufactured authenticity of informality. A lack of formal qualities serves to diminish the sense of its technical reproducibility, and therefore as Benjamin suggests, its deliberate lack of political sensibility. That the author does not identify him or herself is one of the most significant indicators that the work is avoiding this sensibility. The work is being published without charge online, and without branding or apparent material gain.²⁶

It is possible that in “Knock in the Night,” the author is merely demonstrating a lack of formal instruction rather than writing in a deliberately informal way. However, it can also be seen as following the expectations of a community. The Reddit forums in which this story appears, however, is a site of what media scholar Henry Jenkins in his work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, calls “cultural convergence.” He argues that “[this] circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers’ active participation. [...] Convergence should be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. [...Convergence] represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3). The works of art produced in such an environment are not necessarily valued for the qualities of the individual maker, but rather for their contribution to a shared network of integrated

²⁶ Reddit represents its own political dimension as a privately owned as an independent subsidiary of Advance Publications, and it was leveraged by original subsidiary owner Conde Nast as a tool for cultivating “citizen journalists” to recruit for writing in its various publications, including *Wired*. As with most popular social media platforms, Reddit’s ideology informs its functions, policies, tools, and practices. (See Mike Shields, “Wired for success: after a time in the wilderness, Wired.com flourished under smart editorial stewardship and Conde Nast backing.”)

and redistributed artwork that reflects the values of that community to a greater or lesser extent. In this way, adherence to form—to genre—becomes the primary metric for evaluation. To that extent, it is irrelevant whether or not moonbabyx is *intentionally* representing an aura of authenticity in the story's unpolished aesthetic. Users of the forum value "Knock in the Night" for the authenticity it *appears* to represent. Fora such as Reddit's place high value on anonymity. One reason for this, I argue, is for this perceived authenticity derived from the historical situation Benjamin ascribes to first-technology art. As mentioned previously, Pettitt claims that in such an example site of cultural convergence, postmodern storytelling more closely resembles pre-modern folkloric tradition, as it does not experience the same limitations as in the codex book form, such as publishing standards. Those standards are, Benjamin might argue, themselves determined and governed by institutions interpellated into a mass cultural-political apparatus, and are therefore no more authentic than the manufactured informality is.

Benjamin argues, however, that the historical diminishment of art's 'aura'—the term he uses to represent a work's agency through a unique and authentic sense of historical situation and context—in light of a new "second" technology capable of rapid reproducibility, is representative of one particular political tension: "[The] desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (23). Benjamin may draw reference specifically to film in this case, but his point applies as readily to text production online. When art can so easily transcend its historical situation, it can satisfy a mass audience's desire to more easily witness art, and in so doing paradoxically diminishing it by distributing pale imitations. This suggests that the desire Reddit

users have for authenticity in online storytelling is paradoxical, as images and text appearing online are similarly a product of Benjamin's second technology—they are reproductions as they appear in real-text format, in reproducible fonts and with common forum formatting conventions, and in the multiplicity of the screens on which it appears. As Benjamin argues, these stories minimize the aura of historical situation in the storytelling even as they attempt to mimic traditional folkloric aesthetic qualities in order to reacquire, "get closer," in the vein of immediacy, to the aura of the "first" technology and embody unmediated human interaction. They employ second-technology modes of distribution and production to produce politically charged texts in relation to a persistent ideology. Scholars like Pettitt as well as many of the composers in fora such as these posit an implicit value in a return to the social function of folklore, as if it can present an unmediated glimpse of human experience in a highly regulated culture, or as Benjamin describes the function of the first technology, to "obtain mastery over nature."²⁷ Benjamin's description of film as an embodiment of the second technology allows for a more definitive political function: "The function of film is to train human beings in the perceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (26). Benjamin takes a modernist tack here, suggesting that film provides a narrative by which humans can negotiate their position in a modern social apparatus. His use of the term 'vast' is significant. It denotes an expansive, implacable, and unknowable machine which might be represented by Habermas' multiplicity of rational-critical perspectives made manifest in textual production, and notably lacking

²⁷ It is important to note that while Benjamin might not assign this kind of value to folklore specifically, in a contemporary medial situation, folkloric stories depleted of intertextual references, in-jokes, tropes, etc. are often seen as fulfilling the purpose of first-technology art. Regardless of folklore's actual value in this respect, its apprehended quality within the text community creates a value schema in which these stories are traded.

the authenticity of first-technology art. To that extent, the ideological concern of stories like “Knock in the Night” is, in their liminal stasis, a disaffection for texts purporting to be authoritative in a vast and unknowable social apparatus. Regardless, we can assume that stories in the Slender Man mythos cannot be excepted from their categorical ideological function by virtue of pseudo-folkloric aesthetic qualities. Irrespective of political-ideological interpellation, the Slender Man mythos exhibits a broad apprehension of itself as folkloric among its contributors, despite its performing a folkloric fallacy. While this public may wish to distance itself from a mass cultural history, their stories possess certain characteristic tropes with distinct ideological origins.

Horror Culture

Squinting my eyes, what looked like a log was bobbing motionless in the water on the other side of the lake. As we paddled closer, it became clear that it wasn't a log. And once we were right up alongside it, I couldn't contain myself. I threw up into the water. We waited in silence for a while before we paddled back to the access point. I will never go camping again. (Marrinho)

The story “What Lurks in the Backwoods” by Reddit user Marrinho demonstrates a great number of horror tropes with recognized use in American mass culture, in particular tropes of the slasher film genre from the 1970s and 80s such as a proscribed liminal spaces in which the uncanny monster or killer attacks a group of foolish teenagers. The story takes the form of a first-person narrative in which the narrator, Eli, and three friends embark on a camping trip to Algonquin park to relax, explore, eat, drink beer, and smoke marijuana. Their extensive preparation and planning takes on an excited and happy tone in which there is a hint of mischievous glee. They travel to a campsite in the early evening, and faced with the challenge of navigation, they are delayed and forced to take shelter at an empty campsite nearby. They make camp successfully, and

begin to drink and smoke before Jakob claims to have seen something in the woods and goes to investigate. Eli thinks Jakob is “trolling” them, making a practical joke. Jakob fails to materialize and they go searching for him, whereupon they become terrified, hear a scream, and are beset upon by a creature Eli does not fully describe, but appears to be the Slender Man. They flee and take shelter in the tent, where they are awakened in the night by footsteps outside followed by a persistent and predatory screeching and shaking of the tent. The Slender Man departs, and they emerge in the dawn to wordlessly pack and depart for home. In canoeing from the site to the park entrance, they come upon what Eli takes at first to be a log, but it is heavily implied that it is the body of Jakob.

The story contains a number of grammatical errors similar to those described in “A Knock in the Night,” suggesting a similar striving for authenticity as Benjamin suggests. In one instance he uses the incorrect form of the article ‘it’s’, but in two succeeding instances, he uses the correct form, perhaps denoting an awareness of the error and the conscious use of this mechanism to obtain an aura of authenticity. As preamble, Marrinho addresses the readers of the “/nosleep” subforum directly, claiming the events were real: “Hey nosleep. The following is a story that I’ve been wanting to get out for a while. A weekend I’ll never forget, and not for [sic] good reason.” Despite this, Marrinho’s use of common horror tropes suggest instead an appeal to a mass audience for assimilation as part of a communal body of public texts designed to resonate with one another.

American horror narratives rely to a great extent on the use of liminal space. Originally termed by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his book *Rite of Passage* to

describe a time during a coming-of-age ritual in which participants stand at the threshold of adulthood but are at that time neither child nor adult, and it has since become associated with political and cultural change, to the extent that certain liminal time periods produce unstable power dynamics, social groups, institutions, etc (Genep). Geographical boundary locations can be liminal as well, to the extent that certain socio-cultural expectations may become blurred in certain regions. Campsites and campgrounds are two such locations, as there is a degree of uncertainty to which they might be considered either regulated public spaces with enforced rules, regular oversight, etc. as might be found in a municipal park, or as an uncivilized wilderness in which none of these expectations are considered to exist, and the threat of death is real. This liminality renders such spaces frequent horror tropes. Abandoned houses or institutions form similar liminal boundaries between the wild and the civilized, and purportedly haunted sites (haunted houses, etc.) are liminal between the material and the immaterial. While campsites are geographically clear, to the extent that they are delineated territory (theoretically) under the same national boundary, the socio-cultural apperceptions campers might have are ambiguous, and the space is thereby made liminal.

At the end of the above quotation, the final line “I will never go camping again” concludes the narrative, and cements the central conceit of the story. “Camping” is a common theme in horror—urban youths in a liminally unfamiliar and wild environment. Marrinho uses this theme deliberately: “In the car, the mood was jovial. We were happy to be done [sic] work for a while and to be able to kick back, drink lots of beer and smoke lots of weed—all this while completely free from the hustle and bustle of civilization.” This line illustrates one of the Slender Man mythos’ particular political affordances

at the same time that it makes use of a common theme.²⁸ There is a privileging of freedom over “hustle and bustle,” by which is implied a sense of business, embodied through stressful and rote routine. There is a liberty by which to drink and smoke illegally, as indicated by the story’s having been written over two years prior to the legalization of marijuana in Canada (the story takes place in Algonquin Park, Ontario). Neither the age of the narrator Eli nor that of his friends is indicated, though the relative lack of experience and suggested activities seem to indicate that they are young, and perhaps drinking underage. The illicit activity is in part a suggestion of the freedom the wilderness provides in which to partake. Paradoxically, however, it is used as a horror trope in more modern Hollywood slasher films to suggest profoundly *immoral* activities which, as a kind of divine justice, draw the predations of the horrifying object—the monster, killer, ghost, or otherwise uncanny figure or force—upon them. In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover draws upon a number of major examples from the modern Hollywood slasher genre to gesture to a recurring trope known as the “final girl,” in which the viewer’s focalized perspective becomes trained on a particular female character who distinguishes herself from other victims by her wits and good sense, such as avoiding drugs and alcohol (Clover).²⁹ In the political sensibilities implied by such a purportedly-authentic story of foolish delinquency suggested by the line “I will never go camping again,” there is a profound desire for a moral authority

²⁸ See Chapter 2.

²⁹ It should be noted that Clover focuses heavily on the chastity of the final girl, drawing on examples such as *Psycho* and the film’s early victim Marion Crane for her engaging in specifically illicit sex. She does not directly reference the victims’ use of substances, but focuses on the final girl’s ‘purer’ characteristics which desexualize her through emphasizing distinctly masculine traits. Her quick-wittedness is owed to those traits, and the various transgressions frequently reward her fellows with swift dispatch from the killer, not the least of which Clover identifies as trespassing into “proscribed territory,” such as a cursed summer camp. Clover’s argument about the final girl also hinges to no small degree on the liminal sexual status of both killer and final girl.

which Marrinho is expressing in accordance with the moral hygiene codified in the genre tropes. While it may seem like contradictory reading to suggest that slasher films are invested in what might be called traditionally moral, they predicate themselves upon the salaciousness of the taboo or delinquent which are dependent on such an overarching moral framework to remain salacious.

This paradox repeats itself throughout the narrative. The use of a local, personal vernacular, such as the term “yoed” (meaning inebriation from marijuana use—or being “high”), which might allow for a sense of communion or brotherhood within the writing community, but is instead undermined when Marrinho explains its use in his preamble: “The following is a story that I’ve been wanting to get out for a while. A weekend I’ll never forget, and not for good reason. For context, you’re going to see the word ‘yoed’ appear a few times - this is my friend group’s way of saying high.” He shifts dialects between the authentic-confessional vernacular, such as in the (grammatically incorrect) sentence fragment “A weekend I’ll never forget, and not for good reason,” and strives intermittently for a higher vernacular dialect in some phrasing as well, such as “The following,” and “For context [...]” This code switching denotes a similar tonal tension or conflict in the expression, vacillating between differing approaches to prefiguring readers. In a formal authorial voice, Marrinho offers an apology for idiosyncratic speech patterns to his more formal readership, and an informal voice in which he is prefiguring an informal audience to whom he speaks plainly and for whom he tries to authentically embody one of the individuals he describes in the narrative. The tropes he is employing suggest that he feels culpable for what their use implies he believes are the illicit and immoral activities he and his friends purportedly undertook. Clover’s argument relies

heavily on a notion of moral purity, to the extent that the final girl is so often symbolically virginal, and the slasher films of the 1970s and 80s have relied on related themes of transgression and moral hygiene which have had a formative influence on American horror ever since. There are demonstrably similar qualities between these stories and this genre of film, and this code switching between his friends' vernacular and a more detached narration suggests Marrinho is engaging with this discursive paradigm of moral purity. His confessional attitude is juxtaposed with his formal definition to imply that the reader or listener is of a higher moral authority than he is, and he can therefore be read as apologizing for it—moreover that it is these immoral actions that led to their being preyed upon by the Slender Man. It appears as though he is invoking a hierarchized system of moral authority to which he might appeal and confess. A moral authority is embedded in the language and themes, but the liminal space he and his friends occupy is the uncanny and dreadful threshold of the unknown Lacanian Real which possesses no such authority.³⁰ This implies a liminal tension between the mode and the message of the story with which Marrinho is entangled, and which possesses significant ideological implications.

In a similar state of tension, Eli struggles in the story with tensions between his fear for his friend Jeremy and his anger that his friend might be “trolling” Eli and the others by hiding in the woods to scare them intentionally. As previously discussed, trolling is an activity undertaken by some users with the intent to stir up powerful emotional responses in others through disingenuous statements or activities, in part to undermine

³⁰ See Chapter 4

the legitimacy of those emotions.³¹ This activity, it must be noted, does not have a provided definition in the story itself, suggesting that the reading audience is aware of the term and its use. It is similar to the term “tripping,” in that it is a commonly understood term with a wide array of use cases and definitions.³² Similarly, the term’s multivalence suggests that “trolling” belongs to a highly delineated subculture capable of parsing its many meanings. It denotes a tension between seriousness and play which Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* addresses directly:

The origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play. [...] Seriousness and play, rigor and license, are mingled in every work of art, though in very different proportions. [...] The first technology really sought to master nature, whereas the second aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity. The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay. (Benjamin 26)

³¹ While an authoritative definition is not yet available at the time of writing, The University of Indiana’s *Knowledge Base*, a database of common terms and concepts in computing, defines a troll as “a provocative posting intended to produce a large volume of frivolous responses. [...] It may consist of an apparently foolish contradiction of common knowledge, a deliberately offensive insult to the readers of a newsgroup or mailing list, or a broad request for trivial follow-up postings. [...] Troll threads also frustrate people who are trying to carry on substantive discussions. [...] People post such messages to get attention, to disrupt discussion, and to make trouble.” (“What is a troll?”)

³² Tripping, or “trippin” is language which folklorists use in “legend tripping” more literally to refer to a pilgrimage, but in common parlance is better understood as BEV slang used originally in West Coast rap artists in the 1990s who used the term to signify aggressive action toward rival gang members. This was adapted from its use as early twentieth-century slang for a “trip” (in this case a mental voyage) one has when using psychedelic drugs. Various rap lyricists began to use the term much more expansively (eventually eclipsing its original use) to denote an individual’s behaviour which was neurotic, emotional, or in some other way incited interpersonal social aggression, which helps to illuminate the term’s migration. As a consequence, if you are ‘trippin’, you’re all up in your head and saying and/or doing irrational things because of it. The term’s migration is, as Benjamin describes, a playful distancing from the material use case of enacted violence to the abstract use case of social misalignment.

He argues that this kind of art is rooted in tradition and is so situated in time and place that its primary use is to magically encapsulate an aspect of nature through its use in social or religious ritual. “Artistic production begins with figures in the service of magic. What is important for these figures is that they are present, not that they are seen” (25). If the purpose of first-technology art is to reflect some aspect of human nature through its situation, this then is the theoretical apparatus by which folklore as it is understood by the Slender Man community comes to represent an authentic glimpse into the human psyche—as human *nature*. Conversely, art reflecting mass consumption, such as through pre-existent horror motifs alongside embedded moral messaging, is in service to an artifice diametrically *opposed* to nature, reflecting the dichotomy of play and seriousness.

Posting Slender Man stories as both artifice and confession—or play and seriousness—can be understood as trolling. It obfuscates notions of reality, of ideology, and of society, it promotes triviality, and presents an apparently foolish contradiction of common knowledge. Marrinho’s implicit suggestion that “trolling” is understood in common underscores these tensions between seriousness and play in “What Lurks in the Backwoods.” At the same time, trolling itself as an activity undertaken by the Mythos’ writing and reading public is reflective of the same drive for authentic, unregulated space in which the seriousness (the “nature”) of the profound emotions it is designed to provoke are rendered fruitless and perhaps harmless. In this sense trolling is performing that function of the second technology that Benjamin describes, rehearsing the interplay between nature and humanity. The values and sensibilities of Eli and his friends are illus-

trative of those of the broader text community, or it would not function in the role of authentic folklore for that community. However, Marrinho's paradoxical desire for a moral authority is again brought to light in the narrative when the interplay between these two perspectives, both fearing for his friend Jeremy (nature) and the suspicion that Jeremy is trolling them (play) is resolved *for him* by the appearance of the uncanny object—Slender Man—to threaten their lives, as does Jeremy's body which it is implied they discover in the lake. Aside from the moralized stakes, the function of trolling which renders powerful emotions distinctly harmless points to the tensions of hypermediated environments online. It is a way in which the consequences for misreading online utterances or being misread can be neutralized, thus offering a kind of ameliorating effect on the anxiety of alienation by visiting a kind of emotional numbness upon its intended target, with the intent of insulating themselves against emotionally-charged content. Put simply, rather than curing the anxiety of online society, it instead spreads the condition to keep everyone else on common ground.

Jeremy's liminal position as both alive and dead in the narrative involve a literal crossing from the campsite and the firelight into the wilderness and the darkness. The use of light in this story is profoundly symbolic of the tensions between civilization and the wild illustrated by the broader horror tropes the story accesses. One of Eli's friends, Jacob, claims that Jeremy has a flashlight, and is therefore safe—he has literally brought the light with him. Likewise, Eli illuminates the Slender Man briefly with his flashlight before it steps from his field of view. Visibility is key in Benjamin's use of the term "nature." He suggests that the present and authentic art of the first technology exists regardless of who looks upon it, and what matters is its magical property of invoking

the part of nature itself. What matters, he claims, is that the “spirits see it.” The art’s being witnessed by others is coincidental. He argues, “Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight: certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cellar; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level” (Benjamin, 25). This reading of the spiritual significance of first-technology artwork, which the Slender Man text community I argue notionally appropriates and applies to folklore, bestows its subject with spiritual significance based on its visibility. In other words, that it is invisible grants it power in this schema. Visibility is the basis for a great deal of horror motifs, particularly in the slasher genre, such as in Sean S. Cunningham’s 1980 film *Friday the 13th*, but also more broadly, such as in Stephen Spielberg’s 1978 film *Jaws*. In both films, the camera takes on the perspective of the killer and monster (respectively) invisibly observing unaware victims before attacking.

The Slender Man text community’s attribution of authenticity to folklore in general is problematic. As stated above, the function of authenticity in these stories is to capture an aspect of human nature unmediated by politics. In other words, to be taken as first-technology art rather than second-technology art. This sensibility is based upon two assumptions; one, that Slender Man stories constitute folklore; and two, that real folklore is authentic, first-technology art. Folklore, in other words, may be taken seriously by the community in which it is shared as authentic, but it is capable of and frequently shown to be as mediated and ideologically invested as any second-technology art is. In *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends*, Mikel J. Koven discusses the 1973 film, *The Wicker Man*, in which a police investigator ventures into the wilderness to discover a village of people

living in an apparently pagan tradition, and is eventually burned alive as part of a ritual in a giant effigy meant to appease the “old gods” (as the village leader acknowledges in an admission of liminality) for the prosperity of the village.³³ Koven claims that the film’s director, Robin Hardy, and its screenwriter, Anthony Shaffer, were authentic in their recreation of pagan life and traditions. Koven argues that Hardy and Shaffer drew upon James Fraser’s *The Golden Bough* for their inspiration, itself drawn from Julius Caesar’s *The Gallic War* for its depiction of pagan life and traditions. Koven argues from the perspective of anthropologist Elliott Oring that the use of Fraser’s work to establish the historical veracity of the pagan tradition constitutes a *legend* rather than a historical account, and claims instead that Hardy and Shaffer are performing a “folkloristic fallacy” (26) by using folklore to constitute history. He draws on the work of anthropologist Richard Dorson for his definition, quoting him as follows: “Folklore represented the contemporary superstitions and nursery tales of civilized peoples. Mythology preserved the explanation in story form, which all peoples [...] fashioned to account for their supernatural origins. Folklore [...] *embodied survivals from the earlier stages* [of cultural progression]. Mythology appeared at all stages, but in varying degrees of simplicity and sophistication [...],’ (187, emphasis added)” (qtd. in Koven, 27). He admits that Dorson draws on a dated and strictly hierarchical distinction between savage, barbarous, and civilized peoples, but nevertheless gestures accurately to folklore as not inherently historical, and thereby not capable of “authenticity” as Benjamin might describe it. Koven claims that to regard the narrative of the wicker colossus as legend rather than as history is to

³³ It should be noted that Benjamin claims that the pinnacle of first technology art is human sacrifice.

engage in a debate about whether people *really did* such a thing, but *by a culture other than the one portrayed in the episode*. That is, legends are, in addition to negotiations about the possible, negotiations about the other. To see [this episode] as legend, in part, is to see a negotiation of whether such 'barbarity' could have been perpetrated by non-Christian/non-Romans, [...] thereby creating a visceral distinction between 'us' (Fraser's Victorian Britons or Caesar's Republican Romans) and 'them' (the ancient pre-Christian Celts or cultures deserving to be conquered and occupied). (26)

Koven effectively illustrates here the inconsistency between folklore and the powerfully implied aura of authenticity of human situation in time and place that Benjamin describes of first-technology art. Furthermore, he argues for folklore's position as a negotiation of the Other, as Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*, organized such that it not only lacks that inherent authenticity, but even in more verifiable forms contains a significant number of ideological affordances as well. In this respect, it becomes clearer why a story like "What Lurks in the Backwoods" might implicate historically Western notions of morality that come from Judeo-Christian theology in step with the influential slasher genre. Stories that depict liminal boundaries between the known and unknown as well as the self and Other, in pursuit of articulating the Other, invoke foundational elements of the self as well. That which inspires fear in the culturally-and-historically-situated American audience is, to a great degree, that which is *un-Christian*. In light of the storyteller's goal of creating a monster which is disturbing in its transgressiveness, the story-

teller must also invoke what is being transgressed. It is revealing that the storyteller creates a monster which transgresses Judeo-Christian mores because that tells us that the storyteller imagines Judeo-Christian mores to be culturally dominant to begin with. The story's aspiration to folklore would suggest that what the monster transgresses are universal social mores. The fact that some of these are identifiably Judeo-Christian limits the scope of the story's effectiveness in this respect to particularly Western Judeo-Christian cultural spheres. Stories in the Slender Man mythos are similar folkloric presentations of narratives designed for mass assimilation, and are thus possessed of significant ideological tensions. Furthermore, folklore is not itself authentic, but is charged with its own political sensibilities.

Politics of Nihilism

We are a bunch of jackasses. Tyler didn't go along with the joking. He looked ill. Like a man in a confession booth making one last ditch attempt to save his mortal soul. He shushed us and started over. (atbest)

The Slender Man text community is, to a great extent, defined by alienation. The value schema introduced through stories' relative aspirations to authenticity is positioned against a presumed apprehension of broader culture's *inauthenticity*. The choice of spare text media is positioned against high-production value storytelling as in Hollywood films, streaming television, or modern video gaming. Their presumption is that consumer culture reduces them as individuals to manifestations of mere statistical analytics—their browsing habits, their purchasing records, etc. Their art's aspiration to au-

thenticity is, in this way, an expression of alienation. One such aspiration is in the tension between seriousness and play these stories present. Play (as non-seriousness) is considered “unproductive,” and therefore outside the paradigm of consumer culture. It is not measurable in the vein of analytics, it is trivial, and therefore can serve as an “exterior” activity—even an act of protest—without the spontaneous interference of consumerism as might be experienced in, for example, video gaming, where high-production value games might incorporate updates and advertisements into the game’s exegesis, thus interrupting the state of play the gamer occupies in that moment. The story “Needleteeth,” by Reddit user Atbest further demonstrates the tension trolling creates between seriousness and play in these narratives. The above excerpt follows an attempt by the protagonist, Tyler, to tell a story about the abandoned summer camp in which a friend had been killed by a monster similar to Slender Man. The unnamed narrator is reflecting on the friends’ chorused responses to Tyler’s having told them that he had attended this summer camp years prior, and asking them if they knew why it had been shut down—itself a horror trope, as “shut down” indicates forcible closure, implicating some kind of tragedy or wrongdoing, as in *Friday the 13th*’s cursed summer camp. This sets up the replies by their friends, “‘Jason Voorhees!’ ‘Michael Myers!’” The chorused responses are suggestive of rote ritual campfire stories. They are references to prior assimilated mass-audience texts, part of the bricolage of horror culture media being re-told in an oral mode, as Timothy Evans suggests, which is in the metatext a reference to the trope of the abandoned summer camp, even as in the text itself it is a

reference to a common campfire story trope of its taking place in the immediate vicinity—thus emphasizing the liminal boundaries of light and dark they inhabit.³⁴

It is important to note that despite the nested narrative structure that the story is being transmitted, within the narrative itself, this localized campfire story would possess all the major qualities Benjamin attributes to first-technology art. The unique situation, as well as the confessional telling the narrator suggests directly are particular qualities. In this sense, the narrative would be “authenticated” as art meant to dominate the space they are inhabiting, as Benjamin suggests. Despite this, the campfire story nested narrative functions instead as folklore for the circle of friends. It is designed to “rehearse the interplay of man and nature,” possessed of ideological sensibilities. This much is indicated by the above passage. The chorused responses about which the narrator is commenting are listed in the narrative without attribution to speakers, nor are they given any speech tags with which the reader might localize the voices to individuals. Instead, the emergent voices are the voices of the collective, responding to the tropic, folkloric story with tropic, folkloric replies.

That the narrator compares this to confession is to recall a familiar pattern of Western Christian (particularly American Pentecostal) church services in which the parishioners engage in call-and-response with pastors. Zora Neale Hurston, in her monograph *The Sanctified Church* describes that in Black American Pentecostal services:

the priest before the altar [chants] his barbaric thunder-poem before the altar with the audience behaving something like a Greek

³⁴ See Introduction.

Chorus in that they 'pick him up' on every telling point and emphasize it. This is called 'bearing him [up'. ...] Then there is the expression known as 'shouting' which is nothing more than a continuation of the African 'Possession' by the gods. The gods possess the body of the worshipper and he or she is supposed to know nothing of their actions until the god decamps. (Hurston 100-101)

Hurston claims this kind of interaction is about community, in that it thrives in concert, but it is individualistic in that it is an individual expression (88). For Hurston, the activity is a way for Black Americans to remediate White concepts of spirituality by integrating African traditions into an alternative form of Christianity. For the Slender Man text community and the broader creepypasta text communities, this form depends on the communal integration of individualized expression. Unlike the Pentecostal services, however, the response of the crowd is intermittent and inaudible, and is thus a great risk for speakers starved for the mirrored responses that signify authenticated communal integration.³⁵ This interactive sermon form has the effect of interpellating parishioners with religious ideology, which Marxist scholars such as Louis Althusser argue is designed to act as an ideological state apparatus, maintaining the social status quo and imbricating those parishioners in their positioned social rank. The narrator responds immediately to

³⁵ This chapter may appear to critique this approach as being an ideologically-derived counterpublic, it is only a criticism as it applies to the more tenuously communal situation experienced in online communities corresponding through medial forms such as creepypasta. In the case of distinctively African American religious practices, this approach's ability to remediate forced practices into an alternative and authenticated form is a natural countervailing force in response to the violence of slavery and forced migration. Whether or not the inadvertent violence of hypermediacy is commensurate with that of slavery (which I would argue it is not), the passage from "Needleteeth" reflects a similar methodology of interpellation, and indicates the presence of respectively oppressive publics to which both are responding.

the friends' chorus with the statement that they are all "jackasses." The narrator is pointing to the audience's chorus as a way to distance themselves from the affect of the story, telling jokes to dispel the atmosphere. This kind of reflexive disengagement with the speaker disrespects the speaker's intention to captivate and mystify the audience at the same time that it can be read as a show of enthusiasm. As their position in relation to the storyteller is now undetermined, this is a representation of an in-person instance of trolling which alienates the storyteller. This moment in the narrative is significant in part because it affirms that the trolling referenced in "What Lurks in the Backwoods" is part of the internal culture of the text community—these replies and the proceeding affirmation by the narrator are part of that discursive culture: trolling activities and the recognition of the group as such. The narrator's silent judgement reflects that sensibility, in that the speakers are not privy to their shouts' disapproval. Because it goes unheard, it presents users with an anxiety-provoking and unqualified interpellation into an extant *yet invisible* ideology.

A similar example appears in "The Thing in the Yard" by Reddit user AtLeast-ImGenreSavvy, in which the protagonist, a babysitter, describes finding a television program to watch: "I found a nature documentary about meerkats (hey, it was either meerkats or Kardashians) and started to watch." This is a direct address to the reader. For one, it is syntactically conversational, to the extent that it implies a direct address situated in time and place, suggesting the same authenticity and confession as Tyler at the campfire, but more importantly it assumes devaluation of the meerkat documentary as well as the exploits of the Kardashian celebrity family by the text community. Each provides critical ideological insight. A meerkat documentary embodies seriousness over

play. As a cultural artifact, the genre denotes seriousness—academia, minutiae, science, environmentalism, and of course, nature, with which Benjamin directly correlates seriousness. The Kardashians, meant in one sense to refer to the television program *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, but also expanded to refer to the broader celebrity family's wealthy activities that garnered frequent attention by entertainment news media, is indicative of the polar opposite genre. It encapsulates non-seriousness, with tremendous mass-appeal for assimilation, stemming from the cognitive dissonance between the televised family life and life for the viewing public. This dissonance takes on polemic and apparently antithetical modalities. The viewer might consider what they see as the family's financial success relative to their own and aspire to live similarly. Alternatively, the viewer might fixate on disregard for the family's ignorance of what that viewer deems "real" concerns in light of wealth's myopic effect on the Kardashians, believing themselves instead to live according to authentic human concerns, even as they continue to watch so as to affirm that distinction. Ultimately Marxist scholars like Althusser would consider this public fixation with the family as serving a common discursive ideological cause in perpetuating and revelling in class distinction and conflict, regardless of how it is formulated.

What is remarkable about the address the narrator provides in "The Thing in the Yard" is that it contains within it this disregard for the Kardashians, but in light of the juxtaposed disregard for the seriousness of nature, the modality in which disregard for the Kardashians based on their *detachment* from reality appears incongruous. Instead, the statement implies that the text community's devaluation is predicated on the program's

popularity itself.³⁶ It would be consistent with the broader text community's ideological leanings to suggest that it is denigrated based on a general opposition to mass appeal—the stories' liminal nature, the presentation of the narrators and their peers as "jackasses" or otherwise delinquent, young, foolish, ignorant, etc. suggests an audience seeking to detach itself from social norms, either of seriousness or of non-serious mass-consumer media—in other words, alienation. As if to punctuate this theme in the narrative, "The Thing in the Yard" ends with the babysitter's assault on Slender Man with a fire poker, only to discover that it's antagonizing her was part of a prank reality television program itself, and she puts the actor in a costume into a coma. The tensions between the perceived reality of her situation and the fictional product of mass consumer culture in this television genre illustrate this alienation, even as that genre performs the same acts of mock-seriousness in trolling the participants. Further emphasizing that theme, any potential culpability, legal or otherwise, possessed by the showrunners for the accident is barely remarked upon by the narrator. Instead, the story suggests that she is to take the brunt of the blame for the incident by all of those present—a narrative turn which, in its characteristic exile of the narrator, gestures toward *AtLeastImGenreSavvy's* alienation. It is significant also that the author's name is an embedded apology for what might be thought of as a lack of originality, as it refers to being "genre savvy," which suggests an awareness of existing medial architectures at the same time that it suggests an inability to write beyond that architecture. Again, it is anticipating an audience response in the negative at the same time that it anticipates an extant architecture with which they

³⁶ Due to its contemporaneous nature, it is quite possible this is also a reference to Animal Planet International's *Meerkat Manor* series, which features traditional nature documentary footage of meerkats, but edited and narrated with reality television voiceover. While inexplicit, the author may be employing meerkats as a reference designed to further the communal disregard for reality television.

anticipate engaging only with intermittent success. The story's relative popularity in the Reddit forum /nosleep seems to suggest a strong intertextual bond with the text community as well.

Despite the text community's prevailing theme of alienation, these stories continue to exhibit strongly moralistic ideological affordances. In "Needleteeth," the narrator attributes a confessional quality to Tyler's story. It exhibits the apparent aura of authenticity at the same time that it engages with a number of developed and ritualistically deployed narrative tropes that cause it to be regarded by the attendant audience similarly to how a sermon might be. This is an instructive example as to how a narrative exhibiting an "aura of authenticity" is, as stated in the previous section, committing Mikel J. Koven's folkloristic fallacy—qualifying reality based on folkloric apprehensions that are in fact nested cultural and ideological predispositions present in the metatextual environment. On the surface, however, "Needleteeth" appears more distinctly as a departure from the form. "Knock in the Night" features a direct reference to Slender Man; "What Lurks in the Backwoods" and "The Thing in the Yard" both feature Slender Man as the antagonist; yet "Needleteeth" does not mention Slender Man directly. These stories, however, share an audience through medial bricolage. For example, in this story and in others, the monsters are distinct in that they do not always look like Slender Man. They are representing a similar affect, however, in spite of differing appearances. This is part of a general elasticity of form in these stories that allows them to operate within the same cultural context at the same time that they have distinctive aesthetic features. In "The Structural Study of Myth," Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that folklore (myth) is regarded as having a metaphorical material basis for its existence, often localized to a

specific people that share it. He disagrees, claiming that folklore is not about specifically *what* individually is expressed. In Tyler's story, the monster is not, strictly speaking, the Slender Man, but rather a lamprey-like creature in a lake. It is, however, considered to be part of a broader medial bricolage forming their cultural inventory of horror that Slender Man shares. This is because, as Lévi-Strauss explains, it is not the individual and specific elements of the story that are transmittable, i.e., Slender Man himself, but because it shares space in these stories with commonly apparent themes and narrative elements. For example, "Needleteeth," "What Lurks in the Backwoods," and "Knock in the Night" each take place in a boundaried liminal space between the wilderness and civilization; each presents a creature with an uncanny humanoid appearance with a distorted and fixed aspect; each suggests a degree of delinquency or irreverence in its victims and protagonists; and critically, each is presented in a similar way and in similar online environments. Lévi-Strauss explains that "the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning" (431). It is in the context of the monster's appearance and certain qualities it has in relation to many other common themes or elements that the meaning, he argues, becomes clear. (These bundles he would come to call "mythemes.") These mythemes correspond more fluidly to both first- and second-technology art, as they can be applied to stories irrespective of their political affordances and without regard for their actual ability to encapsulate authentic (human) nature.

While the apprehension of these stories by writers, readers, and scholars may situate them in the realm of first-technology art as folklore that does indeed capture a

piece of human nature, they are perhaps better regarded as mythemes in which their authenticity is irrelevant—only what they can provide to better understand the communities to which they pertain. Lévi-Strauss suggests that folklore operates through use of these mythemes to Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of *langue* and *parole*:

There is a very good reason why myth cannot simply be treated as language if its specific problems are to be solved; myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. In order to preserve its specificity we should thus put ourselves in a position to show that it is both the same thing as language, and also something different from it. [...] This is precisely what is expressed in Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*,” (430). To this extent, the combined and shared relations in these stories is of critical significance to determining their ideological implications. The purpose of folklore, he argues, is “to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. (443)

He argues that it is critically important that folklore is always a recounting of events situated in time and place, as Benjamin might agree, but that it is always in the past as well: “[Myth] always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: [...] anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (430). As a structuralist, he argues that a series of concrete and rather more universal meanings can be derived from the analysis of mythemes present in many myths, but this is in a sense performing the same fallacy that the Slender Man text community is, assuming

that the study of common emergent characteristics of myths and folk tales might provide broad insight into human nature, but he readily attests in “The Structural Study of Myth” that modern societies have largely replaced myth with politics—i.e. mass movements of ideology (430). This would seem to localize the study of mythemes to particular cultural contexts, and in the case of the Slender Man text community in particular, I argue that the mythemes they display (albeit modified by Benjamin’s distinction between first and second technologies) can ultimately illuminate the purpose of these stories more clearly: These stories are told by drawing on a network of “mythemes” derived from mass-assimilated, second-technology themes and tropes in order to resolve the tensions described above. In other words, for this text community, tropes are being substituted for mythemes in order to create a new folklore and legitimate the ideological tensions they illustrate as innate human concerns, rather than localized political ones. This, in essence, is what is taking place in what Koven calls a “folkloric fallacy.”

The Uncanny Aspect

“Written in blood on the side of the cabin [...] are the words, ‘Good bye. Thanks for playing.’ The final picture is what makes me scream. The first thing I notice is the yellow cat slit eyes, glaring into the camera. The miniscule, pin prick teeth covered in fur and blood and all manner of viscera. It’s hunched over, its spine in an arch, waving at the camera. [...] Its [sic] emaciated and gangly thin. It’s clearly laughing at us and the fun it’s having. I drop the camera, willing the image out of my mind and look out the window, just in time to see it waving at me as we drive out of the woods.” - MoonbabyX, “A Knock in the Night”

“That’s when I made the mistake of turning back and flashing my light into the deep, dark woods. I saw it only for a split-second before it dashed behind a tree, but it [...] was freakishly tall.” - Marrinho, “What Lurks in the Backwoods”

“It stood on two legs, like a person, but seemed too tall and gangly. Its legs were abnormally long. [...] It had stooped down and was peering in through the window. Well, I think it was peering in. It didn’t have a face. It had a blank greenish-gray concave, as if its face had been removed out with an ice cream scoop.”
- AtLeastImGenreSavvy, “The Thing in the Yard”

“‘There was a face in the water. Well, sort of a face. Pale with a big open mouth and long black hair.’ [...] ‘What I’d taken for hair was this puffy fungus-like growth all down the hunched back of it. The hands probing our bridge were also puffy, like they’d been in the water a long time. The fingers weirdly long and thicker at the tips. [...] It had no eyes. They just weren’t there. The skin was all smooth over the dents but if it did have eye sockets they were empty. No nose, either. Just these slanted slits. And the mouth [...] was round like a suckerfish. Full of slender pointed needleteeth. We could see...we could see the mouth dilating and contracting, like it was breathing hard. And it looked up. It looked right up at us without eyes.’”
- atbest, “Needleteeth”

It is of critical significance that though many of these stories are incorporated into the Slender Man Mythos, the monster or bogeyman they feature frequently appear to take on a unique aesthetic aspect as part of the medial bricolage their audience shares. In “A Knock in the Night,” the creature appears bestial and feline, in contrast to a monochromatic suit in an incongruous environment. Nevertheless, the narrator’s husband whispers to them at a forested gas station that “SLEEEENDY IS WAITING FOR YOU UP THERE,” referring to Slender Man by name. The story is being shared in a public forum, Reddit’s “r/nosleep” board, where stories belonging to this mythos are expected to take on certain aesthetic and political affordances, a deviation from which ought to be regarded to some extent as a reactive choice, particularly if the author’s purpose is for the story to gain traction within the community as a valuable contribution. To this extent, if the monster appears somehow different, its acceptance by the text community depends on adherence to certain constants, such as Lévi-Strauss might consider critical to

mythemes. In this case, the mytheme is a body of tropes having been established within a localized popular culture, but what the monsters have in common is instructive as to the nature of this body of tropes, as well as its attendant political and ideological sensibilities. In effect, what we are observing in this apparent relation to a common mytheme is what philosopher Slavoj Žižek is the ideological component embedded in the antagonisms present in the material product of the enthusiasts' collective fantasy--the Slender Man stories and mythos. In "Fantasy as a Political Category," Žižek claims that "this materialization of ideology in the external materiality renders visible inherent antagonisms that the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge" (Žižek, p. 89). The fantasy being entertained is that these stories are offering an alternative form of storytelling (and experience of reading) to the kind of storytelling which is capitalistic in nature--that which is commodified. In this way they are pursuing a post-structuralist approach: by presenting an alternative, there is an inherent fantasy that they will absolve storytelling of commodification and return it to its apparently folkloric roots--misapprehended as "purer."

One feature which reveals this antagonism is the monster's face. It is described in three of these stories, and in each, the face is ostensibly different, yet there is a common thematic quality to each. The monster in "A Knock in the Night" is described above as having "miniscule, pin prick teeth," suggesting that they are visible in the image, and the creature is said to be waving after the narrator departs, having left a message written in blood, "Good bye. Thanks for playing." These elements strongly suggest an uncanny friendliness the creature is affecting, and this points to the visible teeth in the image as an uncanny grin. In spite of the deviation from the "normative" faceless Slender

Man, the monster here obeys what Žižek calls an "imp of perversity" in its fixed rictus grin--the uncanniness of its rigidity that it has in common with Slender Man maintains this ideological antagonism that text community members share. The creature in "Needleteeth" appears to have a circular mouth "like a suckerfish" that does not suggest an expression at all either, as well as the suggestion of eye sockets without any eyes. The creature in "The Thing in the Yard" appears to possess a concave, "scooped out" emptiness, rather than the mannequin-like featureless-ness that the Slender Man takes on in most of his depictions. All of this is to suggest two critical qualities that define Slender Man monsters and which act as ideological keystones—one, which is a general and uncanny humanoid aspect with *limited* bestial qualities, and the other, which is some kind of immutable and inscrutable countenance. In pursuit of the second quality, it is of critical significance that the mouth can be either of *no* expression, or of *fixed* expression, like a rictus grin, for instance.

In his 1919 paper, "The 'Uncanny'," Sigmund Freud acknowledges the various ways in which subjects might experience that which is fearsome. He goes at length into presenting various definitions and synonyms for the root term of 'uncanny', *homelike* (*heimlich*) and determines that it frequently relies upon its antonym, *unheimlich*, or 'un-home-like' to define what is both familiar and comfortable for the subject. He argues, "In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud, 7). Ernst Jentsch, with whom Freud is informally corresponding with in his essay, wrote in "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," that, "Among

all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate, and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate—and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness. The mood lasts until these doubts are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling” (Jentsch, 8). Jentsch goes on to discuss the relationship between this effect and automatons, artificial dolls, and the like, arguing that the “unpleasant impression is well known that readily arises in many people when they visit collections of wax figures [...]. In semi-darkness it is often especially difficult to distinguish a life-size wax or similar figure from a human person. [...Such] a figure also has the ability to retain its unpleasantness after the individual has taken a decision as to whether it is animate or not. [...] In storytelling, one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader uncertain as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character” (Jentsch, 9-11). Each of these claims builds on the notion that an uncanny apparition of this kind is frequently both humanoid, yet distinctly artificial, but also typically excites uncertainty in the reader as to whether it is animate or not, as well as the presence of darkness, incongruousness, and (as one of Freud’s contributions) that the home-like contains an *occult* quality—that the uncanny object retains the possibility of familiarity as that which is *heimlich* is also obscured. The preservation of the uncanny uncertainty hinges upon both the evident monstrousness, but also a persistent beckoning possibility of friendliness. The creature in “A Knock in the Night” waves at the narrator, presumably smiles, and bids

them a polite goodbye, beckoning the possibility of familiarity, and this is critical to the aesthetic sensibilities of the mythos, and, I argue, its ideological sensibilities as well, as it echoes the dual-handed nature of trolling practices, allowing the creature's wave to act as a knowing glance at the genre-savvy user, and simply terrifying to the casual observer. Both trolling and this uncanny relationship with humanity these monsters share offer the same ideological antagonism under the guise of material terror. Žižek would refer to this point, terror, as material utility. In this sense, text community members are providing these mechanisms of terror out of material sincerity. They utilize the uncanny purely because it is terrifying, and troll purely for the humour of it. Žižek argues, however, that the "'purely material sincerity' of the external ideological ritual, not the depth of the subject's inner convictions and desires, is the true locus of the fantasy that sustains an ideological edifice" (91). The apparent commitment to this utilitarian entertainment is positioned against the ideological considerations behind what, precisely, renders these monsters terrifying. They are scary because they appear human and friendly, but harbour secretly monstrous intentions: A reasonably clear articulation of the terrifying material situation in which these texts are exchanged.

"What Lurks in the Backwoods" is written as a post in the Nosleep Reddit subforum, but in the metatext, as described above, it takes on the appearance of a truthful confession. The comments in the forum are circumspect in addressing the authenticity of events. While there are compliments on the story, which Marrinho accepts, pointing inconclusively to artifice. One commenter, Novaalia, says, "Wow had me on the edge of my seat! Great Read!" to which he replies "Thank you!" There are other commenters

which appear to take the story seriously, however, which he indulges. One such commenter, tehjessicarae, asks “Why were there no other campers around?” To which Marinho replies, “My best guess is that they were wary of whatever we encountered that night.” The first example exchange refers to the story as a “read,” which is a common term for fiction, but can also simply refer to a written account. More importantly, however, complimenting in this way fails to show respectful reverence for the tragedy of a real events. In this way, it is conspicuously side-stepping the issue of its veracity. In the second example, however, the authenticity of the events appears more explicitly. Marinho’s saying “My best guess” strongly indicates he does not claim authorship of fictitious events—rather that he is producing an account of actual events. In this sense, he can both accept praise for his account, but *not* for its contents. This metatextual paradigm suggests two further conclusions. First, not only do the aesthetic contents of the story take on this persistent uncanny uncertainty that Jentsch and Freud describe, but the situation of the story itself takes on a similar aspect of uncanny uncertainty in which directly attesting to the story’s authenticity one way or another by readers or writers appears to be taboo, as to do so might resolve the paradox such that it ‘gives way to other feelings.’ Here again, we see the parallel of uncanny antagonisms between the medial situation and the stories themselves. Lévi-Strauss claims that the purpose of folklore is to bridge such paradoxes—that taboos prevent this purpose suggests that, by Lévi-Strauss’ definition, it is not folklore. The story not only fails to resolve both paradoxes, but *actively perpetuates them*. This is crucial to the second conclusion: that there is a commonly accepted, if unacknowledged accord between writers and readers whose purpose is to perpetuate this paradigm of uncanny paradox between the members.

There are varying degrees of adherence to this standard, but all seem to acknowledge its preeminence in the community. This mutually-accepted purpose is the 'imp of perversity' pointing to an ideological concern.

It is of critical significance that the tensions between reality and fiction in the Slender Man mythos are maintained. This is not just an interest in maintaining the uncanny affect of the Slender Man stories, nor is it a primary concern that it not be allowed to resolve social tensions for those who read or write them. The uncanny tension provides a site in which the text community can indulge an enigma *in relation* to the real conditions of existence, which are as inscrutably sublime as the text community presumes them to be constant. In effect, the uncanny aspects of these stories are meant to unnerve through instilling everyday situations and objects with dread. Symbolically, this offers enthusiasts a vehicle by which to express mistrust in existing messages and institutions. It is not just that Slender Man appears frighteningly familiar, but that his suit and impassive nature can stand for a similar mistrust in the formal businessperson, and the institutions that employ them, and thus serve as an affirmation of their own extranormality.³⁷ In this way, employing the uncanny to destabilize existing objects and institutions can be put to nihilistic use. Telling a story in the Slender Man Mythos may appear to be benign creative storytelling, and indeed it is. However, the ways in which the authors address and relate to their audience suggest certain imagery, phrasing, and plot devices that suggest via fantasy an anticipated architecture of ideological thinking which is revealing. The themes and characters that are popular within this community also reflect this kind of storytelling, and the recurring use of uncanny imagery in this case resonates

³⁷ See Chapter 3.

due to its capacity to destabilize what is normal, and suggests that this is a vested interest for the community of readers. The uncanny, however, is not inherently nihilistic, though it is sometimes considered as such, as the destabilizing of the familiar does not inherently offer any alternate point of stability to recontextualize the uncanny object. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues from the Marxist perspective that the “kernel” of a material commodity’s value is labour, but that the imagined state of relations between labour and commodities is a dream—a fantasy. Žižek argues that dreams of this kind might take on many forms but the conditions of its existence are predicated on the immutability of that set of relations—this, he argues, is ideology. He accepts that value relations might be antagonistic, but holds, much like in “Fantasy as a Political Category,” that they are predicated on one another to derive value. Post-structuralist theory would suggest that the methodology of deconstructionism provides a critical aim in understanding discursive binary oppositions—that they are to understand, establish, and create better discursive modes of thinking through resolution, and that persisting antagonisms are tantamount to nihilism. Žižek argues that this embraces an empirical objectivism with which he disagrees, as he sees that empiricism as inherently ideological—it establishes an obligation on the part of the subject to deny an extant position within a social order. The disavowal of one’s position in an ideological edifice of social order inherent in the denial of the subject manifested by their empirical approach is a refusal to engage with that edifice, and a tacit acceptance of the socio-cultural privilege with which such an abdication can take place. In other words, for Žižek, aspiration to universalism is the privilege of the affluent—it perpetuates Marxist class hierarchies rather than subverting them.

Žižek argues that latent Marxist commodities exchange underlies an ideological marketplace that predicates itself on universalism as an antidote to social class. Within this inverted structure, it is imperative to note that *The Sublime Object of Ideology* posits the deliberate obfuscation of commodities exchange within this cultural marketplace are ideological affirmations of those exchange conditions. For Žižek, ideology is the imagined (not false) relation to the real conditions of existence, and that it is performed by subjects through material practices. “Indeed, people can ‘know’ very well that they are fetishizing—for example, treating money *as if* it has intrinsic value—and yet still find themselves doing it for all that” (Žižek). He argues that cynicism, the knowledge and ironical refusal of so-called illusory commodity fetishism, is no antidote to the real conditions of ideology. In this kind of sensibility, there is a willful act of obfuscation taking place in which the awareness of the artificial nature of the behaviour does not inhibit either the exchange, nor the fetishizing of the commodities in exactly the terms they present. It is in this modality that, for the Slender Man text community, it is irrelevant whether or not they take the Slender Man stories as “true accounts.” Even if they are gleefully ironic about their responses to these stories, well aware of their basis in fiction, in the real conditions of this community, these stories are *treated as if they are* authentic. This is why the sublime uncanny tensions these stories seem to exhibit are essential for that text community to maintain, as it forms the basis for the ideological affordances of their exchange value.

Perhaps the most critical question to this project is, how can these stories possess exchange value if they are freely distributed without authorial agency? What these

stories show us is the way in which cultural capital is exchanged online through the medium of social media.³⁸ A critical comment, I think, on Marrinho's story "What Lurks in the Backwoods" is by user DipenG, who states "Nicely written! Have an upvote [smiley]." To which Marrinho replies "Thank you!" This is the most quantifiable way in which the exchange of cultural capital is mediated by Reddit. The provision for Likes, Upvotes, Shares, Retweets, etc. is a convenient mechanism establishing base value relations between social media posts, and thus, between users. When commentators in news media programs proclaim that social media users have *become* the commodity by which Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc. make money, it is only one part of the equation to conclude that the information they share provides those companies with a commodity that they use to generate income. By cultivating and curating a collection of posts, shared articles, friends, images, and comments that are deemed valuable by the socio-cultural *container*, users become commodities for one another, and this often becomes the basis for real materials exchange as well, such as when a user sells their popular Slender Man story to a publisher. The term "container" is important, here. Sites like Facebook and Reddit provide for a certain degree of user "play" in establishing their own groups or subreddits (for example) in which terms for cultural capital can be set and adhered to, despite being contingent upon compatibility with the overarching system that the site or app allows for. In other words, while the degree of reverent authenticity with which users treat Slender Man stories might provide them with cultural capital, the unit of exchange for that value is still Reddit's 'upvote' mechanism. Note, however, that the vote itself is not strictly of value itself, but rather how that vote plays into a networked economy. The

³⁸ (P. Bourdieu)

value is the forum in which likes are shared. While there is material value to individuals in this context as I have described, the mechanism itself also acts as a reflexive recognition of the value of the forum as a whole, and is mutually beneficial to all participants. Each contributes to the value of the forum, particularly in relation to other fora in the medium. Reddit will often display ranked popular Subreddits and posts within them, and this allows their communal Subreddit to attain higher status and recognition. Thus the value becomes the affiliation with that Subreddit--the economy as a whole, rather than an individual exchange, is what offers the most in terms of cultural capital.

While the exchange of texts within the Slender Man mythos might appear to resolutely deny schema of cultural capital exchange, inhibiting the traditional manifestations of its authority such as intellectual property, the staking of ownership, and the selling of edited, polished, and published works, etc., it merely replaces them with other exchange practices copacetic with the mechanisms of deconstructionist universalism—the denial of the subject by the denying of authorial ownership; the resistance to declaring the stories as authentic accounts or as fiction; the tacit maintaining of the uncanny tensions in their content—each of these are distinctive obfuscations of a subject position—the denial of the self—that contribute to the same unstated empirical ideal represented by the universalism of post-structuralism, privileging a position free of ideological constraint.³⁹ Of course, the unstated point that this exchange has no material investment

³⁹ I refer several times to 'deconstructivism' because I am gesturing to a particular aspect of post-structuralist thinking, which is the productive deconstruction of ideological binary oppositions. As is the case with many contemporary social movements from which this text community is drawing its ideological architecture and aims, there is a universalism underpinning post-structuralist thinking: if binary oppositions can be deconstructed, then perhaps what remains will be somehow whole, complete, or purified. If, by exposing a model of exploitation and hypocrisy, we can show that the edifice is at odds with its apparent aims, we might do away with that edifice or reform it so that it becomes consistent--hence, universalized, to the extent that it has been harmonized. If, for example, we are to use cell phone vid-

entertains an imp of ideological perversity as well: the declaration that it is pure utility and the presentation of value in the forum itself--the subculture--is ideologically declarative, and positions itself against monetized subcultural counterparts--against capitalism itself. Not just Slender Man, but the very mode of production can thereby be offered as antidote to everyday alienation, as a kernel of reality presented sincerely. The persistent impression that Slender Man texts ought to be regarded as folklore—as evidence of the closure of the “Gutenberg Parenthesis”—is part of those same deconstructivist sensibilities. While they may be authentic to the extent that they are sincere manifestations of the set of imagined relations to real conditions, they are not illustrating the Lacanian Real itself. Reality is, as Žižek claims, by nature unassimilable. He borrows from Jacques Lacan when he claims that the moment the subject articulates, they manifest an ideological syntagmatic *relation* to reality, *not* reality itself. If the text community perceives that reality is articulated through the sublime, via the obscured, the taboo, or the perverse, that is a problematic state of emic ideation for the traditional aims of post-structuralism. If, through the ideal of universalism, the perverse becomes a conduit for truth, this belies their stated purpose of establishing *better* paradigms for social structure and thought in an effort to avoid nihilism, instead becoming a breeding ground for new and contrary ideologies founded on perversity. This is why Slender Man’s popularity is predicated to a significant degree on its presentation as folklore. To do so affords the texts a status exempt from ideology, in adherence to poststructuralist sensibilities,

eos to show police officers acting monstrously, this will reveal their practices as contrary to their stated aims as preservers of the peace and as benevolent protectors. Thus, we might be compelled to reform their practices so that they are in line with their stated role. The fantasy for the Slender Man text community is that by showing a better, more “authentic,” more compelling form of terror, than the commodified and packaged version of storytelling will be shown to be inadequate: it does not sufficiently terrify us, and so it does not really *know* us, because it is shown to be unfeeling—merely profiteering, and commodifying its readers. Thus, we will be compelled to reform our practices of storytelling.

as if it might provide a glimpse of the Real, and thereby the state of ideological exemption privileged by the dominant poststructuralist perspective of the Western world. It is, however, a historical reality that in a state of nihilistic permissiveness, those ideologies which are most profoundly different from what came before, and often predicated on what is obscured, i.e. the perverse, the taboo, etc., become the most compelling and gain the most public traction. To this extent we can see how the lure of authenticity that folklore offers the text community provides a theoretical basis for authenticating their creation as symbolically universal, and they pursue this authenticity through a wide array of textual strategies. Yet the conditions under which Slender Man might be employed as a symbol in practice reveal its imbrication in a social and ideological economy. As a result of such an object orientation, Slender Man can act as a symbol, but endemic to a particular population and its historical concerns.

Chapter Two: Convergence Culture and Embodiment

Tribalism and Opposition

In the conclusion to the previous chapter, it became apparent that the text community derives part of its value from its relation to other subcultures represented in the fora in which the stories are exchanged. To understand the Slender Man phenomenon and its significance in this broader online culture, it is critical to understand some of the fundamental mechanics and early history of online society, as Slender Man is expressive of the particular tensions these mechanics evoke, and the motivations behind those tensions underline the antagonism they appear to feel for broader cultures. One of the major aspects of interaction online that differentiates it from real-world interactions is time. Among the most powerfully interpellating functions of online social interaction is the fact that most often, they do not take place in real time. Another is that early electronic bulletin board culture, the principal precursor to modern social media, was imbued with an oppositional social dynamic from its inception.

In its infancy, online communication was a niche interest undertaken by a privileged few with access to advanced enough computers to enable networking. Many of the sites where this happened are well-documented. In the early days of computing at the University of Michigan in 1971, Bill Joy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, was given access to campus computers at the Computer Centre for no more than an hour at a time, paid for through an account with a fixed amount of money. In his words, "someone figured out that if you put in 'time equals' and then a letter, like t equals k , they wouldn't charge you" (Joy, qtd. in Gladwell, 46). As the lab was open for 24 hours, he spent the majority of his time there. The suggestion that "someone" was there to spread around

the information that the system could be cheated suggests what many similar stories do, that there was a shared in-group of users that worked together to practice their mutual and meticulous passion. In *Dungeons and Dreamers*, Brad King describes an "unruly group of students" at MIT in 1961 were among the first to develop a lasting community online.

The computer science program there was one of the most advanced in the country, with brilliant minds studying topics ranging from artificial intelligence to database construction. This particular group, associated with the campus's model railroad club, was simply in love with the ability to manipulate the mainframe computers in unconventional ways, and its members spent virtually all their free time playing. They created a series of software programs that had little to do with their official curriculum, ranging from the whimsical to the intensely practical. Among these was a game they called Spacewar!. [...] Tens of millions of dollars in U.S. Department of Defense funding poured into the computer research labs at MIT, Carnegie Mellon, and Stanford, earmarked for serious research, while recipients of the funding spent hundreds of hours figuring better ways to model space battles. As early as 1963, Stanford administrators ordered students and faculty to stop playing Spacewar! during daytime hours. (King, 26)

This paints a picture that is shared in stories by Bernie Galler, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and many others, which detail a growing subculture of likeminded, focused, and brilliant

young people with a mutual fascination bordering on obsession, and rooted by gaming. Much of what facilitated socializing between members of this exceptional community, more akin to letters and notes than discussion, was a multilateral foundation for online 'electronic bulletin board' (BBS) culture, often shortened to "board" culture.⁴⁰ As connectivity spread between independent networks, boards were established for this niche community with access to them in which they left posts for one another. In later days of the Internet, this became the basis for chat rooms which were modelled similarly.

The ability for users to remain anonymous was limited, however, and their computers were not insulated with counter-intrusion security. Much of the Internet in these early days was in use by the United States government, and those outside public few that steadily increased their illicit activities, spying and intruding upon others' computers shared data via these chat boards. It was in this way that online society and board culture became associated with illicit activity, and this association formed the basis for imbuing sites like 4chan with an outsider dynamic. The illicit activity of board culture in the late 1980s and early 90s caused what Bruce Sterling refers to eponymously in the title of his 1993 book *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*. Sterling details the US Secret Service's Operation: Sundevil, in which they conducted a series of raids, arrests, and confiscations of property against known hacker groups in Arizona, including the well-known group 'Legion of Doom'. While they were unsuccessful in shutting down these groups entirely, the operation is remembered as an early show of force by the US government against illegal computer intrusion, but which simultaneously concretized the dichotic relationship between online BBS communities and

⁴⁰ Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*

sovereign government authority. In response, a number of interested individuals including Mitchell Kapor founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which contracted lawyers to represent the hackers arrested during Operation: Sundevil. Kapor would go on to found both the Lotus corporation, and more significantly the Mozilla corporation—developers of the Firefox Internet browser which was widely popularized in the early 2000s for its commitment to user liberty and insulation against commercial information sifting efforts, which are now a widespread phenomenon emblemized by events as recently as 2018 in the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal.

The early oppositional dynamic created in these clashes defined the rebellious attitudes of the early adopters of online society. Coinciding with this social dynamic is a phenomenon which modern software development has brought to public attention in recent years and which BBS systems (perhaps unwittingly) utilized to foster community engagement known somewhat obliquely as ‘user retention’ or ‘customer retention’. It refers to mechanisms within various kinds of computer applications to sustain a user’s engagement over a sustained period of time. Developers use various involved psychological principles to foster user retention. Possibly the most significant mechanism that employs such principles is used by all enormous and widespread social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter—the function by which one refreshes their feed to look for community responses in the form of replies, likes, re-tweets, etc. This refresh mechanism is commonly employed in modern, mobile versions of these apps by the user’s pulling the feed “down” with their finger and releasing it—a motion which some developers have compared to a slot machine, with documented neurological responses similar to those seen in narcotics users. The film *The Social Network* which fictionalizes the

story of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, ends with a particularly evocative scene in which he is alone in a Cambridge pub repeatedly clicking the refresh button on his laptop browser awaiting a reply for a friend request from a woman. This exploitative relationship with users' dopamine responses is one of the main reasons for the rapid growth of many online service providers. In one statement at Summit LA on Nov. 3rd, 2017, Netflix founder Reed Hastings claimed that his company's biggest competitor was now "sleep." These now-established techniques for user retention were responsible in part for the tribalistic oppositional dynamic of early BBS culture, which required a similar "refresh" mechanism in order for users to see new posts, including replies to their own. There is no capacity for an individual to "hear" a reply passively, as they might in face-to-face interactions. Instead, they must actively engage this refresh mechanism to "listen" for a reply to their statements online. In this way, it is possible that they be many times as invested in social interaction in these online spaces as they are in person, and this function hinges on the interaction's not having taken place *in real time*. That it must be an exchange of posted messages and alerts may be incidental to the medium, but it is instrumental to the development of tribalism online that they must be so much more attentive, and receive a dopamine response in actively seeking and finding validation for their claims. This is one of several ways in which the affordances of the medium heighten the stakes for users with regards to social validation. It cultivates a near-narcotic level of dependency in its users.⁴¹

⁴¹ Game mechanics not only play a role in user retention, but also cultivate a level of stimulus response in users when they are applied to narratives in the form of what Espen Aarseth refers to in his eponymous book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergotic Literature*. Aarseth outlines the ways in which narratives can expand beyond the traditional confines of the page, such as through the use of hyperlinks, and in conjunction with gamification practices, explains how exploring a boundless digital narraform such as Slender Man becomes both compulsive and competitive, and builds into online tribalism.

At the same time, the early 1990s saw the rise of broader access to Internet culture. There were many ways in which broader culture integrated the Internet, but one of the earliest was in video gaming online. In contrast to BBS culture and its contemporary counterpart in social media interaction, video games provided one of the first instances of widespread, near real-time interaction between individuals online via the Internet. Predating widespread use of instant messaging platforms such as ICQ, AOL Messenger, or MSN Messenger, the burgeoning first-person shooter (FPS) genre of video games became among the first stable platforms by which relative strangers could interact with one another online.⁴² This kind of play from a first-person perspective had not seen widespread application in prior modes of video gaming, such as console gaming, as 8-bit and 16-bit formats did not readily support the rapidly-developing 64-bit isometric viewpoints that were emerging in the more flexible PC systems with more easily interchangeable parts that could adapt more quickly to developing technologies. Marketing a contained console system more capable of supporting such technology ran too great a risk of rapid obsolescence as capabilities expanded. By the time consoles such as 1993's Atari Jaguar made it to market, the newer 64-bit FPS titles they could support were already outclassed by newer and more advanced PC titles, and led to Atari's complete withdrawal from the console hardware market, despite having been the first company to have provided a true dedicated home gaming console system. Id Software's 1993 title, *Doom*, was not only met with widespread popularity among the gaming community, but was among the first to provide integrated support for online play, and users

⁴² Instant messaging systems had existed before that point, notably IRC, or, Internet Relay Chat as early as 1988, but it was the province of the existing BBS culture, already aversely positioned against broader society as evidenced by their independent, non-profit networks characterized by rather separatist titles such as 'The Undernet'.

could connect their PCs to local networks and play against one another in 'deathmatch arena' modes of play.⁴³ While a modicum of computing acumen was required of players to do so, one function of this kind of play was the ability to post real-time messages to the server that would appear briefly on each player's screen, with a username attached that players could assign when they joined the server. *Doom* would go on to be adapted to many different dedicated platforms, including a downgraded 16-bit version for Nintendo's Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), though the port did not perform as well having been released well after its PC counterpart.

This advanced communicative capacity combined with widespread popularity among affluent young boys to whom *Doom* was marketed combined with several additional factors to suture the adversarial dynamic already established in early Internet culture against social and government authority to this emerging community of young gamers. Among these factors was a contemporaneous series of moral panics associated with gaming culture in particular among young boys. The disappearance and subsequent suicide of James Dallas Egbert III from Michigan State University in 1979 had previously attracted widespread public attention to his devotion to the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which sparked a lasting panic over the game, associating it with satanic ritual. This was later discredited as Egbert was shown to have been suffering from a number of debilitating mental conditions prior to his disappearance, but the association remained, until its attention was refocused on video games in the early

⁴³ According to *International Business Times*, *Doom* was distributed by id Software via a File Transfer Protocol (FTP) site on the University of Washington's network, and players shared the game on other FTP sites. It would ultimately go on to make over \$100,000 from \$9 'shareware' versions of the game alone (a sample first chapter of the complete game's three), and was eventually purchased and/or played by an estimated ten million players within its first year. This was an unprecedented level of game circulation and play at the time.

1990s. *Doom*'s circulation was widespread enough to attract the attention of mass media outlets in association with the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Co. in 1999, in which mass shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were said to have been avid enthusiasts. This dovetailed with a moral panic occurring in 1994 with the events of the 'West Memphis Three', in which three teenage boys, Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley, and Jason Baldwin were convicted of having tortured and killed three eight year-old boys, again in alleged association with satanic ritual. The conviction at the time had been extremely controversial, and forensic evidence has since broadly absolved the three of having conclusively participated in the crimes, but they became associated with a 'satanic panic' in which parents feared their children's involvement in cult activities. The overwhelming majority of such claims have been discredited to the extent that the panic became historically considered an event of mass hysteria, as scholar Sarah Hughes points out in her essay "American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000." "During the 1980s, the legal and economic ramifications of ritual-abuse accusations, as well as ongoing news reports of cases, appeared to validate a national hysteria over the presence of devil-worshipping pedophiles in America's suburbs. [...] [These] suburbs in the 1980s were prone to hysteria, which was catalyzed and temporarily endorsed by the legal system, as well as by news and entertainment media." though this historical context served to solidify the adversarial dynamic of young male gamers against broader society, perceived in light of these circumstances to be short-sighted and judgemental.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ These claims are not without justification. The *New York Times* reported in a 2016 retrospective on the moral panic associated with *Dungeons and Dragons* that "the explosion of video games over the last few decades has been accompanied not by an increase in youth violence but, rather, by a sharp decline. Justice Department statistics show

The widely-publicized panic and outrage concerning violent video games contributed to the marriage of the existing and authority-averse community of early BBS culture with video gaming culture. This, combined with the competitive nature of these deathmatch-style FPS games led to an internal culture of tribalism among players. In 1996, a fan site for id Software's latest popular FPS title, *Quake*, produced a 'middleware' platform, GameSpy, for matchmaking between players looking to play multiplayer games online. The company was wildly popular among FPS gamers, and provided a platform through which laypeople could play online without the acumen required for external player organization by the game's internal multiplayer support. It provided a list of subscribing servers in which to play, and a chat function similar to instant messaging platforms launching to widespread popularity at the time (Mirabilis' ICQ having been released in the same year). This system vastly increased the degree of multiplay in the gaming community, and facilitated the creation of loose organizations of players known at the time by the tribalistic moniker, 'Quake clans' that further enmeshed members of the community. Statistics of relative success rates, reputations, etc. led to an atmosphere of competitive social status (again, under the auspices of an 'alternative lifestyle' averse to broader culture) which prefigured the modern incarnations of professional e-sports teams with widespread popularity today, and which possess corporate sponsorship deals that collectively are reported by statistics company Statista to have reached 882.4 million US dollars in 2020, and projected to reach 1.2 billion by 2023 (Gough).

that in 1994 there were 497 arrests for violent crimes for every 100,000 Americans ages 10 to 17. Since then, the arrest rate has fallen almost without interruption year by year. In 2014, it stood at 158, not even one-third of what it was 20 years earlier," (Haberman, 2016).

Gaming culture collectively has been shifting demographically to accommodate a rising number of women and girl gamers. The Entertainment Software Association reported in 2014 that seventeen percent of video gamers are boys under the age of eighteen, and thirty-six percent are women over the age of eighteen, with forty-eight percent of all gamers being women. Competition in esports in 2019 was five percent women to ninety-five percent men. Viewership of competitive esports events in 2019 was seventy percent men to thirty percent women. This demographic skew suggests that the competitive tribalist culture of FPS gaming was, in its infancy at the very least, coded as a male activity.

Convergence and Alterity

In his work, media scholar Henry Jenkins outlines the broad aspects of participatory culture online, with several key characteristics he outlines. One, that participatory culture has relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement. Two, that it has strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others. Three, that it has some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. Four, members of such a cultural body believe that their contributions matter. Five, that members feel some degree of social connection with one another, or that they care what other people think about what they have created. He cautions that not every member must contribute but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued. He also outlines four key forms of participatory culture. One is Affiliation, where member-

ships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media (such as Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace). The second is expressions, in which members produce new creative forms of existing media forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, and mash-ups. The third is collaborative problem-solving, in which members work together in teams, both formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, and spoiling). Finally in circulations, in which members shape the flow of media through modes such as podcasting or blogging (Jenkins et al, 2009). In Jenkins' book *Convergence Culture*, he describes a contemporaneous state of online culture that results from these conditions of participatory culture and its manifest forms, which is a vast proliferation of channels, content producers, and platforms, all of which possess a relatively equal degree of qualitative significance, and from which participants are informally called upon to aggregate and assemble a gestalt experience of culture online. Jenkins' perspective is that this has created a space in which participants are more empowered than ever to participate and collaborate.

In the case of Slender Man and the internal culture of creepypasta, influenced as it is by the history of users in the various fora from which these stories emerge, I argue that Jenkins' observations about the participatory nature of online culture, and the resulting state of convergence he describes, are both in fact correct, but that the *empowerment* he argues results from these phenomena is perhaps an ideologically delineated term. It limits the experience of convergence to users' positive feelings of freedom and capacity for creation that allows for those participants to engage and feel welcome. In

the case of the Slender Man phenomenon, I argue that reactionaries to convergence, comprised of a vast number of affluent young male gamers in particular, have instead produced an artistic expression of social tensions experienced by those faced with the responsibilities associated with the level of engagement that Jenkins' convergence culture entails, and that are in turn rebelling against its pressures. In part, they see socio-normative expressions of convergence culture as the products of commodified inauthenticity. This is evidenced when such expressions are presented as platform-based collaboration, such as gathering through social media groups and built on funding mechanisms such as Kickstarter and Patreon. In this process, each of the aspects of participatory culture and convergence that Jenkins outlines exists in a confining and negative context for these individuals. I argue that the participatory culture that these reactionaries are contributing to is indeed empowering, but that it is enabling them to engage in concordant expressions that are often violent, sometimes fatal, dehumanizing, and the product of hate, in the vein of racism, sexism, ethnicism, and sectarianism. While it is important to note that this project's contention with Jenkins' use of the term 'empowerment' is perhaps an ideological distinction to the extent that the expressions of convergence as either 'good' or 'bad' is dependent upon an extant framework of moral hygiene, my perspective is that the phenomenon of convergence within the participatory culture of the Internet is *inherently* neither one or the other. It is, on its face, a tool. It can and has been used in a manifest way for the betterment of the disenfranchised, the empowering of a vast array of cultural production that might otherwise have never been widely circulated, and the expansion of knowledge on a broad scale. Convergence may itself be an apolitical phenomenon, but does act as a vehicle for ideological content.

Similarly, Jenkins' phenomenon as it is described is positioned against a top-down, organizer-based approach that is its antithesis. There is a 'surplus value' in something we might describe as "grassroots," in that that which self-organizes precludes an agenda of exploitative personal interest that a central organizer might harbour in secret. The Slender Man phenomenon provides such a potential means for the expansion of knowledge, as it produces critically significant pieces of gothic and horror art forms and speaks to the social tensions of a cultural identity group—effectively embodying decidedly positive perspective of convergence that Jenkins espouses. It is as a whole, however, also a product of a reactionary group that more commonly is regressive: it disenfranchises others, often inhibiting cultural production, and discourages adaptation and learning within its ranks. It is important to recognize that this reactionary group is not the product of malicious design—it is a product of systemic social issues resulting from what is as of yet an incomplete understanding of participatory culture and convergence online and its impacts on those generations coming of age alongside it. Those individuals comprising its ranks often cannot be held singularly responsible for the resulting ideological architecture or the violent acts perpetrated in its name, and are quite often doing so because of serious and under-appreciated pressures and tensions that I am exploring and which produce in these members real pathological conditions that are worthy of sympathy and assistance.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ There is often a difficulty we experience in coming to understand the nature of pathological responses certain individuals have that result in immoral or criminal acts, where we are forced to delineate between labeling them either 'victim' or 'perpetrator' with no middle ground. It is possible that had someone done something to 'help' a particular bad actor before those acts had been perpetrated, they might have been averted. This diminishes the perpetrator's accountability, and parsing the difference is a contentious concern in many contexts and cases. Neither this position statement nor this project as a whole is meant to offer a stance in this particular debate, nor does it seek to absolve those particular bad actors that emerge, I argue, from this body of reactionaries such as Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian or others, several of which I will consider in later parts of this project.

The Slender Man phenomenon and the fora from which it emerges possess several qualities attributable to participatory culture and convergence that Jenkins describes. 4chan is a site predicated upon the Japanese model of anonymous posting which limits user information. This is definitively a low bar to entry and engagement, and obfuscates any metric of authority that might be utilized to evaluate what they are producing, whether image, utterance, or narrative.⁴⁶ Likewise, without any relative measure of authority or expertise, individual users possess an equally indeterminate level of support for their posts. This is not *support* in the sense that Jenkins means, but is instead a *lack of impediment* to their posting, which has an ostensibly similar effect, but produces an entirely more negative affect for users—they cannot be certain of their post's value, and are therefore as vulnerable to rejection and/or ridicule or even exile as they are to receiving praise and support. Conversely however, users cannot rely on an extant authority to inflate the value of their posts either, and users take comfort in mutual vulnerability. This is a similar process to military boot camps or cult initiation in which cadets or members are broken down psychologically by inconsistent and harsh treatment by superiors so that they come to rely both on the systems into which they are being indoctrinated and on those individuals being indoctrinated along with them for support. It cultivates dependency and affiliation—belonging. This is in part why users become devoted to these communities despite the potentially negative affect they engender. In a study conducted for the journal *Deviant Behavior* in 2012, Dominiek D. Coates reports that "Participants described that emotional and psychological control was achieved through

⁴⁶ Jenkins' aspects of participatory culture and convergence often refer to 'products', 'artistic expressions', and 'cultural production' to refer to multifarious objects users post, but given that anything users post on 4chan or SomethingAwful takes the form of a 'post', this is the term I will be using from here on.

[...] instilling guilt and fear, the use of 'counseling' and 'confessions', inconsistent behavior, the exacerbation of a 'fear of failure' and 'bottle breaking'. 'Bottle breaking' was a term used by one of the participants to describe the need of cult members to be 'destroyed' before the 'authentic' self can be recovered" (175).

Perhaps more significant still is Jenkins' observation that participatory culture online is often characterized by an informal system of mentorship whereby the most experienced pass on information to novices. There are several aspects of this claim that need to be considered carefully. The first is that it is informal—this serves to illustrate one of the ways in which the more venerable board culture online obtained a level of authority among those newer gamers making up a large part of the reactionary community on 4chan. The mode of communication for these users often did not involve personal information as a metric for evaluating a user's authority—they interacted via mercurial usernames and relative expertise in computing, often granted a measure of authority by virtue of the use value of their contributions and/or their relative wittiness. These users and the new body of gamers merge in the early nineties, those more adept users facilitating online multiplayer for the newer players. In fact, the vast majority of Slender Man media emerges from fora which mimic the older BBS format conventions. 4chan's user data is equally ephemeral, and with only a few additional and consistent metrics available on Reddit where many of the content producers eventually migrated. 4chan's organization suggests a direct connection to video gaming, with a disproportionately large number of its fora connected to gaming, and identifying tabletop games such as tabletop role-playing games, miniature wargaming, and board gaming under the forum title

‘/TG/’, or “traditional games.” The use of the word ‘traditional’ is retrospective, suggesting the unqualified equivalent in games is the more modern form of video gaming. The common threads between the older and newer forms and the evidence of inherited adversarial perspectives and modes of communication suggest that there is a genealogical relationship between the two groups, and historical examples of individual instances of mentoring serve to indicate the presence of an informal system of mentoring in which the older BBS culture served to influence the newer generations on SomethingAwful, 4chan, and Reddit.⁴⁷

Similar to the inversion taking place as regards support for members contributions, Jenkins’ suggestion that a participatory culture online must include a sense that its members’ contributions *matter* is equally bound by the 4chan’s ephemerality. An individual user’s contributions are just as likely to be considered relevant by the community as they are to be considered immaterial. What is more significant is Jenkins’ fifth quality of a participatory culture, that members feel some kind of social connection with one another. The two most significant ways in which this works are that members feel an informal affiliation with one another; and that affiliation establishes a firm sense of the group’s authority for the individual, so that when members contribute, they perceive the group’s response to be authoritative, such that their work is perceived to have been

⁴⁷ One example of this kind of mentorship was SomethingAwful founder Richard Kyanka. In his book *It Came From Something Awful*, Dale Beran describes Kyanka as having “occupied a cubicle in a vast, impersonal bureaucracy. Unhappy, he retreated to games and online networks. [...] His attitude typified the American response to the same problem, informed by a counterculture that had spent decades battling corporate co-optation. He knew that fantasy worlds sucked too. [...] *GameSpy* had hired [Kyanka,] a self-hating gamer to promote games to other gamers by mocking them mercilessly. [...] [Kyanka’s] SA’s nerdy content quickly attracted the cynical, pop-culture-obsessed 90s adolescents who were clambering onto the web. All forums suffered from the same systemic problems since the days of Usenet: flame wars, obsessive users, and rude comments. This behavior seemed to come more easily when people were safely separated by their computers. But what set SA’s forums apart was its attitude toward all of this. Rather than strip out all the bizarre aggression that inevitably accompanied forums, SA simply let it grow as a grotesque experiment, cultivated it even. (51-54)

evaluated appropriately. This is an instructive aspect of participatory culture as it applies to the Slender Man community. Each member is beholden to an amorphous collective authority they believe to be ideologically aligned. 4chan users are known to appeal directly to this authority in their use of the term “Anons” in their posts as a way of referring to and marshalling the collective authority.

Each of the ways in which this community operates in accordance with Jenkins’ five qualities of participatory culture serve to cultivate a community which is intensely involved, invested, and insulated by amplified anonymity. Anonymity is not only a predicate to their culture, it is emblematic. As new forms of corporate-owned social media developed, the historically adversarial mentors in this group fostered a sense of solidarity through alterity for the 4chan community. There have been several historical events in relation to these genealogically-related fora which support this claim. For example, users of SomethingAwful retreated against a fast-approaching broader audience that veteran users saw as outsiders—‘normies’—and erected a rather trivial paywall to preserve the space. This accomplished its goal for those veteran users, but also impeded a great deal of their fellow insiders as well, causing them to migrate to 4chan after the fact, seeking refuge in a similarly anonymous space.

This perceived antagonism with normative culture contributed to a common practice in the 4chan space in which users signed in under different usernames each time and adopting a temporary persona in which they might lampoon ideologues appearing on sites like Facebook in which bodies of users were rapidly segregating into friend groups, formally organized group pages, professional pages, sales groups, etc. Users on sites like Facebook have been shown to exploit their relative anonymity and spatial

distance from one another to express themselves more freely than they might in person, in part because such online interactions are unmediated by the vulnerability of their bodily hexis—they are not limited by mediating factors such as relative attractiveness, age, race, sex, nationality, education, religion, or situational context, etc. as these factors are more readily embodied in physical proximity. Social media profiles can be managed by users to diminish or even eliminate these aspects of themselves, as history and various studies have shown them to be mediating factors when evaluating the relative social authority of the speaker.⁴⁸ This is not necessarily true of all Facebook users, but the cultural perception that they *tend to* is enough to produce a reactionary form of satire in alternative groups like the 4chan community. A 4chan user might, for example, create a temporary profile which appears to take on a neo-fascist political bent and participate in heated debate in 4chan’s political subforum with a similarly-affected neo-communist persona in the hopes that it would appear real to vagrant ‘normie’ outsiders reading it, and elicit a violent and sincere response from them. For insiders, this act of stagecraft—“trolling”—is amusing. It is a collaborative and informally-organized performance in which insiders’ sense of *communitas* is strengthened by its alterity to a supposedly normative broader culture from which they are separate and in some extreme cases, adversary. This context serves to illustrate the emphasis the 4chan community places on alterity to a perceived inclination by normative culture to “commit” to a position—to “take something seriously.” In part, this is why this online participatory culture accepts and promotes the perspective that *nothing on the Internet is to be taken seriously*.

⁴⁸ Awan, 2014, and Frost-Arnold, 2016 for example.

This satirical practice is not limited to the realm of politics, though it is one of its principal origins. The genealogical relationship between the old BBS culture and relatively modern 4chan culture is apparent via the broader public's use of the term 'hacker' to label the satirical political group Anonymous, so named for 4chan users' use of the term "anons" to refer to anonymous forum posters which the forum displays to users as "posted by Anonymous" followed by the timestamp. In reporting on organized political activity, mass news media outlets began referring to the group as a "hacktivist" group, once again attaching the term 'hacker' to alternative social groups online and perpetuating the same adversarial dynamic as in the early 90s. This atmosphere of alterity in fora like 4chan can easily become hostile, and particular social dynamics, such as the rise of women video gamers and their integration into the existing community become all too frequently a vector for that hostility.

The Slender Man community emerges from the same origins as 4chan, which had direct links to the Something Awful fora in which Slender Man first appeared. Moreover, the Slender Man community maintains the same oppositional social dynamic at play between 4chan and normative culture. It is not always directly connected to this broader and heavily politicized relationship, but often shares a number of relevant ideological affordances with the polemic which, I argue, define its most characteristic quality—that it is engaging in a similar act of ephemeral impersonation as in the acts of trolling. The extent to which Slender Man community members are looking to deceive outsiders is variable and not readily apparent, yet the fact remains that they share this distinctive mechanical similarity; they appear in the same fora; they adhere to many of

the same formatting conventions; and, among the most critical similarities; they share a sense of utter disembodiment.

As mentioned previously, the mode of social media omits (to varying degrees) the imposition of bodily hexis. This can be considered liberating where users might otherwise feel their state of embodiment is an impediment or creates the impression of bias. The appeal this precluded hexis offers is offset by what this project argues, that a sense of alienation proceeds from the same lack of embodiment. It can also offer us insight as to why members of these fora often adopt bad-faith imitations of social movements for marginalized people (such as the "Incel Movement"), as they are perhaps mistaking this sense of alienation for racism, sexism, etc. (if not actively mocking such movements).

PewDiePie and Embodiment

The lasting influence of the SomethingAwful forums on broader Internet culture is particularly prevalent as it applies to YouTube. One of the most significant forms of gaming culture online has been in the production of guides for play in the form of walkthroughs (a term for step-by-step guides showing readers how to play and succeed in video games online), recorded demonstrations of gaming skill or revealing of secret locations, and many other intended purposes for which gamers produce and distribute recorded sessions of gameplay online. This practice has a long history, but SomethingAwful is credited with having coined the term for videos of gamers simply playing and commentating on their experience of play as they do: Let's Play. The video sharing site YouTube has over the course of its lifetime has adopted more and more features akin to social media to the point that it is often considered a social media site, but the

presence and prominence of video content affords it a measure of bodily hexis that other platforms broadly lack.⁴⁹ As a marketplace for circulation in which users' number of subscribers and likes directly correlates to their profitability (as YouTube proportionately awards its users ad revenue), the relative numbers of a given user's subscribers provides a statistically significant measure of that user's influence online. Omnicore reports that the company, which has only about two thousand employees, commands a subscriber base of about two billion active monthly users. The number of daily users is around thirty million. Of those individual user accounts with the highest number of subscribers, five of the top thirteen are dedicated user accounts of gamers principally producing Let's Play videos. The highest subscribed account in all of YouTube is one of these with a commanding 101 million subscribers (to the second-place's 45 million), Felix Kjellberg, AKA "PewDiePie." Kjellberg is widely regarded as one of the first Let's Play content producers on YouTube, where most previous instances of recorded playing were for demonstrative purposes. While his content has diversified in recent years, his channel has always been built on the model of Let's Play, with one of his most recent videos (eight hours prior to the time of writing) being a 12-hour Let's Play of the game *Minecraft* with over three million views already. Those numbers speak for themselves, and show that Let's Play videos are among the most critically significant forms of user-produced content in the world today. Kjellberg is also one of several of these YouTube personalities that garnered a great deal of early fame and attention with this kind of Let's

⁴⁹ While other platforms possess multimedia capabilities such as Instagram or Facebook, they do not emphasize content to the same degree. Facebook is unfavourably regarded as claiming ownership of such media content shared on its site, and there is no architecture whereby Facebook will reimburse users with a measure of ad revenue for visitors to their pages once they reach a certain level of circulation online in the form of subscribers, likes, or purchases. Consequently, YouTube is the predominant site for content production and profit, where it is only a secondary function of platforms such as Facebook which markets users' social connectedness as its principal product.

Play media, but significant for the purposes of this project is his connection to Slender Man. Among the most popular Let's Play videographers on YouTube, including Kjellberg, Mark Edward Fischbach, and Seán William McLoughlin, each has in common that among their first videos to gather attention and build their expansive channels were Let's Play videos featuring the Slender Man video games *Slender: The Eight Pages* and *Slender: The Awakening*. While there is other content they have posted prior to exploring these particular games, preceding each one's meteoric rise to mass media attention was a focus they had on horror games with "facecams" and their reactions to them, including these games featuring Slender Man.

In reporting on Kjellberg, few news media sources fail to report on him as a controversial figure. He is a 29 year-old Swedish-born white man with affluent origins, coming of age in the early 90s, with an interest in video games and an early disregard for authority.⁵⁰ He skipped school to play video games, as reported by Laura Parker for *The Rolling Stone* magazine. His video content has been praised as "unfiltered and raw" (Parker), but this has proven to cut both ways as he has been met with criticism for racism, anti-semitism, and pro-Nazi statements. These comments have been documented in large part by a series of articles penned primarily by Internet culture writer Abby Ohlheiser for the Wall Street Journal. In a tense moment of gaming in one of his videos, Kjellberg referred to another player as a "f---ing n-----" (redaction mine). Such remarks have periodically surfaced in his commentary, and while he demonstrated immediate contrition for his remarks, in a response statement he posted later, he claimed "You probably won't believe me when I say this, but whenever I go online, and I hear other

⁵⁰ His mother, Lotta Kristine Johanna Kjellberg is a former Chief Information Officer, named 2010 CIO of the year in Sweden, and his father Christian is also a corporate executive.

players use the same kind of language that I did, I always find it extremely immature and stupid and I hate how I now personally fed into that part of gaming as well” (PewDiePie, "My Response"). He went on to claim that he used the word “in the heat of the moment,” choosing “the worst word I could possibly think of.” Whether or not his comments are to be taken as sincere, his response affords two possible conclusions, one, that this kind of language is indeed widespread as he claims in the online gaming community, and two, that in reaching for the “worst possible” word, he is indirectly displaying a predilection for alterity, likely in a way that is shared by many in the online gaming community. In light of remarks such as these and a series of videos in which he does criticize what he sees as ‘PC culture’, a position shared by figures such as Alex Jones and Jordan Peterson (whose book *12 Rules for Life* Kjellberg promoted on his channel), many of his corporate sponsors such as Disney and YouTube itself withdrew from dealing directly with him. His subscriber base, however, did not diminish. On the contrary, it continues to rise.⁵¹ This suggests that through the vector of alterity, a sensibility I have argued is shared by the cultures of what is sometimes called the “old Internet,” figureheads such as Kjellberg are both empowering those users that take such statements sincerely, and also embodies the concerns of a significant portion of the gaming community that at least shares his irreverence.⁵² Kjellberg’s generation of interconnected children coming of age in an online world experience a constant record of their statements and actions, readily archived in social media, with which they reckon on

⁵¹ TrackAlytics reports that his channel had 53 million subscribers in February in 2017 when Disney cut ties with Kjellberg, and as of September 2020, he doubled his subscribers to 106 million.

⁵² As a proponent of gaming culture, his reactionary statements run against the grain of new media scholarship which illuminates the identity-homogenous space video gaming and much of early Internet culture has occupied. See Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, and Lisa Nakamura, *Race After the Internet*.

a daily basis. These actions are archived and accessed, rather than benefitting from a public passage into memory and eventual forgetting. Ohlheiser, arguably Kjellberg's most steadfast opponent, remarked that "[longtime] YouTubers are among the first to know what it means to mature in real time on the Internet. It means constantly reckoning with what you've done online, which is liable to resurface and make the rounds on Twitter" (Ohlheiser). In Sweden and England, as in much of mainland Europe, fascism is an omnipresent concern. In response to changing geopolitical conditions including a large influx of refugees from Iraq, Jordan, and Syria and a series of terror attacks perpetrated by operatives entering among them unnoticed, much of Europe has seen a rising tide of radical right-wing parties espousing populist and arguably fascist views, such as in Italy and in Romania.⁵³ Kjellberg's apparent flirtation with antisemitism is, I argue, an irreverent response to a prevalent European concern. He is effectively performing what 4chan's political subforum became known for—irreverent impersonation as a neo-nazi with intent to agitate those who violate what 4chan's arguably considers its most significant "Rule of the Internet," Rule 16: "Nothing on the Internet is to be taken seriously." This phenomenon of irreverent impersonation might be regarded as local only to a few "old Internet" proponents lurking together in subfora on Reddit, 4chan, or many of its successors, yet the case of Kjellberg suggests two substantial differences in this manifestation: one, that Kjellberg's enormous popularity and extant influence suggest that its proponents are far more numerous and widespread, and two, that his bodily habitus is both present on his channel in a way it is not on sites such as 4chan, and this compromises his ability to maintain the tension of 'real' and 'not real' that such impersonation

⁵³ Anthony Faiola, "How Europe's Migrant Crisis Became an Opportunity for ISIS," *The Washington Post*.

affords in an anonymous forum.

Horror and Disembodiment

If Kjellberg's inability to maintain this kind of impersonation (sometimes called Sockpuppeting—a type of trolling) is as a result of his ultimate embodiment, we can infer that it is only possible in a *disembodied* state. This begs the question however, which is the cause and which is the symptom? The alterity exists in relation to the disembodiment, but did a sincere desire for alterity create a need for an anonymous space, or did the anxiety of disembodiment foster expressions of alterity as its antidote? To this, I argue the latter—the gaming community, as a gestalt of old Internet culture and modern gamers, as well as a common socio-cultural habitus to which games have been traditionally marketed, experiences a significant state of disembodiment in online spaces, such that they seek to alleviate its tensions via adversarial online tribalism, made manifest in elaborate ruses and in some, rather more serious offenses, overt mass violence. One such elaborate ruse, an expression of this impersonation and a trap for those violating their 'Rule 39', is the Slender Man creepypasta community. This state of disembodiment is as a result of a diminished bodily hexis online experienced in particular by those for whom games have been produced, affluent young white men., It is a commonly-accepted academic viewpoint that men in this position in media, as by virtue of their widespread and culturally dominant status, they represent the dominant subject position in what film theorist Laura Mulvey calls the scopophilic gaze.

Mulvey's scopophilic gaze delineates between male and female perceptions in film. Mulvey's perspective is that on film women have most often been treated as objects reflecting the masculine ideal-ego subject position that the protagonist occupies. This protagonist possesses complete agency, and women on screen have their "desire subjected to her image as the bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (804). John Berger argues similarly, that on screen, "men watch women, and women watch men watching women." The implication is that in their depictions in media, women are represented in object form, and are frequently "objectified" and are thus made subordinate to an invisible and demonstrably masculine subject position. Mulvey's research (as well as that of many other scholars) has aided in building a culture in which the term 'objectification' is commonplace, and has made strides in demonstrating the confining nature of such a polarized perspective in media representation. The fact remains, however, that the very one-sided nature of the gaze succeeds in 're-presenting' women as *embodied* in the literal sense—their bodies are allowed, at least in part, to define them. The same patriarchal aspect of the gaze however has a confining effect on the masculine subject position as well—in effect, they are subjectified and disembodied in relation to what Mulvey calls their ideal-ego mirror, made possible by "processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the

gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror." This is not to say they do not exist on screen, but rather they frequently exist in similarly diminished forms as functions of their station consistent with an imposed ideal-ego rather than allowed to exist as bodies. Additionally, the rise in concern over correct and diverse representation in popular media, while a laudably progressive movement, has the added effect of diminishing the embodied state of young white men in roles unmediated by their station (810).

Slavoj Žižek offers a point I wish to consider in light of this ideal ego in his essay "The Thing from Inner Space" where he presents a similar argument regarding the patriarchal gaze in film. He refers to an Id-Machine, or that "mechanism that directly materializes our unacknowledged fantasies." He posits that this fantasy Thing is an intrusion of something interposing itself on the void of the Real, and thus in its imposition becomes representative of "the Space (the sacred/forbidden Zone) in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, [...] our desires are directly [materialized.]" Žižek presents a stark reflection of Mulvey's assumption that the male spectator experiences a kind of symbiosis with his embodiment on screen in Andrei Tarkovski's science fiction film *Solaris*, in which the protagonist Kelvin experiences a phantasmic simulacrum of his deceased wife manifested by a psychic alien world. The image, Harey, Kelvin comes to understand, is "a materialization of his innermost traumatic fantasies. This accounts for the enigma of strange gaps in Harey's memory--of course she doesn't know everything a real person is supposed to know, because she is not a person, but a mere materialization of HIS fantasmatic image of her in all its inconsistency. The problem is that, precisely because Harey has no substantial identity of her

own, she acquires the status of the Real that forever insists and returns to its [place.]" Žižek's apprehension is similar to Mulvey's and he acknowledges that this film is no different in the woman's status as symptom of man, particularly when Harey tries to kill herself when she sees the pain she causes Kelvin. Žižek continues however, using Judith Butler's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectics of Lord and Bondsman, quoting her "the imperative of the bondsman consists of the following formulation: 'you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body. 'The disavowal on the part of the Lord is thus double: first the Lord disavows his own body, he postures as a disembodied desire and compels the bondsman to act as his body; secondly, the bondsman has to disavow that he acts merely as the Lord's body and act as an autonomous agent, as if the bondsman's bodily labouring for the lord is not imposed upon him but is his autonomous activity." Butler's work on Hegel is about establishing the dual nature of the Lord and the Bondsman's position as interchangeably disavowing their labour, the Lord as a labouring body, and the Bondsman the product of his labour. The disavowal of the body exists in the male spectator as well, who asks that the Bondsman, in this articulation the filmic protagonist to the "Lord," for whom he performs, the male spectator (theoretically experiencing an ideal-ego mirroring), and becoming as Žižek describes, a disavowal of his own body as he observes the ultimately empty presentation of the simulacrum on screen. Mulvey's articulation is correct, but that the patriarchal gaze is not an agreement subordinating the female object, but rather an irreconcilable interaction as Hegel would have it, in effect benefiting no one. In this way, the male spectator apprehends an empty void of the real against which the protagonist

imposes itself. The same is true of spectators in Let's Play videos, but in this case the experience of spectatorship is shared on screen with figures like Kjellberg.

The origin of the word “trolling” is often mistaken online, as it frequently refers to those engaging in acts of trolling as “trolls,” yet it is actually borrowed from angling. The angler places a specialized lure in the water, and drags it behind them in a boat, aiming to excite the attention of strong and fast predators that can keep pace with the boat and take the bait. This connotation of “taking the bait” suggests that a troll is luring prey to it, rather than lurking like an opportunistic predator near a well-trafficked area. This lexical ambiguity dichotomizes the active agent—in one sense, they ambush unsuspecting prey, but in the original sense as it was used to refer to the Usenet community, the fish is the active agent. This ambiguity persists today and emblemizes similar tensions that users in these communities, in particular the key gaming demographic, experience. They can never be certain who is the active agent in these interactions, even as they serve a multitude of social agendas. This instability is a source of enormous tension for users, but in certain online spaces it become reconfigured as a state of being for users in a given community—a rite of passage which itself becomes a source of pride. It is much akin to acts of Stockholm syndrome in which an abuse victim begins to identify with the abuser in an attempt to cope with the stress and pain of abuse. *The New York Times* in an article entitled “The Trolls Among Us” refers to Judith Donath’s perspective, that trolls often employ a ‘pseudo-naïve’ tactic, “asking stupid questions and seeing who would rise to the bait. The game was to find out who would see through this stereotypical newbie behaviour, and who would fall for it. As one guide to trolldom puts it, ‘If you

don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it'" (Schwartz). While many scholars have published studies detailing the activity of trolls, few have been successful in identifying why they do so, but the sublime may furnish us with a reason.

Kjellberg is one of a large community of YouTube personalities made famous by their series of Let's Play videos. Among them are Mark Edward Fischbach (Markiplier) with 24 million subscribers, and Seán William McLoughlin (Jacksepticeye) with 22 million subscribers. Each of these personalities is known for producing Let's Play videos with their faces superimposed over the game screen as they play. They are intense personalities with expressive reactions to in-game events, and among the most popular videos they post are those in which they react with natural terror to the genre of games known as survival horror. Kjellberg himself established a foothold in subscriptions by recording his play sessions of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, a critically-acclaimed survival horror title noted both for its unconventional narrative structure which draws upon early twentieth century weird fiction as its source motif, as well as the protagonist's inability to dispatch the indistinct and spectral enemies. The game borrows from tabletop roleplaying elements of games such as *Call of Cthulhu*, which includes a mechanic whereby the protagonist's sanity is a finite game resource that contact with enemies steadily diminishes. *Amnesia* is praised for the genuine fear it excites by virtue of the relative vulnerability of its protagonist—its impenetrable faceless narrator. The facelessness of the narrator is a common theme of games designed to target the core gaming demographic, the intention being that a lack of characterization allows for the player to superimpose themselves onto the characters being played. In this state, the most basic details become indicative of the target demographic—white, male, and socially mobile. Modern

games often experiment with this formula, in part to more readily accommodate a diversifying demographic, but they have been slow to evolve, despite available evidence. In part this may be due to the apparent delight these communities online seem to take in criticizing games that characterize their protagonists in more diverse ways, particularly when game protagonists are women. History is in part to blame for this. One of the ways in which game avatars are made to appear ambiguously white, male, and mobile is by using helmets to disguise their facial features. *Doom* is just such a game, where the bulky white male 'doomguy' is given a visored motorcycle-style helmet which obscures his features. Similarly, 1984's NES console game *Metroid* is known for its faceless spacefaring protagonist armed with a powerful robot suit with constantly improving capabilities for fighting space aliens. The game's finale, however, is a well-known moment in which Samus Aran takes off her helmet and reveals that she is, in fact, a woman. She is dressed in a bikini in that revealing moment with long flowing hair (often depicted as a symbol of sexuality and fertility). While Samus is often presented as counter-evidence to the claim that games are targeted towards boys and men, the character's reveal is rendered in a moment of triumph as a 'bait-and-switch' in which players assumed to be men are shocked by being confronted with a female protagonist. There are a number of ways in which players might (and did) respond to this revealing, but her sexualization is indicative of its being meant for a male audience.⁵⁴ In *Amnesia*, the early twentieth century motifs borrowed from the fiction of the time by, in particular, H.P.

⁵⁴ Later incarnations of Samus Aran render her a far more feminized and sexualized object-presence, in some instances quite reductively, as in *Metroid: Other M*, in which she is presented in a skin-tight bodysuit, beholden to the emotional blackmailing of a senior officer, and with melodramatic and reductive metaphors for maternal anxiety.

Lovecraft, the narratives frequently take place between various white, socially-mobile men, and the game is no exception.

It is telling that many video series obtain this kind of wide circulation on YouTube despite a lack of relative novelty. Watching others playing video games is ostensibly familiar, particularly as those individuals of voting majority today (particularly this demographic) grew up at a time in which they shared the play experience of home console systems with siblings and friends, frequently watching each other play. It is perhaps a similar experience that users have bonding with Let's Play personalities, but what each has in common that contributes to an experience that users might otherwise have playing the game themselves is a feeling of mutual vulnerability in the face of the sublimely terrifying. They bond in their mutual uncertainty, and look to the clear and expressive face of these personalities as a vector by which their own feelings are concretely mirrored. Physical video evidence has a long history of use as proof when dealing with online interactions, and while it is often used with great efficacy as proofs of real-life phenomena in relation to real-life veracity disputes (such as a court case), the relatively unbounded nature of life online renders physical evidence doubly persuasive. Photographs, videos, and other evidence bear a particular degree of weight in establishing a user's authoritative credibility, even more so in a forum where trolling is commonplace. To this extent, much like the doubly-intense degree of investment users experience in an online interaction due to the need for 'active listening', physical evidence is doubly powerful where it is far easier to divest oneself of a physicality that might otherwise disprove or confute their stated bona fides. Judith Donath establishes this in her essay

“Mediated Faces,” arguing that “based on the cues we see in the face, we quickly categorize people according to gender, ethnicity and age and make judgements about their character and personality. These classifications tell us how to act towards the other, what behaviors to expect from them, how to interpret their words and actions. In many languages, it is difficult to construct a grammatically (or at least culturally) correct sentence without knowing the other's age, gender or relative social status. Such distinctions are also the basis of prejudice, with significant biases are found even among people who consciously decry race- or gender-based stereotypes” (377). The relative popularity of these videos is a direct result of users’ embodiment through the YouTuber’s expressively mirroring their fear. In this instance, the user becomes embodied not by their function or station within a broader architecture, as they are often presented in film, television, and indeed in games, but rather as an unmediated embodied presence alone. In this way, Kjellberg’s popularity due to his being “unfiltered” or “raw” are more readily explicable—they are unfiltered because they are unmediated by function or station and allowed rendering as objects on screen. While their object nature is similar to that of women in film, as Mulvey describes it, they are not subjected to the will of a gaze in the same way, in part because they are most often responding to a series of voices appearing in “chat” that they read and respond to as they play. They are also given a measure of agency as they are able to manage that body of observers, demonstrating power in their ability to ignore, block, or otherwise chastise those observers they do not approve of. To this extent, the only agent to which they are subjected is the game itself, providing a tacit goal, parameters, functions, etc.. However, this is broadly benign as it is re-

stricted to an array of game functions, capabilities, and narratives which are not perceived to be complex enough to ‘respond’ to the player, merely rote response-functions to a series of choices that players make.⁵⁵ With this qualification in mind, YouTubers producing Let’s Play videos for gamers that deal with sublime horror are capable of providing a mirrored state of embodiment in mutually expressed emotion—fear in particular. These videos are popular, I argue, because the target demographic feels the tensions produced by anonymous interaction online alleviated by this mirroring process.

Given this albeit limited state of gamers’ embodiment in relation to games, men, and expression, the tensions to which these videos perhaps unwittingly respond become a source of protected vulnerability for these gamers. In the early days of gaming, it was a space in which gamers experienced this kind of traumatic disembodiment, but in later days, the influx of new players included both the usual wave of neophytes (“newbies,” “noobs,” or more homophobically, “newfags”) that streamed into spaces such as 4chan, but ever more diverse—in particular women. In his assessment of Alt.Folklore.Urban (AFU), Duncan Richer describes a common saying in the Usenet forum that users should ‘avoid September,’ because, as he describes it, “September is AFU’s ‘black month.’ It signifies the return of students to college throughout the United States, and hence there are a whole new bunch of freshers to infuriate the old hands. You get a resurgence in the classic posts as impatient freshpeople who don’t read the FAQ break the one rule of etiquette that applies” (Richer, 1998). The established practice of ‘sockpuppeting’ on forums such as 4chan and AFU frequently involved sockpuppeting

⁵⁵ My own research has explored games’ capacity to engage with and manipulate players, and what it means for the game to restrict players’ ‘freedom of choice’ to a set array of choices which conform to the game’s ideological paradigm. To this extent, it is only arguable that players are in control of their avatars in-game. (On lability in gaming, see Morton.)

women in particular, adopting Donath's described role of the pseudo-naïve. While only intermittently and/or passively sexist, the introduction of actual women into these spaces was perceived by some to disrupt or otherwise spoil the tribalism being enacted there.⁵⁶ Author Dale Beran supports this conclusion when he describes the inception of 4chan, as it originally began as a satellite forum of SomethingAwful, Raspberry Heaven: "[The] inhabitants of [Raspberry Heaven] were all teenage boys who directed their social life not outward toward the goings-on in the halls of their high schools [...] but rather inward and toward each other on the IRC channel, mediated by the fantasy of anime. 'We quickly chased out the few women' a user named 'Shii' who later became an influential early 4chan moderator, told me" (59). Women were seen as unexposed to, and even unable to experience the state of disembodiment being all of lamented, relieved, and celebrated all at once in these fora, and were therefore regarded as the vanguard of an invading force of so-called 'normies' that would not follow the rules. In the forums, they could leverage hate speech as a kind of sockpuppeting that would provoke others, and if the normies responded to the trolling, they would be ostracized and omitted, but the women among them were seen as being able to draw upon a vulnerable and protected status as women to defend themselves and expose the trolling as if it were serious—breaking the cardinal rule of these spaces, Rule 39. This is one of many ways in which these communities indicate their organizing principle of alterity through disembodiment by positioning themselves against those with a distinctly embodied state, and that

⁵⁶ Sockpuppeting women is only intermittently sexist as the users doing so may sincerely wish to embody a female gender identity, and is only passive because an impersonation requires that it not draw attention to itself by overtly-expressed sexism. Nevertheless, those users doing so as an act of trolling requires the use of the female persona to be conclusively reductive, and the subtext shared by those users 'in on the joke' must find that sexism comedic in order for the act to be meaningful.

are thereby empowered and protected to some extent. What defines them is their opposition to embodiment by virtue of their own *subjectified* position.

Chapter Three: Gothic Tensions and Alternate Realities

Something Awful

On 19 June 2009, eleven days after Slender Man's first appearance on Something Awful's paranormal images contest, Troy Wagner, under the username "Ce Gars" posted a preview in the forum of what would soon become an integral part of Slender Man's "canonical" lore. In the days following Victor Surge's original post, "The Slender Man" was instantly the most commented-on and contributed-to monster in the series, and had garnered the attention of several influential members of the hybrid community of users, including contributors to Snopes, SCP, 4chan's /x/ board (dedicated to the paranormal), among others. Users had already begun to opine for an 'ARG'--an 'alternate reality game'--in which they could participate in a collaborative roleplaying experience online which featured Slender Man. Wagner's teaser was in fact a modified transcript of the first episode of his ARG based on Slender Man, and while the post itself was lengthy, it did not appear to provoke an immediate response from other users. A few days later, Ce Gars posted again with a follow-up video that sparked more attention. Wagner announced that the next day, 20 June, he would post the first entry of what would become a long-running series of video clips, or "entries" to YouTube. On June 21st, Surge (Eric Knudsen), a steadily receding presence in the forum, shared his approval of Wagner's work, posting "I'm loving this a lot. Also, what if I didn't spontaneously come up with Slender Man? What if that's what it wants you to think. Come to think of it, I don't really remember those days last week, or even making these posts." Knudsen's rather distant presence to that point did not preclude other users' regard for

his role in Slender Man's creation. Users saluted "Victor" regularly, regardless of his input. His approval of Wagner's work was a rarity, and reflected a debate that users in the forums had been having in the background, in which they debated Slender Man's nature as either a flesh-and-blood creature or as a disembodied and tulpa-like spirit (a ghost-like spirit conjured into existence by collective human belief popularized contemporaneously and borrowed from Tibetan mysticism). While no clear consensus had been reached, one user, JossiRossi (a constant presence in the forum) articulated what all involved appeared to agree upon, posting, "I think it should be said that the closer you think you are to understanding the Slender Man, the more incorrect you really are." That dictum, which kept Slender Man in view, yet out of focus, became central to the aesthetic of the Youtube series *Marble Hornets*, and associated alternate reality gaming practices, that will be the focus of this chapter.

In the posts that followed, as Slender Man picked up momentum as an alternate reality game, one of the first things that happened was that users suggested that Slender Man not be referred to by name in many of the "encounters" users professed to having with him, each contributing to a sense of organic distribution. Many users had already begun to use the forum's functions to "black out" portions of their posts discussing him, a practice that was normally used to insulate readers against "spoilers." This effectively censored statements alluding to Slender Man's fabricated nature. Many of the posts which featured narrative encounters with Slender Man had also begun to mimic the structure of a case file of paranormal investigation, offering transcribed (albeit fictional) interviews with Slender Man's victims, and reports of encounters between him and the unnamed organization that recorded these encounters. This mimicked the style

of another extremely popular ARG called “The SCP Foundation.” This was a collaborative fiction project founded the year before, in 2008, featuring the eponymous “Special Containment Procedures Foundation,” in which users' contributions take the form of fictionalized official documentation recorded by the foundation reporting on various paranormal phenomena and designed to frighten and entertain readers. It was meant to portray a secretive paranormal investigation and containment institution similar to fictional organizations depicted in popular television, such as in Fox's *The X-Files*, and the BBC's *Torchwood*, among others. Users collaborating on SCP Foundation case files had developed similar forum practices respecting a “fourth wall” that oughtn't to be broken in contributing to the project, and many of those practices were swiftly adopted in the SomethingAwful forum in the days following Slender Man's inception.

Wagner's contribution to Slender Man, the Youtube series *Marble Hornets*, adopted many of these practices with Knudsen's approval and set the stage for a number of extremely popular ARGs featuring Slender Man in the years to come. It established a canon that all involved would largely adhere to, in which JossiRossi's admonition—that the closer one gets to him, the less they understand him—became the cardinal rule, and few if any answers as to Slender Man's inherent nature would be offered by *Marble Hornets* or any other ARG. In this way, Slender Man texts could vary widely, as there was little to which each text was required to canonically adhere. More significantly, however, the lack of any coherent and complete account would in fact lend a measure of authenticity to each account as much because they differed from one another as because they cohered. Wagner followed more of JossiRossi's advice, namely that: “a big key to success would be generating things that don't explicitly mention our

pal SM. [...] Just common descriptions or themes.” Wagner referred to his monster as The Operator, but was Slender Man in all but name, and in following the advice of users JossiRossi, Leperflesh, and Aleph Null among others, contributed to an active effort which, as user Aleph Null puts it, “is like work, but would be supremely awesome if carried out. The birth of an urban legend... “

Slender Man's origins and the developments following his inception offer valuable insight into his nature as a digital object, and more broadly to the relation between digital media practices and “alternate reality.” Users contributing to his story at his inception strove not just to provide authentic-sounding accounts of encounters with him, but also to establish a firm, yet intentionally imprecise sense of his existence in which his authenticity would not be jeopardized by the variances and inconsistencies between the accounts themselves. To the contrary, they would strengthen it. This would require the delicate application of thematic and aesthetic allusions to existing gothic, weird, and horror cinematic and literary traditions in order to position texts in the mythos as embodying and integrated with their reading public. In effect, they positioned Slender Man as a purely apprehended object to which the texts act as products of the reading public, contacting and reflecting on the apprehended object and never offering him as an unmediated and complete presentation. The sublime affect offered by online spaces through hypermediacy would enable contributors to do so—a state in which users' ability to discern reality had come to depend on a new form of media logic that Richard Grusin calls “premediation,” in which users of the global mediasphere are conditioned to anticipate an integrated media-form of objects and phenomena occurring prior to its being experi-

enced *in* reality, yet serving paradoxically of proof of its existence, even if it is never experienced in reality.⁵⁷ In effect, by employing this new media logic, they strive to culture a body of referential symbols in Slender Man objects and texts, each of which bears a submerged genealogical affiliation with existing objects and texts from popular culture, such as from the weird fiction of author H.P. Lovecraft with whom the text community frequently demonstrates an affinity. Rather than make Slender Man derivative, however, their fragmented texts utilized the mass-media logic of premediation, perhaps inadvertently, to repurpose users' existing state of premediated anxiety and recollection which informs the uncanny familiarity Slender Man evokes to effectively remediate Slender Man, offering for users an intermittent sense of his material authenticity and historicity. Once again, Slavoj Žižek offers us a way to interpret Slender Man in this case as an apprehended object, but vis-a-vis this glimmer of apprehension, one which offers a glimpse of the Real and drawn from within the self, apposed to the implied inauthentic. In "The Thing from Inner Space," Žižek draws on Jaques Lacan, claiming that "art as such is always organized around the central Void of the impossible-real Thing," and proposes thus that the Thing is "the Space (the sacred/forbidden Zone) in which the gap between the symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e., to which, to put it somewhat bluntly,

⁵⁷ Grusin's primary case study assessed the evolution of mediacy techniques following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in which he observes mass media outlets employed a persistent low-level anxiety anticipating another terrorist attack, though he goes on to include less tangible ends to which this anxious vigilance was employed, effectively displacing a traditional model in which events are mediated after the fact for viewers and readers, instead conditioning users to look to the mediasphere first for indication of phenomenal existence prior to its experience in reality. Consequently, events are already narrativized, contained, repackaged, and presented in an anticipatory way before, or indeed if ever, individuals can process the events in reality. There is therefore a growing disparity between those experiencing events and the public apperception of those events. As a further note on terminology: Grusin, along with co-author Jay David Bolter originally coined the term "hypermediacy" to refer specifically to multiple, simultaneous modes of media being employed all at once in the manner of a computer screen with multiple windows and applications running. In this project, I am proposing an expansion of the term's use to include an extreme of mediation separating and modulating the distance between subject and object—often between user and object, but also between user and other users with whom they desire society. When referring to hypermediacy specifically as an extreme multiplicity of mediate modes, I will refer to Grusin's original term prior to his work with Bolter, "multimediacy." (See *Remediation* and *Pre-mediation*)

our desires are directly materialized (or to put it in the precise terms of Kant's transcendental idealism, the Zone in which our intuition becomes directly productive." In this way, Žižek provides a way in which Slender Man can be an unmediated and unassimilable representation of his creators' collective fantasies: an implacable threat to be answered by a return to a kind of authentic purity. To this extent, Troy Wagner's ARG *Marble Hornets*, and those of others following in its footsteps serve as operative examples, embodying an endemic media logic to remediate users' latent anxiety as a product of a historicized and universalized alienation, which they strive to represent fictionally as a supernatural condition or fantasy, taking Slender Man's folkloric aspirations as proof. My premise in this chapter, following from the analysis of the "folkloric fallacy" in chapter one, is that this aspiration to folklore is best understood in terms of the media practices it generates.

In exploring Bolter and Grusin's concepts of premediacy, immediacy, and hypermediacy, the titles alone convey a concrete sense of premediation. Trevor J. Blank and Lynne McNeill's scholarly work on Slender Man, *Slender Man Is Coming*, and the HBO documentary *Beware The Slender Man* both position Slender Man peripherally, as an apprehended and anticipated presence, yet remains an absent presence. Each of these examples also feature indistinct images of him on covers and advertisements. Both are examples of ways in which even peripheral texts are engaged in the process of fitting Slender Man into established narratives in an act of anxiety-driven premediation. Alternate Reality Games in the Slender Man mythos provide a nested experience of a text in which the layers of mediacy are rendered invisible at the same time that they are always

active in broadcasting an imminent terror against which users are incited to remain anxiously vigilant. In so signalling, they demonstrate their grappling with the same anxiety to which Grusin refers. They are premediating Slender Man's presence through the use of multimediacy (which Grusin and Bolter call 'hypermediacy,' see footnote [2]). Grusin's *Premediation* draws on a 1990 essay of Mary Ann Doane's in which she cites several contemporaneously televised disasters to characterize television as built upon catastrophe. Grusin writes that Doane "sees real-time, liveness, and instantaneity as key elements of televisual catastrophe, which works by interrupting the predictability and reassurance of regularly scheduled programming. The live coverage of catastrophe on television functions both to generate anxiety and suppress it. At the beginning of the nineties, televisual catastrophe worked to bring the audience into immediate contact with a "real" which disrupted the normal and the everyday, [...and because] of the repetitive structure of the everyday built into televisual programming, the repeated premediation of future disasters or catastrophes works to guard against the recurrence of a media trauma like 9/11 by maintaining [...] an almost constant low level of fear" (Grusin, pp. 14-15). This sense of immediacy mass-media seeks to offer viewers, Grusin argues, changes in the early twenty-first century so as to integrate and anticipate catastrophe so as to protect against collective trauma (as in 9/11), and that this pervasive sense of 'premediation' is sustained by a low-level anxiety mass media propagates in users through inciting constant vigilance. This anxiety is, I argue, the same anxiety which users experience in pseudonymous fora, and which mythos creators leverage to instill fear in readers.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the most popular modes by which users engage with Slender Man (such as Let's Play videos) appear to alleviate tensions that correspond with the anxieties of premediation. Let's Play videos use nested multimediacy in order to both capture and distance the immediate moment in which the premediated future becomes realized in the catastrophic present for users watching the play-through. As Markiplier broadcasts his anxiety in the visual shell surrounding the actual game screen, the events of the game as his avatar explores the dark woods becomes distanced from the viewers on YouTube (who comment with each other in a present time another step removed from the game itself, though not yet "real time" either), but the distance between each layer is compressed and rendered invisible, largely through the present-tense "happening now" voice that videographers adopt in imitation of mass media figureheads to which Grusin refers. Consequently, the terror Slender Man evokes in ambushing the player echoes up through the layers to the viewer, from the game screen, to Markiplier's shrieking, to the YouTube co-present shell in which users are watching videos online in real-time and mediated by the boundaries of a curated user experience YouTube offers through elements such as a column of related and recommended videos on the right and commentary on the video below.⁵⁸ Each of these layers serves to both isolate and drag out the moment in which the terror is realized, and thus insulates viewers against its profound affect. ARGs operate similarly, employing a multimediated user experience that premediates Slender Man's presence to both clearly distinguish and

⁵⁸ It might appear as though this layer is collapsed when videos are watched in "full screen," but this serves only to render the layer invisible—its presence remains felt in the overlay that slides into view when the user manipulates the mouse in this mode. Even when invisible, it is noteworthy that YouTube is able to obscure the clock on mobile devices, where mobile applications such as Netflix do not, and thus lingers, mediating users' experience of time in this mode.

cushion users against its affective terror. Each of these correspond to the low-level anxiety that Grusin argues mass media of this kind propagates. The latent content of the mythos, however, is what offers a glimpse into the alienation this text community appears to treat as contingent with that anxiety. Not only do they see these stories as authentically universal by mistaking them for folklore (as in Chapter 1), but the symbolic value their work possesses is historicized, ideological, and transgressive, all in ways which reflect an alienated public.

The alienated affect ARG characters possess an alienated affect that suggests a paradigm in which they are as isolated socially. This is mirrored by as they are by their hypermediated presence in relation to viewers. The premediated reality in which these ARGs operate suggests an inevitable validation for the characters' growing and erratic irrationality that has positioned them at odds with a presumably normative public, and that anticipation positions both user and focalized protagonist in an invisible and transgressive *present* in which they are at odds with the broader world. This transgressive positioning fantasy is coupled with the mythos' folkloric aspirations in order to provide for those users a mode by which validate their sense of opposition, as well as they could presume that alienation's universal affect by linking it to the widespread phenomenal anxiety of premediation. In other words, they can see themselves as a "woken few," revealing for the blind masses the real source of their anxieties and antagonisms. They correctly identify Slender Man's terrifying affect as resulting from a premediate anxiety felt universally, but incorrectly imbricate Slender Man's *latent symbolic content* with that universality, premediating Slender Man as folklore rather than the product of a contained and ideologically alienated public: they've identified the problem, but misidentified

the cause. In essence, Slender Man's creators misidentify the anxieties resulting from premediation espoused by the global mediasphere as a product of an altogether older and elemental anxiety (concerning a vague apprehension of inauthenticity), apparently universally experienced, and have attempted to access it by deploying Slender Man texts as a new form of online folklore. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, Slender Man's latent symbolic content is demonstrably ecotypified as a product of a public which skews demographically toward users that are affluent, American, white, male, and ideologically transgressive. Were Slender Man stories to be treated as universalized folklore, any latent ideological content in Slender Man texts might be considered irrelevant, to the extent that it might only apply to one text or a handful of texts, but its presumed emergent nature signals a broader and unifying affect that supersedes the affordances of any one text. If, however, the Slender Man mythos is not folklore but a body of public texts adhering to broadly ecotypified conditions, that would establish the texts' discernible ideological affordances as endemic, and thereby relevant in critically considering both the texts themselves and the public with which they correspond.

Slender Man's early contributors appeared to agree to a veil of silence under which their creations were meant to provide enticing glimpses into his activity, but never so much as to preclude his legendary status, in a conscious effort to imitate the spread of folklore. Nevertheless, the thematic associations their creations borrow from have traceable source material with their own histories, influences, as well as political and ideological affordances from which Slender Man's particular brand of terror is derived. Being so localized, these influences and affordances provide a rationale as to why this

particular body of users finds these themes resonant. The panoply of gothic horror motifs and themes (particularly those that emerge from early twentieth-century weird fiction) serves to root the open question Slender Man tacitly poses to users through his intentionally obscure nature. These motifs, those in particular of Lovecraft and other weird fiction authors, have historically been shown to be responding to expanding social pressures that, for those authors, appear to foster alienation, in turn paralleling tensions I argue are felt in hypermediated pseudonymous fora such as Something Awful, and which foster potentially delusional relationships with reality for some users.⁵⁹ That potential for delusion is significant because after the stabbing in Waukesha by Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser, the response that appears to most widely represent the text community—that of Creepypasta.org—put the responsibility of interpreting the reality of Slender Man texts in the hands of individual users. An endemic ideology espoused by these texts, however, would compel the text community's taking responsibility for violence resulting from their work.

Troy Wagner's work on *Marble Hornets* has been impressive enough to garner widespread attention, even from the likes of film critic Roger Ebert, who posted to Twitter on 6 November 2009, "'Marble Hornets,' a YouTube serial. A forsaken indie film meets 'Paranormal,'" and offered a link to the series. Wagner had converted his existing channel, Troyhasacamera, into a new account named MarbleHornets. The series that would become known eponymously became central to the development of the Slender

⁵⁹ The degree to which these social pressures can be said to "foster alienation" is limited. As will be explored later in this chapter, the weird fiction of Lovecraft and others (Robert Chambers, Thomas Ligotti) reflects alienation, and arguably in response to life in contact with people from other cultures and ethnic groups. To this extent, calling these social pressures (i.e. diverse cultures coming progressively more in contact with one another) "alienating" is charged, but is only presented as such for the benefit of the later analysis by these authors--these pressures ought not necessarily to be alienating, but can be taken that way and represented in certain relevant horror fiction.

Man mythos, and most of the canonical aspects of the mythos derive in some way from Wagner's work, including several other extended video series by different creators, known both as Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), or Alternate Reality Experiences (AREs).⁶⁰ Each series features similar characteristics, including found footage taken by increasingly paranoid characters as they investigate Slender Man, posing as YouTube account holders alleging their authenticity. Viewers are rewarded for discovering more of the unfolding mysteries each series presents by engaging with the material directly. Methods include decoding hidden messages in the footage that the audience's careful pausing can isolate and read; paying attention to associated social media accounts such as Twitter or Discord in which series characters remain "in character" and also engage with other enthusiasts, providing cryptic information that enriches their participation; yet each platform retains a degree of hypermediacy via anonymity which fosters anxiety, and in a state of relative social isolation, is alienating. Slender Man texts reflect that alienation through remediating the sublime affect of terror as a glimpse into a secret historicity that, it is implied, is being accessed by the alienated protagonists and which is meant to serve as antithesis to an implied grand cultural zeitgeist.

If we consider these ARGs as cohesive 'texts,' they are distributed, and given to what Grusin, along with Jay David Bolter in their work *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, call "random-access," in that it "has no physical beginning, middle, or end" (p. 31). Under this model, Bolter and Grusin might consider the array of approaches to *Mar-*

⁶⁰ The terms ARG and ARE are broadly interchangeable, and mainly differ based upon the speaker's understanding of interactivity as it relates to 'games'. My own work on games inclines me to regard even minimal active involvement as a game, hence this is the term this project will use.

ble Hornets each as multiple, individual modes of content delivery occurring simultaneously. Slender Man's intentionally incomplete and distributed nature espoused by his contributors on Something Awful, however, stakes a counter-position, suggesting that Wagner's goal in the use of random access to the ARG through multiple modes of mediacy is meant to interact with Slender Man himself as a cohesive text, where the implied "whole" of Slender Man's world, influence, history, characters, etc., are meant to appear impossibly vast. In this way, each Slender Man text can be read as part of an implied and premediated whole, and the irreconcilable variances his activity might take in each text are meant to reflect the multiple and perspectival nature of human accounts of real-world phenomena. All that is required, therefore, of otherwise disparate texts to be read as parts of a cohesive whole is for them to affect sincerity by appearing as a premediated phenomena ostensibly proving Slender Man's existence prior to his being actually witnessed, and thus what is missing or inconsistent between these texts is supplied by viewers' sense of a sublime whole to which these accounts are meant to correspond, however incoherent each account might seem. This corresponds with a definition of the sublime attributed to one of its earliest theorists in *On the Sublime*, allegedly written by a first-century author named "Longinus," though its true authorship is in contention. In considering his work, Berkeley rhetorician James I. Porter summarizes Longinus' view of the sublime, stating that "the gaping nature of [Euripides' lines in *Antiope*] exemplifies this potential and imparts to them the particular pathos of the sublime: they suggest their own fragmentation. The sublime is based on an aesthetics not of perfect wholes but of ruptured wholes" (81). In this sense, Slender Man's uncanny indeterminacy offers

a more powerfully sublime affective experience. Further, in a state of contemporary pre-mediacy, these texts offer an extremely potent suggestion of Slender Man's reification, the likes of which can all the more easily foster delusion in those vulnerable to it.

In *Marble Hornets*, the sublime is accessed in the mode of ruptured wholes, with each short video segment unfolding, as the first entry exposit, as incomplete footage from a series of unlabelled VHS cassette tapes obtained from another individual that has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The series eventually becomes (in later “seasons”) film segments either recovered elsewhere or taken by the protagonist himself by way of documenting what becomes an investigation into the tapes' contents. Much like the short stories submitted online, there is no indication offered in the metatext that these are fictional accounts, and are produced with the same indistinct relationship with reality in mind—they are similarly falsified acts of legend-tripping. Whether or not the series is meant as an act of trolling, to the extent that, in giving birth to an urban legend (as Aleph Null suggests), Wagner intends to dupe unsuspecting users into thinking of Slender Man as real, or conversely if he means to provide an avenue for users watching the videos to 'legend-trip' themselves, is ultimately irrelevant for those users that treat these productions as though they were real. What is relevant is that either case enables those users, however susceptible they were from the outset, to believe in it, and for users like JossiRossi, Leperflesh, and Victor Surge, their intention to blur the lines between reality and fabrication is a response to alienation experienced in hyper-mediated environments.⁶¹ The fragmented narrative, offered via multiply mediated

⁶¹ Wagner's later aspirations to cinema and writing suggest that they are to be taken as artistic expression rather than as anarchic gaslighting in the manner of trolling. It is possible that it was meant as such at the outset, however, and events since—including the Waukesha stabbing—may have given him cause to regret and re-frame the nature of the

means through the random-access of unlabelled video tapes remediated for YouTube, lends itself to Grusin's notion of premediation, as Slender Man's existence is "proven" through mediated means—the tapes, followed by the YouTube account. This is bolstered by the sublime fragmentation, suggesting a whole object, yet never offering a clear view of it.

Like the stories discussed in Chapter 1, ARGs correspond to these same tensions, and various elements of these entries illuminate this close relationship. Existing scholarship on Slender Man is contentious in this respect, as through the inherent antagonism his contributors possess towards the mainstream, Slender Man is an evasive subject for existing theoretical models and/or genres. His aesthetic relationship with the literary gothic or weird fiction is misleading to the extent that in adhering to those conventions, it would suggest that Slender Man is considered by his contributors to be a singular "text" to which they are mutually contributing. Rather, while he might be considered as a cohesive object for research purposes, and he is indeed implied as a cohesive object to which the texts all correspond, his contributors do not appear to regard their work as contributing to a collective text. Instead, they proverbially 'agree to disagree' in producing work meant to provide an array of interpretive representations of similar *real-life* phenomena, with the intention of producing in the minds of their readers and viewers a "real," singular object of which they are all creating disparate accounts and allowing their readers to draw the conclusion that they are referring to the same thing. Put simply, they *do not want* their depictions to agree. In her excellent scholarship on Slender Man, scholar Shira Chess' essay "Open-Sourcing Horror: The Slender Man, Marble

project. Likewise, the deliberately unclear nature of the work perpetuates the same tensions that this project is investigating, regardless of authorial intent.

Hornets, and genre negotiations” treats Slender Man as a singular product of convergence, drawing on C. R. Miller's 1984 essay “Genre as Social Action” to position him as a communal negotiation of genre conventions by his contributors, drawing on Victor Surge's June 14th post in which he acknowledges his source material for Slender Man for the basis for their negotiations.

I consider Leperflesh's post on June 18th, however, to be more revealing. His post is in response to user apsouthern's post on the same day providing a link to a falsified Wikipedia entry he had made on Slender Man, describing him as a genuine legend. Here is Leperflesh's reply to apsouthern in full:

Going with a wikipedia page up-front was probably a lot of fun...
but not a good idea

The right thing to do is establish web resources about the Slender Man first - conspiracy-theory web pages, etc. Then, after there's some cross-pollination and even interest from people outside SomethingAwful, create a stub Wiki page that just links a source or two, and treats the subject from a skeptical/fact-based standpoint (use words like "myth," "alleged," and "conspiracy theory").

A page like that, that purports only to report on a fringe myth, would have been more likely to survive. An editing history with a lot of different editors, over a long period of time (rather than a

goon rush), with multiple references added and removed and edited over time, would have made the page less likely to be deleted.

Now, of course, that's closed off; even if we did all of this, the history of the original page's creation and fast deletion as vandalism will serve as evidence against any future incarnation of the page.

...which is OK. I'm thinking we (me?) register Slender Man.org, work on it (make it the typical disorganized, slightly unbalanced ranting style typical of the genre - just take a look at websites promoting HHO, 911 Truthers, crop circles, etc. for ideas), and then gradually over time add a selection of stuff from this thread, sticking to the top-quality examples (probably not the supposed secret texts from agencies we've never heard of - don't require someone to believe in an additional conspiracy theory just to accept this one, as that is an implausibility-multiplier). You could even address the subject from a skeptical-believer point of view, showing "obvious forgeries and fakes" on one page and "unable to discount" stuff on another, etc.

Do it very low-key for a while (a year or more) and eventually it'll

creep into the 'net's culture, and even have a chance to attract the attention of lazy reporters who don't fact-check stuff.

Chess's perspective (via Miller) is contingent on these users' negotiating genre conventions to establish Slender Man as a *canonical text*, where they are in fact negotiating their mutual inconsistency to both obviate a canon, and rather to suggest a *real object*, misidentified, in the manner of blind men and elephants, so as to lend authenticity to the legend. Jeffery A. Tolbert, in his essay "The Sort of Story that has You Covering Your Mirrors: The Case of Slender Man," argues that this is a process he calls "reverse ostension." As discussed in Chapter 1, ostension is a folkloric concept in which reality is *shown* or *demonstrated* rather than given any concrete signification. He defines ostensive action as "the direct performance of a given action or its representation through a related action (with the assumption that the ostensive act itself is somehow "real,")" and argues that Slender Man attempts the process in reverse, stating "Slender Man represents what might be thought of as *reverse ostension*, in that it is an iconic figure produced through a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre."

Ostension, however, is an act of presentation and in effect frames, focuses, and anchors phenomena in reality to a system of signification by virtue of their being lent ostensive significance in the first place. To this extent, ostension can only function within a closed social loop where, as Tolbert correctly points out, a tacit assumption that the ostensive act/object is indeed real/possible, and real. As the text community is fully aware of Slender Man's fictitious nature, a model based on ostension cannot function. Though

the community might imagine themselves to be performing ostensive acts (in reverse or otherwise), their conscious awareness and the mediacy involved in further encoding the presentation render it inert as an ostensive act. Tolbert's work does, however, position an implied and invisible monster as a cohesive object to which these texts appear to correspond. As a vast series of insistent, conscious gestures to a whole, though otherwise empty sign (in that it is incomplete), it issues an imperative to invested readers to interpret the sign's referent by any available means, and thus seek further cues from the sign itself, amplifying the affects of any latent ideological content that sign incorporates. In the context of an established counter-cultural ethos, it would be consistent to reject the mainstream rather than, in establishing a canon as Chess would suggest, to package Slender Man consistently such that he would be easily integrated with a larger public, i.e. the mainstream. In an environment where mutual congratulations are shared for users' contributions to a creature continually referred to in a singular way, as if they are working on a shared text, it is easy to mistake the nested nature of the discussion for collaborative text production, particularly in light of the aesthetic conventions to which many of those depictions appear to adhere, but the singular capacity of this kind of horror to make intentional use of readers' misapprehensions through an intentionally discordant body of otherwise disparate texts that do not acknowledge one another positions them as a 'text community' where an individual user's work runs parallel to that of others rather than converging as a truly collaborative production. The intention behind these practices is to make users' exploring the Slender Man texts an act of legend-tripping, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, is when individuals explore purportedly haunted

places, tempting themselves even as rational people to indulge in a cognitive dissonance to perceive supernatural phenomena. As users in the SomethingAwful forum attest, even knowing that Slender Man is not real does not stop them from feeling afraid of him.

Yet Wagner's *Marble Hornets* provides an operative example of the text community's aversion to canonical integration through a nested depiction of legend-tripping. This is one result of the forum's apparent consensus that Slender Man is unknowable. The characters in these ARGs take on the role of the reader, as users online investigating Slender Man phenomena. The implication is that what knowledge those viewers have at the outset by visiting the kinds of pages Leperflesh suggests creating is not known to characters in the ARGs, and viewers' uncovering information about Slender Man online is meant to run parallel to the ARG characters' discoveries. In this case, watching *Marble Hornets* as Wagner (and others) intend is to legend-trip by watching others legend-trip in exploring Slender Man, although in the ARG, characters are confronted by "genuine" haunting for their transgressive investigations. In this way, *Marble Hornets* demonstrates how the texts produced by this community are meant to be imperfect allusions or representations of an implied real-world monster—Slender Man. Of course, as Chapter 1 describes, this does not render Slender Man as a modern expression of folklore, either, as the creators are aware of its fictitious nature. Slender Man texts do however, as previously stated, share aesthetic and ideological qualities with certain modes of the literary gothic, particularly as it corresponds with similar themes of isolation, alienation, and the uncanny, which gestures to a genealogical history of alienation to which Slender Man can claim membership. This suggests a more enduring and

pervasive tension that this modern articulation is only emphasizing, and a relevant textual history that not only precludes Slender Man's folkloric nature, but in striving to integrate online life with material existence, points to the particular pressures—hypermediation—which amplify the alienated anxiety to which much of the literary gothic, in particular the weird fiction of early twentieth-century America, corresponds.⁶²

It is telling also that the probative evidence the ARG characters uncover tends toward material objects rather than digital artefacts, such as cryptic and handwritten notes, physical media, drawings, and verbal accounts by other characters. These run parallel, for example, to *Marble Hornets'* correspondent YouTube account “ToTheArk,” which is meant to be the series antagonists' channel, producing haunting and cryptic videos meant to respond to the posted entries on the official channel. These are presented as “evidence” for users to find—digital artefacts of premediacy to which Wagner's protagonist, Jay, refers only in passing. This implies that the two bodies of evidence, digital and physical, are meant to remain separate, with the digital space available to plumb by series fans, and physical evidence is left for the characters. These are separate, but parallel bodies of evidence, meant only to be bound by an implied “reality” to which they gesture. On the level of praxis and community engagement, however, this appears to be that they are attempting to reconcile or otherwise equivocate between these two modes of engagement. Users might refer to this kind of involvement as feeling “engaged” or “invested in the outcome.” Ultimately what contributors mean for these

⁶² It is distinctly possible that in this formulation, wherein mythos enthusiasts have both the understanding and a language to integrate their work and the work they enjoy into a contained and material tension (i.e. it is real life, and it is not omnipresent—the anxiety has boundaries, which it does not as readily in its formulation as folklore), this dissertation project might contribute to alleviating some of those tensions as well, and hopefully in a more authentic way than through more hypermediated means.

feelings to do in light of this paralleling is rehabilitate an inherently deficient level of engagement they feel experienced in pseudonymous and hypermediated spaces online. The work these text producers are attempting appears to be to manifest an online creation in the material world via premediacy. In reality, it is the inverse: to elevate hypermediated engagement by marrying it with the material world. Read this way, it appears as one facet of a broader attempt to alleviate a common feeling of hypermediated anxiety. These tensions are a result, I argue, of a state of hypermediation experienced as a result of particularly mediated spaces online, such as 4chan or Reddit.

“It is one thing to make an idea clear,” writes Edmund Burke in his 1756 work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, “and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination.” This statement follows Burke's earlier claims that marry existing aesthetic notions of the sublime to a form of fear that proceeds from obscurity. Burke's understanding of the sublime offers us a point of juncture for Slender Man with his influences (via Eric Knudsen), as well as to the dreadful anxiety engendered by hypermediation. The sublime qualities of Slender Man, felt through the aesthetic affect of works like *Marble Hornets*, gesture to a similar sublime affect which accompanies society in hypermediated spaces. The sublime is often understood in an earlier frame of reference in which it encompasses a wide array of emotional affects—a perspective embodied by the likes of Joseph Addison, who writes on the sublime in *The Spectator* in 1712, associating it with a quality of vastness in nature that is particularly affecting, most often as a kind of beauty:

Our Imagination loves to be filled with an Object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its Capacity. We are flung into a pleasing

Astonishment at such unbounded Views, and feel a delightful Stillness and Amazement in the Soul at the Apprehension[s] of them. The Mind of Man naturally hates every thing that looks like a Restraint upon it, and [...] a spacious Horizon is an Image of Liberty, where the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the Immensity of its Views, and to lose it self amidst the Variety of Objects that offer themselves to its Observation. Such wide and undetermined Prospects are as pleasing to the Fancy, as the Speculations of Eternity or Infinitude are to the Understanding. But if there be a Beauty or Uncommonness joined with this Grandeur, as in a troubled Ocean, a Heaven adorned with Stars and Meteors, or a spacious Landskip cut out into Rivers, Woods, Rocks, and Meadows, the Pleasure still grows upon us, as it rises from more than a single Principle. Every thing that is new or uncommon raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possest. We are indeed so often conversant with one Set of Objects, and tired out with so many repeated Shows of the same Things, that whatever is new or uncommon contributes a little to vary human Life, and to divert our Minds, for a while, with the Strangeness of its Appearance: It serves us for a kind of Refreshment, and takes off from that Sa-

tiety we are apt to complain of in our usual and ordinary Entertainments. It is this that bestows Charms on a Monster, and makes even the Imperfections of Nature please us.

At once, Addison's expositing on the sublime in this way illustrates the strange appeal of an unknowable vastness; the boredom engendered by more common entertainments; and the appeal of that which is uncommon or new. These perspectives map easily onto Chan culture's disregard for the mainstream as 'disagreeably common', and the ways in which reaching for a particularly sublime object (as new, different, and unknowably vast as Slender Man appears to be) can be appealing. This is particularly so in a space already devoted, abstractly, to a similar unknowable vastness meant to alleviate boredom with the common.⁶³ SomethingAwful, as well as its similarly pseudonymous progeny, 4chan, Reddit, etc., incorporate into their forums' disembodied voices a similarly unknowable vastness, to the extent that posts lack clarity or certainty. The indeterminacy experienced in these forums (as discussed in Chapter 2) either in the relative publicity or intimacy by which any given user's utterance is to be taken; in the relative levels of sincerity in a space given to trolling and grieving; in the relative maturity users demonstrate in their phrasing and diction; among many other manifestations offer us an avenue by which Slender Man's sublime affect can be understood as mirroring a similar affect the 'unknowable' indeterminacy of hypermediated fora offers. Read through the lens of Grusin's premediacy, it is as though the anxiety fostered by the mediasphere are revisited upon social media interactions, where a user's sense of personal branding and

⁶³ It is vast in the sense that there is a wide array of potential modes of interpretation for any utterance online.

marketing fosters a commensurate need to anticipate not just the possibility of a public event such as a terrorist attack, but also the reaction of the *polis* to their posts—an impossible task, given the limited approximation of real-world engagement social media offers.

While Addison's perspective illustrates the appeal hypermediation appears to offer, however, Burke's understanding of the sublime illustrates for us a flip side in which that indeterminacy can be felt as dreadful. He considers the affective quality to which Addison refers to be astonishment, claiming that "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." He goes on, arguing for the same disorienting quality of the sublime that Addison does, but focuses more on the arresting affect, claiming that "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear* [...] Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endured with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous. [...] Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime. [...] To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings. [...] If I make a drawing of a palace,

or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then (allowing for the effect of imitation which is something) my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape, would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting. This experience constantly evinces. The proper manner of conveying the *affectations* of the mind from one to another is by words; [...] In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever.”

Burke's arguments align with those of Leperflesh and JossiRossi in the Something Awful forum, particularly in Slender Man's claims to obscurity, both aesthetically, such as in the blurry and artificially antiquated images associated with him; as well as conceptually, in that he is neither singular nor plural; spirit nor flesh-and-blood. His uncanniness renders him uncertainly inert or living, and his humanoid characteristics are apposed to his featureless face, his blandly formal attire, symbolically powerful and literally faceless. His indeterminacy in this way--, his obscurity-- renders him more terrible and affixes the imagination of those who look on him, and users' efforts to render him in inconsistent and fragmented ways are antithetical to collaborative production, even as they strive to establish him as a premediated object. In the same way, those who discuss him and post about him are capable of presenting their encounters with him harmoniously as “real accounts,” as they are themselves obscured in the same way, and are thus capable of being objects of terror, particularly as users accumulate experiences in these hypermediated spaces where they are “trolled” or “griefed.” Thus, regardless of

the apparent “vastness” of their character, each user operates as indeterminately as the object they present does, and thus evoke a measure of sublime and indeed, dreadful, affect.

Marble Hornets and Universalized Alienation

Marble Hornets first submission, “Introduction” (Marble Hornets, 20 June 2009), does not provide viewers with many fixed points of reference. It depicts a few moments of footage taken from a car window in silence, with captions in a nondescript white font that appear over the footage—and as intertitles on a black backdrop—that contextualize the shots being shown as “raw footage.” The landscape shown is flat, with copses of trees suggesting some foresting, but much of it is cleared for industrial properties and farmland. The car, as the low angle relative to the road and automatic engine sound seem to suggest, is traveling on long, straight motorways with low population density. The shot is framed in the passenger-side view out the front windshield of the car, intermittently reoriented between intertitles to look out the passenger-side window as well. The steady framing and filming while the car is in motion suggests that there is a separate driver in the car, and there is no evident conversation between passengers, which introduces into the scene a certain uncanny co-presence, juxtaposed with a tense exchange between principal characters mutely presented in the intertitles in order to foster the series' characteristic tension. What Andrea Kitta notes of Slender Man narratives—that they provide users with an avenue by which to share a common experience of being watched—corresponds with the sense of 'co-presence' foregrounded in the car (Kitta, 87). There is no footage of human subjects, nor more than an incidental view of

other cars and there are no visible license plates to denote a specific location. These aspects are probative in several ways. Firstly, as Kitta contends, the entry's more ambiguous elements are meant to have a universalizing effect for viewers. Second, the entry provides a great deal of information implying a far more ecotypified habitus than the ambiguous elements suggest. Third, this paradox of unrealized universality signifies the mythos' pervasive efforts to dismantle the house the master built with the master's tools: to short-circuit the pain of alienation by showing that alienation to be a universal condition, and to diminish isolation through shared corporeal terror. It does so by using terror to "awaken the faculties" via the sublime, and thus strengthen mythos enthusiasts' sense of *self among others*. In this respect, Bob Rehak's essay "Playing at Being" is a useful model for comparison. Rehak describes how game avatars mimic aspects of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and the realization of the "Other" in a way that renders the self as "other." He argues from Christian Metz that film is akin to Lacan's "primordial mirror," which is the "original instance in which subjects are constituted through identification with their own image—in every way but one. Although on the cinema screen 'everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only which is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body'" (Rehak, 103). Taken together, these three elements of *Marble Hornets*—its universalizing, its ecotypifying, and its focus on shared conditions of alienation and horror—suggest that its creators attempt to use the gothic sublime's ability to "constitute the subject" in order to alleviate the painful alienation hypermediated spaces foster; and that they do so by rendering the subject's condition as universal. It is not, however, universal, and therefore succeeds only in constituting the subject in a delusional and ultimately harmful way.

One of the clearest things *Marble Hornets* renders universal, and seems to take for granted, is its relation to its Americanness and Americana. While the series aspires to a universally terrifying affect, the mechanisms it employs seem to embody either a distinctively American sensibility or engages with an American cultural praxis, particularly as regards its setting. While there are some features I might classify as distinctive to a particular region or place, it is more significant that the ARGs videos are corresponding with a common *apprehension* of Americana, local or otherwise. The abutment of large and uniform suburbs against local parks and forests appears to be an American mosaic seasonal landscape, certainly as it appears in Hollywood horror films that inspire the Slender Man text community's apprehension of what is horrifying. This apprehension appears to be incidentally prevalent as well. Characters appear to have some expectation of possessing personal vehicles, for example, even among teenagers, which the material space can afford—for example, through yards and driveways large enough to accommodate multiple personal vehicles, which is less common in similar cultural spheres such as the United Kingdom or Europe. Events in the series even depend on the personal mobility that characters are capable of affording in terms of available time, money, and space for personal interests. Andrea Kitta links text production and Slender Man's engagement with belief to American sensibilities, drawing on Hufford (1982) to claim that “American society has a 'tradition of disbelief'; while it traditional to believe in certain things, it is also traditional *not* to believe in certain things. In addition, individuals regard the experiences of others as up for questioning, while our own experiences are

treated as dogma” (Kitta, 78).⁶⁴ Mikel J. Koven makes a similar argument: he sought information about Slender Man by surveying teenagers in the U.K., discovering that students in Scotland mightn't have had any knowledge of Slender Man at all. He notes at the outset that “what grabs the imagination of children in North America does not necessarily interest British kids,” claiming that he must have first heard of Slender Man from American colleagues (Koven, pp. 114-15). To their points, Slender Man enthusiasts appear to apply apprehended American cultural spheres which correspond with the material presentation of *Marble Hornets*. It depicts a predominantly suburban white area in stagnation or decline, and in which the series' characters display a pervasive affect of ennui reflected by the series' frequent contrasts between dilapidated or natural filming locations and scenes of suburban sprawl. The entry's captions are in English, with a North American diction and syntax, such as referring to “college” in an unqualified way, in the way that Americans use the term to mean any post-secondary educational institution. This is supported by later entries in which the various characters have North American accents, as well as features such as the style of signage on the road, and expansive roadways and properties. More specifically, Wagner is American and resides currently in the state of Georgia, which suggests that it was filmed nearby and may have a connection with the American South. In fact, this question has been taken up by the community: a Wikidot site on the series, as well as a Reddit thread in which users claim to have been from the area and recognized some of the locations both purport to have

⁶⁴ Kitta's distinction might be vague, but her point is justifiable, to the extent that as a post-enlightenment project in nation-building, white America does not have a predominant and areligious body of folklore, and to David Hufford's point, presupposes the inherent falsity of others' folklore. It begins with the premise that “what I know, I know. What you know you only believe,” (Hufford, 47). There is, in other words, a starting position of skepticism that comes from an imperial sense of superior reason. This is a perspective that could be supported by the likes of Toni Morrison (*Playing in the Dark*, 6-8) and Jean Baudrillard (*America*, 47), who both write on the United States preferring to define itself and its cultural identity largely by exclusion.

found the locations in which it was shot and corroborated those locations with photographs. These enthusiasts claim it takes place in and around Tuscaloosa in central Alabama, with some additional footage near the towns of Helena and Pelham outside of Birmingham.⁶⁵ This would be consistent with the landscape, terrain features, cast demographic metrics, and to some extent themes.

While it is not deterministic, Tuscaloosa's history can be particularized in ways that pull against the implicit claims of *Marble Hornets* to decontextualized universality. The city survived the American Civil War through the Confederate construction of a series of locks on the Black Warrior River connecting it to the seaport of Mobile and becoming a valuable trade hub. It is also the site of the University of Alabama and the "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" incident in which the stand-off between Governor George Wallace and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach's federal Marshals took place in an effort to ban black students from attending. It is also the site of "Bloody Tuesday," in which black civil rights protestors were beaten by police. Helena to the East began as an industrial logistics rail stop during the Civil War, and with the modern American steel and coal industries in decline, the City of Helena website describes "related growing pains" in adapting to become a growing part of the suburban sprawl of Birmingham. It is historically proximate to a great deal of racial conflict, given Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement in 1963 that Birmingham was "probably the most segregated city in the United States," at the outset of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference integration movement he was orchestrating. The heated campaign produced a lasting friction, illustrated in part by the United States Census Bureau's documented incidence

⁶⁵ https://www.reddit.com/r/marblehornets/comments/24xg4e/also_locations_of_where_marble_hornets_was_shot/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

of “white flight” from the diversifying city center to the surrounding suburban communities up to 2010, the height of *Marble Hornets*' popularity. While the practical reality precludes the likelihood of actual geographical determinism, certainly the sites in which *Marble Hornets* allegedly takes place might be apprehended by its creators as being demographically and racially fricative. Tuscaloosa is certainly racially divided, much like Birmingham, with far greater ratios of white to black citizens in the surrounding suburbs and rural townships, in part due to “white flight.” Industrial decline and suburban racial resentments suggest that inherited social anxieties and resentments are passed on to children, not necessarily in the form of overt racism, but certainly in the form of discontent typical of areas in economic declination or change. This might parallel similar forms of discontent resulting from other kinds of economic change occurring elsewhere, but differing by degrees and by attendant social-historic scapegoats such as race. Regardless of what can be said of Helena, Tuscaloosa, or other sites in which these ARGs are allegedly produced, racial friction in the United States are a reality in which these users live, and their work is, I argue, influenced by this divided culture, whether as part of their demographic reality, or apprehended as a spectral cultural backdrop.

There is little to nothing overtly racist in the *Marble Hornets* series.⁶⁶ Despite Tuscaloosa's relatively even divide between white and black citizens, the cast of *Marble Hornets* is almost entirely white, suggesting a persistent social divide in the region that the series embodies.⁶⁷ As I will go on to argue in later parts of this project, movements

⁶⁶ For the sake of clarity, this project is not addressing the question of individual racism (and does not mean to suggest that Wagner or any other cast or crew member involved with *Marble Hornets* is racist), but is interested instead in the way the series—including its treatment of race—thematizes systemic issues of (predominantly white) discontentment connected to economic decline and a long history of social resentment.

⁶⁷ While the main series in the Slender Man ARG canon remains *Marble Hornets* with the largest viewership, the succeeding two most influential series, *EverymanHYBRID*, and *TriveTwelve* share a great deal of genealogically similar

emerging from what I argue is the same discontented and alienated subculture that congregates in fora such as 4chan tend to imitate (or outright mock) social movements for marginalized people, in the vein of "white racism" or "reverse sexism," suggesting part of the conditions for this phenomenon of alienation is racially ecotypified in some way. Certain characters display a progressive degree of irritability associated with having been stalked by Slender Man, and the particular sites in which the series is shot seem to reflect a history of decline, featuring abandoned houses, facilities, and industrial apparatuses, etc. While these qualities may correspond to similar economic and social tensions elsewhere, they also reflect the distinctive form of racially-divided space in a country and region where civil conflict has dealt particularly lasting wounds. Nevertheless, certain elements, such as a predominantly white suburban landscape in North America can be persuasively commonplace, and fitted to the environments of different viewers. This may wind up lending a skewed perspective to those users in less discontented regions, who nevertheless experience their own particular types and degrees of discontentment. Worse still, it may provide an unintended architecture of scapegoating that can be taken out of context, such as in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where racial conditions are different. This is particularly the case where that architecture is left to implication, as frequently occurs in hypermediated online spaces, as distinctively American racial tensions structure discourse in other places, far from their sources. It is unclear why,

characteristics. The text community is often divided as to which characteristics might be taken as canonical, but among such characteristics are economically depressed suburbs in the United States, an almost exclusively young, white, and male cast, themes of mental subjugation, anxiety, depression, isolation, and disconnection from family and friends. To a limited extent, *Tribe Twelve* departs from these themes as it takes place in Cape Coral, Florida, a pioneer in planned city development built around more sustainable service and tourism industries, and featuring members of the protagonist's family—though they too are haunted by Slender Man, and are arguably an extension of different themes of tension and difference as the series has some Judaic themes associated with it. All three, however, are otherwise similar.

for example, a popular YouTuber like PewDiePie might use the racial epithet “n----,” in frustration or otherwise, in Norway--a region where racial tensions from which that word derives are not historically prevalent. Its use may have diversified online, as he suggested, but that does not render it inert. Rather it activates a network of potential interpretations for which it might be used sincerely or insincerely, and that indeterminate nature, I argue, is the product of hypermediation. If users are unable to parse clearly the intended use of certain words, because either they are breaking the fourth wall of a community masquerade in which the ambiguity is critical to its functioning, or because it is in defiance of an oblique series of rules established by early Internet countercultures, as “nothing is to be taken seriously,” those words become all interpretations at once, rather than inert. For a user watching PewDiePie in Alabama, the use of the word “n-----” may, therefore, refer quite specifically to black people, where it is just a countercultural expression of frustration for a user watching in Massachusetts, for example. This does not make the user in Alabama racist—but their geographical exposure to the term in a potentially more active and directed way resulting from stronger local race tensions might take its use in any way more seriously than those for whom the term has been reclaimed or used far more often ironically or under a greater sense of taboo, where others might not. The term is therefore categorically *both* interpretations simultaneously as corresponds to differing cultural habitus. This is demonstrably the result of hypermediation, as language reaches a progressively greater (and eventually a critical degree) state of ambiguity in online spaces with commensurate modal ambiguity, such as 4chan. In this way, hypermediation can foster delusional mental states from which violence can erupt.

The setting is one way in which this apparently universal narrative of discontented alienation can actually be seen to be the universalizing of something more particular. More can be elicited from the narrative pacing, which encourages a foreboding sense of dread but keeps Slender Man himself largely unrepresented. The pacing of *Marble Hornets* thus spends less time showing us the monster, and more time foregrounding the disaffected, alienated subject position the viewer is meant to identify with. Slender Man becomes as an omnipresent and threatening agency that emerges from between the layers of narrative time captured in *Marble Hornets*, with its conceit of working with, editing, and researching previously shot documentary footage. Another way to put this is that *Marble Hornets* allegorizes the production of a Slender man mythos: by constantly setting the scene for Slender Man rather than representing him, the surface layer of narrative time occurring as the viewer watches the video becomes privileged. What it offers is an obsessive proliferation of texts about Slender Man, with the emphasis squarely on the supposedly universal medium, and Slender Man himself never fully brought into view.

Marble Hornets begins with the YouTube video, "Introduction," in which the narrator, as of yet unnamed, describes (through its signature series of intertitle cards with simple white text over black backgrounds) his strange interactions with Alex Kralie, a fellow student in their secondary school who had become known for his abandoned work on a student film after what are described as "unworkable conditions" on the set, "less than a mile from his house" (recalling the proximate geographical considerations described above combined with the vulnerability implied by the associations with Alex's 'home'). The narration relates a conversation with Alex, asking him what he intends to

do with the tapes, and Alex replies “Burn them,” which is given singular emphasis by the narrator, presenting the words in quotations in white in the middle of a black screen that interrupts the landscape shots, complete with a deadpan period punctuating the statement, thus emphasizing the disproportionately violent and curt reaction. The narrator offers to finish the project for Alex, referring to himself as a film student. Alex consents to giving him the tapes, under the condition that he “never mention them to [Alex] again.” The narrator claims to have been unnerved by the experience and Alex apparently transfers to another school and they had not seen one another since. After three years, he says, he finds the tapes and offers to upload “anything” he finds from the “countless” tapes. They are apparently unlabeled or dated, and other than taking place allegedly in the summer of 2006, they cannot be easily parsed. Each of the entries that follow depict segments from the tapes that the narrator apparently deems significant.

The series trades on a “found footage” conceit in horror cinema popularized in the early 2000s by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which employed an early form of ‘random access’ by presenting an implied reconstruction arranged by officials that “recovered” the videocassettes on which the events of the film were recorded, and which encourages viewers to see the film as a “neutral recording of real horror” (Clasen). Bolter and Grusin compare this to the nested or multiple nature of windows on a computer screen: they offer multiple points of access, but since each window contains an arrangement of representations inside the windows (text, graphics, and video), they create a “heterogeneous space, as they compete for the user’s attention” (32). In the format shared between *The Blair Witch Project* and *Marble Hornets*, there is a suggestion of a nested representation being provided by a reconstituting agent, which in the case of

Marble Hornets is the narrator Jay. This “found footage” mechanism forms a cinematic equivalent to some of the folkloric formatting conventions in the Slender Man stories I discussed in chapter one, namely the sense of apparent authenticity afforded by the informal style of home video. This is in keeping with longstanding gothic literary tradition, such as through the epistolary and documentary framing mechanisms in the likes of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, each of uses conceits of documentary evidence to offer a sense of authenticity (Clasen). *Marble Hornets* uses the documentary conceit to at least two different purposes: as a mark of the authenticity of these supposedly true events; and in the interest of a metafictional awareness about the medium, where the videos themselves can come to appear haunted or contagious, spilling over into the viewer’s own world.

The significant effect of this style, for my purposes, is time disorientation. As a consequence of this random-access transmedia framing, the sense of containment tacitly offered by narratives with concrete beginnings and endings is distorted by the presence of an off-screen and *immediate* threat which Slender Man represents to the viewer, and which heightens their sense of both the narrative’s authenticity and relevance. This provides an avenue by which *Marble Hornets* operates in tandem with Grusin’s premediacy as it serves as both a source of the same low-level anxiety and a call-to-action in preventing the harm Slender Man might do to them. The fragmented nature of the narrative suggests a malicious agency on a level beyond the production of the text, which only corresponds with the source of that agency. The source of the agency can be read as timeless, and in conjunction with the multi-platform experience of viewing, provides a lingering sense of anxiety.

While the singular anxiety that the fragmented presence of Slender Man fosters in viewers is capable of transcending the boundaries of narrative time, within the confined narrative of *Marble Hornets*' exegesis, there are several nested layers of time in which events are unfolding simultaneously on screen. The narrator—eventually identified as Jay Merrick—offers one such layer, as he views the tapes and reports on his findings. In “Introduction,” Wagner (in character as Jay) has posted the video at one point in time, and the viewer is watching the entry at another. The discussion Jay recounts with Alex in the video itself occurs at a third, further anterior point in time. Finally, the video presented is ostensibly from Alex's tape collection, and is being filmed at its own point in time, earlier than and disconnected from any of the others, and so provides a fourth. Some of these layers can collapse as Jay periodically takes over for Alex in filming himself and the unfolding events. Gérard Genette offers a language for this particular kind of narration, which is quite complex. It involves “interpolated narration,” to the extent that both what happens at the time of the events the narrator describes are significant, as well as what is occurring at the time of narration. It also incorporates *external focalization*, in that Jay is unaware of certain facts of Alex's project; and also subtle elements of *prolepsis*, in that it anticipates events unfolding, both in real time and in the time of narrated events as they are uncovered (*Figures III, Narrative Discourse*). However many layers there are at any one point in the series, ultimately temporal multiplicity is one factor serving to fragment the narrative and foster a sense of unease in the viewer, as they are drawn to the otherwise disconnected scenes unfolding in Alex's film on screen. Once again, Genette refers to these tools as *anachronies*. Given the anticipated genre--horror--offered by the arrangement of narrational components thus far,

these anachronies fosters an invisible sense of anticipated violence concordant with that of Jay's narration, but which is never realized in the entry. The most significant of these 'layers,' however, remains the implicit and omnipresent agency of Slender Man himself emerging from the exegesis to be negotiated in real-time by the viewers.

Marble Hornets signals this by including a series 'antagonist' YouTube channel, ToTheArk, which Wagner uses to impersonate a mysterious masked figure watching Jay's progress and providing disorienting and uncanny feedback on the unfolding investigation/haunting. These videos occasionally feature scenes depicted in the series channel, but from the angle of this the unseen antagonist. In one notable sequence in the video "Addition," this figure observes Jay in close proximity. "Addition" was posted to Wagner's ToTheArk channel, and is in response to the series' channel's "Entry 16," in which Jay investigates a house where a former cast member of Alex's, Brian, was said (by anonymous tip) to be found. In that entry, Jay calls out to both Alex and Brian but finds no one in the house and the furniture in disarray, but does find pieces of probative evidence, including a bottle of pills with no label and a trail of blood leading to a large pool in the bathroom sink. There is also a moment in which Jay collapses coughing shortly before finding the pills, which, in juxtaposition, suggests a contagious element to Slender Man's effect on his victims. He also coughs again shortly before the entry's conclusion. Jay states in an intertitle card at the end of the entry "I may go back eventually," with no clear indication as to why.

This is one of many signals that Jay is not providing complete information to the viewer, and serves to reemphasize the immediacy with which the viewer is expected to "participate," and which draws "real-time" (more specifically, the time in which the viewer

is watching an instance of the video's being played) into significant focus. In "Addition," Jay's voice calling for both Alex and Brian is played back repeatedly and in slow motion over a distorted camera feed in green "night vision" mode. The camera frame appears to peer out from behind a door frame to film Jay from behind, prone in the corridor in which he has collapsed coughing. "Addition" is only fifteen seconds long, but at its end features the words "See You" in blurry white lettering over a black backdrop, seemingly to mock Jay's characteristic intertitle arrangement. Jay's "Entry 16" is an example of *external focalization*. Jay is filming in narrational time, though it is in relation to narrative time (i.e. with respect to events that have taken place on narrated videos he has shown his narratees). He is unaware of some aspects of what have transpired in narrative time. "Addition," however is contrasting Jay's external focalization with an implied narrator (the modal implication of camcorder footage implies a narrator) with *zero focalization*, presumably aware of at least some part of what Jay is attempting to uncover (G n tte). This continual intertextual exchange between these two video channels form a backdrop which privileges the viewer's immediate time frame, and crucially, a mode by which the viewer might learn more about protecting themselves from the predations of Slender Man. This privileging is in part due to the unfolding of the entries' release schedule, and is used in part to ensure the viewer's continued interest, though a comprehensive resolution for the events in the series as well as solutions to unanswered questions has yet to be fully authored at the time of writing. While it is not entirely uncommon for serialized narratives to halt abruptly, there is a consistent promise of enlightenment as to Slender Man's nature that the narration postpones indefinitely. In "Entry 16," for example, Jay finds blood evidence in a sink that may be the result of one of the inhabitants coughing

up blood, which the proximity of his own collapse and coughing would seem to corroborate. His finding the unlabeled pills would suggest a mode by which Slender Man's contagious influence might be controlled or limited, but it is left to the viewer's imagination. Nevertheless, the presence of the pills, as well as the anonymous tip Jay receives signals another kind of omnipresent agency which might serve to counteract or oppose that of Slender Man. This opposing agency promises a kind of relief from or hidden knowledge about Slender Man, which is furthered by the presence of the separate masked antagonist whose relationship to Slender Man is unclear.

This comes to fruition when Jay returns to the house in "Entry 18" and encounters this masked figure seated on a counter in Jay's flashlight beam. The frame is blurred as it registers the figure's distance, however, and it is unclear at first if it is a mask or a face beneath the figure's hood. In the brief moment in which the two study one another and Jay calls out Alex's name assuming the figure to be him, the viewer sees a promise of hope, as if Jay has found an unseen ally. This is dashed, however, as the frame focuses, and the mask is revealed in almost the same instant the figure dashes at Jay and assaults him. The conscious and meaningful arrangement of these signifiers, however unresolved, appears designed to offer a way for viewers to rationalize their fear and anxiety, in that a medicalized procedure might serve to explain or relieve the sublime unknowability of Slender Man in some way. In the end, however, it does not do so. If we might qualify this arrangement of signifiers, we might consider the use of abrupt coughing, aspiration of blood, unlabeled pills, and inexplicable stalking and aggression as a rational mode by which medicalizing Slender Man (perhaps as a

product of contagious mental illness) is explicated by means of an authoritative, intellectual, and scientific institution. That this mode of understanding is unrealized presents a statement in which that form of medicalized authority is ineffectual, and symbolically suggests disillusionment with medicine and science as authoritative institutions. This coincides with the rise of popular conspiracy within hypermediated and pseudonymous fora like Something Awful which also questions the authority of medical and scientific institutions, but sutures this disillusionment to the universalized anxiety of Slender Man, whom, with his facelessness, his height, and his black suit, presents a corrupted and even mocking image of authority as a whole.

As that case against authority suggests, even as the layers of narrative time allow Slender Man to transcend the narrative itself, many aspects of the series remain to provide latent ideological content, namely its commitment to the “loner” individualism of a white, technologically savvy middle-class. The series’ characters, for instance, provide subtle arrangements of signifiers that, in light of Slender Man’s unknowability, make statements about the series’ audience, in particular about what kinds of modes of rationalizing might serve as potential (however insufficient) explanations for them concerning Slender Man and his behaviour. There are subtle signs of social mobility that indicate that characters do not feel the constraints of social class, for example, that suggest an assumed income demographic for the series that might similarly take those signs as a given, but which more impoverished audience members might think unlikely, and for whom the ideological parallels do not align. As preface to an example, it is also significant that *Marble Hornets* (among other mythos productions) uses behavioural parallelism in its characters to suggest that they are susceptible to some form of psychological

corruption by Slender Man. Jay begins to imitate Alex's behaviour, for example, by filming himself almost constantly. One of the videos includes a reference to Alex buying tape for filming, but this introduces one such example issue of 'textual ecotypification' with regards to social class. Neither Alex nor Jay, in all of their time filming, are shown to either go to a place of employment, nor are they shown to attend school in any way. There is a powerful element of agency with regards to social class and social mobility being assumed in this series, and the time dilation produced by the framed narration serves to obfuscate the protagonists' apparent wealth of free time with which to indulge their mutually growing paranoia and facilitate their investigation. Each character also drives, apparently with free access to personal vehicles, but there is no suggestion as to how they afford gas or maintenance. They film themselves constantly, but it is unclear how they afford the material costs. Jay is shown at one point in the series ("Entry #27") to check himself into a hotel for a week, with no apparent means of affording it to this point. A lengthy stay at a hotel is expensive materially, but also as a time commitment which presents a conspicuous absence as to his friends and family, and as there is no information or apparent acknowledgement of Jay's family, and with no discernable attention paid to Jay's family in the fora either.

Among the more disorienting aspects of *Marble Hornets'* narrative concerns this ambiguity which connects Jay, other characters, or indeed those users online participating in the ARG, to the world of material needs. While it might be considered another conspicuous omission in service to the narrative's sparsity—a feature which lends a great deal to the more uncanny aspects of the series—it is significant that few if any of

those users engaging with the ARG appear to have inquired as to the pressures of family or material needs of the characters which might be serviced by regular hours of employment. Regardless of what is intended by this absence, there is a clear de-prioritization of material needs and interpersonal obligations both for creators and viewers that could hinder or inhibit the characters' investigations into Slender Man. This could be meant to function as a narrative expedient, however the series aspirations to folklore; the presumed authenticity the narrative embodies through a constructed incidental proximity to the transcendent malicious agency represented by Slender Man; and the ways in which both are meant to tap into a sense of immediacy in the audience all would suggest that omitting material needs and obligations as a narrative expedient contradicts mythos creators' stated aims. Moreover, the community does not acknowledge this absence while simultaneously sifting entries by both *ToTheArk* and *Marble Hornets* for hidden messages, seeking hidden details in the backgrounds of various scenes, or otherwise deciphering clues. It is a significant aspect of participation in ARGs and AREs that viewers carefully scrutinize what might be obscured in these videos so as to uncover these hidden details. This then begs the question, why have so few if any of these scrutinizing users asked about Jay's personal obligations and needs? There is a measure of implicit discernment taking place within the community as to what is obscured that might constitute a clue. The silence shared between creators and viewers would suggest that such material needs and obligations are tacitly (even unconsciously) agreed upon as being in some way immaterial. If we presume that this omission is unintentional (if fortuitously shared between videographer and audience), the capacity that the community appears to possess to ignore these concerns alone would suggest that both creators

and viewers have social mobility enough to neglect them, which positions the audience within an apparently mobile social class, and further diminishes the mythos' capacity to realize its universalized folkloric ambitions.

Material and interpersonal obligations, however, imply an authoritative agent to whom these characters may be considered beholden—one of the things that Slender Man himself may well symbolize here. In “Introduction,” Alex (presumably the videographer), is positioned in the passenger’s seat of the vehicle. Viewed alongside an implicit disregard for material and interpersonal obligation, and motifs within the series that make statements about the ineffectual nature of traditionally authoritative bodies, such as medical science, a picture of juvenile alienation within the series’ latent ideological content begins to emerge. Furthermore, in light of this neglect for interpersonal obligation and material needs, the series offers the characters’ co-presence on screen as more closely resembling online society than it does material society, in effect allegorizing the mythos enthusiasts’ own media situation. Interpersonal relationships do exist in the series in the form of friends and contacts. It is clear enough that some of them are aiding Jay's investigation, and others are participating in Alex's student film, but the protagonists' relationships with them are acknowledged to have declined, such as through repeated instances of their having ‘lost touch’ with Alex, for example (“Entry 15”). Relationships between these characters reflect a state in which they are capable of becoming reclusive without being called upon at home by concerned friends or family, much like a user might cease posting in a forum, leaving other users no recourse to find and ask after them. The time fragmentation itself recalls a similar time dilation occurring

online. The series presents individuals with a sense of cerebral identity without an apparent 'body' (signified by material needs or concerns) that permeates this narrative in a way that mimics the experience of hypermediated life online, and the time distortions of experience online serve the double-effect of both rendering the experience sublime and disturbingly uncanny, but also to obfuscate this distorted version of reality in which individuals are disconnected from material concerns, which for some users might diminish material connections like family. In these ways, this double ambiguity again both reflects and perpetuates the alienation of hypermediation, to the extent that the more remote subject positions the characters appear to occupy—and which reflect online society—are capable of easily supplanting those positions they might embody in the material world, without a great deal of negotiation that might be apparent should users reflect more on material concerns in commenting on and discussing the videos. These series render material needs reflexively immaterial. This places primacy upon a premediated impression of reality, yet the stories are nevertheless predicated upon an apprehension of authenticity—it gestures to an authentic reality somehow paradoxically embedded in a premediated space. This is a nuanced and pervasive diffusion of fantasy and reality which renders the conditions in Creepypasta.com's response to the stabbing in Waukesha: that users can and should easily distinguish between the two, and any failure to do so is the fault of the users in question that ought to be able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality for themselves—as contradictory.

While Wagner and others offer the series as authentically documented encounters with a real monster, the implicit choices they have made in producing texts within the Slender Man mythos provide a latent ideological framework which informs both an

ecotypified public that precludes its being universally folkloric. To some extent, in striving to present Slender Man as an omnipresence with universal affect, creators make a tacit presumption that any apparent commonality, as a conscious and reflexive history of gothic literary and aesthetic tradition which is popular among this demographic and which possesses similar ideological content, in particular the weird fiction of the early twentieth century United States.

The use of media format to disorient the viewer is further perpetuated by Slender Man's presence on-screen.⁶⁸ Distortions begin to appear as a background condition of the media being employed—the hand-held video cameras Alex and Jay are using. These include audio distortions including noise, filtering issues, and visual distortions such as tearing or static. They are distinctive but commonplace conditions of such media, and the viewer is at least initially inclined to treat them as background conditions supplementing the mythos' "found-footage" ethos. To that extent, *Marble Hornets* continues to exhibit some of the same characteristics observable in creepypasta fiction in which authenticity is represented by an unpolished quality, such as the grammatical inconsistencies outlined in Chapter 1. These distortions, however, eventually become apparent as indicators of Slender Man's being present. In "Entry 1," Jay observes in his intertitle cards that he has found something unusual in the tapes in which he observes that the audio has apparently been removed. Over time as viewers review the entries, it

⁶⁸ Despite there not being a great deal of original material to derive any significant metric of purity to Slender Man prior to the appearance of the Operator, the community continues to emphasize difference between the two characters. This was to some degree the result of the schisms caused by the events in Waukesha: the Operator was seen by some as responsible for setting the precedent for the stabbing, as *Marble Hornets* (as this chapter will detail) established the concept of "proxies" that give themselves in service to the Operator. In general, however, I will not greatly differentiate between these two figures, as they are taken more broadly by readers and viewers to be the same boogeyman with shared characteristics. Any apparent differences in fact perpetuate folkloric apprehensions of Slender Man by appearing to be varying accounts of the same *real* monster, once again inculcating "real time" for viewers and readers. Hence, while Wagner and others take the name of the monster in *Marble Hornets* to be called The Operator, for the sake of consistency I will refer to him as Slender Man.

becomes clear to them that this is Slender Man's presence distorting the camera's microphone feed. Visual tearing is taking place as well. Jay observes that this video appears to have been taken in Alex's house rather than the set of the student film (which, titled *Marble Hornets*, gives the Youtube series its name). There are intermittent visual distortions, but the exegesis appears to be from a frightened Alex at night in his home, interior lights extinguished, peering out the windows through which the viewer is treated to brief, frantic glimpses of Slender Man in the porch and yard lights, framed against a forested landscape at the edge of the property. Slender Man is mostly silent, but is shown to move in occasionally erratic bursts, showing interest in Alex (in the later "Entry 7"), as though stalking, by leaning down to peer through the window at him (recalling a similar image in the story discussed in Chapter 1).

It is significant that this is the series' first direct depiction of Slender Man, and it bears a few characteristic features. The channel, for one, takes the name of the student film, *Marble Hornets*, and yet has been remediated in the YouTube channel to expand beyond the student film's principal photography. The persistent title, however, appears to signify a failure of containment. The object of the ARG, Slender Man (as an omnipresence which the series presents as a real object captured on film) is capable of expanding beyond the confines of the media, which strives to make itself invisible, flaws included, into an invisible layer of mediacy overlaying a reality to which viewers are subject. Similarly, the series title, thus retained, suggests a sense of containment, that the channel is presenting the film, but the ARG has little to do with the film, and so instead becomes another invisible layer of mediacy that frames its ostensibly real object—the footage unfolding of Alex's (and subsequently Jay's) paranoid personal life and haunting

by Slender Man. Secondly, the encounter with Slender Man in “Entry 1” establishes an indeterminately expansive use value for the tapes themselves, and lends significance to Jay’s acknowledging its departure from what was apparently typical footage. Each of these factors contribute to a sense of hypermediation which disorients the viewer, and as each purports to document “reality” (however inadequately), the viewer is primed to internalize the distorted version of reality. The tapes featured in the entries begin to detail Alex’s descent into paranoia, filming apparently all parts of his life, with intermittent glimpses of sometimes abrupt audio and visual phenomena, which become stronger as Slender Man appears more often on screen.

In “Entry 4,” Jay suspects Alex of being responsible for at least some of the video distortion. In “Entry 16,” as described above, Jay is given a tip as to how to locate Alex’s friend and lead cast member, Brian, leading him to an abandoned suburban home. This, again, illustrates certain class assumptions: abandonment is only possible with owned properties left to ruin, and there is no evidence in the house of family or any other occupants. It is unclear how Brian, who is later shown to have become a recluse, can afford his living conditions. In investigating the house, Jay uncovers evidence of Brian’s mental decline, such as the unlabeled pills, but also as he finds a closet in which Brian or Alex has evidently been sleeping, with a pillow, sleeping bag, and water bottle, suggesting lengthy paranoid episodes. In “Entry 19,” Jay describes filming himself (as Alex had done) and shows footage of himself sleeping with the light on. He appears, getting up from bed with his eyes shut, as if sleepwalking, to leave for hours, before returning, falling asleep immediately. He claims to have no recollection of the events. The footage

concludes with several time-lapses, featuring glimpses of the same hooded, masked figure in his bedroom, watching him sleep. In the series' conclusion (Entry 84), Brian is revealed to have been the masked figure, shown previously to have been working alongside another hooded antagonist and cast member. Each of these events are examples of Slender Man's influence upon certain characters, suggesting a hypnotic effect or Stockholm syndrome in which his victims become delusionally attached to and invested with their tormentor so as to ensure their survival. It is unclear whether or not this subordination is voluntary and thereby the product of reason. Viewers, however, experience a degree of instability as regards the reliability of the narrators. Beyond a certain point in the narration—"Entry 19" is the first strong suggestion that Jay is acting without conscious awareness of his actions—the events in the narration no longer have a fixed position *in time* in which they would be focalized behind Jay and experience the plot as he does. To this point in the series, Jay has been apparently in control of his own actions, and footage he presents has been governed to some extent by his promise in "Introduction"--that anything he finds that is relevant or significant, he will share. Consequently, the sense that he may not be in control of his own actions suggests that there may be video content--pertinent evidence in the series' mystery--that he unconsciously conceals, alters, or otherwise creates himself. The "lucid" Jay may, for example, present footage that he has produced in a fugue state at some other point in time. In effect, with or without his knowledge, "Entry 19" transforms Jay into an unreliable narrator. Without any remaining point of temporal fixity, *Marble Hornets* both illustrates the same kind of awakened faculties offered by the sublime, while simultaneously affirming the anxieties of alienation produced by the inherent solitude of hypermediated spaces online. In this

way, *Marble Hornets*—like most Slender Man texts—both promises and fails to deliver mythos enthusiasts from their own anxieties. Instead it further destabilizes the sense of trust between narrator and narratee. The suggestion that the characters act under the will of Slender Man—a supernatural representation of some elemental aspect of human nature—seems to offer the audience the conclusion that the anxieties to which the narrative speaks are natural and felt universally, and where those anxieties are taken to be universal thanks to the mythos' folkloric affect, can lead certain of them to delusion and subsequent violence.

Uncanny Assimilation

In 1964, Belgian surrealist painter Rene Magritte produced a painting called “The Son of Man,” which depicts a well-dressed man in a bowler hat whose face is obscured by an apple. In a radio interview in 1965, Magritte claimed that the painting hides the face “pretty well,” as the perspective of the painting permits a few details of the face beneath it, but is, for the most part, obfuscating. He claims that “everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present” (Torczyner, 172). While Slender Man trades in the unease which his faceless aspect offers via the uncanny, Magritte is suggesting that the obscured face in “The Son of Man” is alluring. Slender Man also shares a similarly formal attire, no matter his historical situation, as Timothy H. Evans points out, “[Slender Man’s] twentieth-century suit and tie is a constant in many of these

[images], even in versions whose historical settings make it anachronistic” (p. 130). This consistency suggests an inherent value. The symbolic value of the attire to Magritte is, similar to the effect of the apple, in its ability to obscure enticingly, rather than conceal. Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* foregrounded the suit itself as emblematic of a post-war malaise of conformity and materialism, which in part inspired the common appellation of “the grey flannel suit era” to 1950s America. This materialism represented by a swelling middle class in the 20th century expanded beyond the United States, and Magritte’s “The Son of Man,” painted in 1964 retains this symbolism. The consistency with which the suit is presented in depictions of Slender Man strongly suggests a thematic association of timeless material conformity with the suit consistent with that of his symbolic forebears. Wilson’s novel, however, like Magritte’s painting, present the suit as a uniform which obscures the individual within, rather than concealing him. Wilson’s protagonist Tom Rath struggles with this material conformity and seeks meaning, just as Magritte claims the observer seeks to uncover that which is obscured.⁶⁹ The emotional conflict he claims that this kind of enticing obscurity invites articulates a kind of humanizing internal struggle in which the individual subject is contained against his will by the suit in service to the demands of culture, materiality, and station. This symbolic internal conflict represented by the consistent suit is one expres-

⁶⁹ While the image itself shows a figure whose face is principally obscured by an apple, Magritte’s sense of the image is that the occlusion is constantly recurring. I would argue that the apple is itself a recurring image in the painting, as it represents the point of fixation not just for the viewer, but before the eyes of the figure himself, as though it is that which he seeks and which in turn blinds him to the world around him. Some interpretations suggest it is biblical, which the title of the painting supports, and certainly it would appear as though the apple is analogous to the fruit of the biblical tree of knowledge. The figure becomes faceless as he dons his obscuring uniform in pursuit of that knowledge. Regardless, it appears that there is some parallel of occlusion between the two aspects of the painting, both voluntary and involuntary on the part of the subject.

sion of the alienation that the Slender Man text community expresses through its stories. In part, the suggestion of an inner humanity contributes to the broad range of Slender Man stories which are remarkably humanizing. For example, Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill point out that some Slender Man stories feature 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” (p. 9). They acknowledge that those stories featuring Sally are treated much more broadly as fiction than other, historicized accounts. Nevertheless, there are other ways in which Slender Man is humanized, such as through 4chan’s meme culture, in which images of “Trenderman,” a photo of a featureless white mannequin in comparatively fashionable semi-formal attire, is contrasted with that of Slender Man, and presented as a relative of Slender Man’s rather than a different incarnation of the same being.⁷⁰ In this way, Slender Man constructs for the text community and his enthusiasts a similar internal conflict to that which Magritte describes in which his obscured nature is both unnatural and distressing, but also enticingly human. The latter is informed to a great degree by pain. Slender Man is commonly depicted, (such as in *Marble Hornets*’ “Entry 61”) as peering in or reaching out to “victims,” and yet it can just as easily be an inverted narrative in which he is reaching out for relief or succor, or peering in for acceptance.

⁷⁰ While this chapter will not explore the subject extensively, there is also a wide array of Slender Man fiction in which he is presented as a sex object or dominant sexual partner. While this is a relevant contribution to critical study of Slender Man, I consider this component as germane primarily to other scholarship involving online pornography. Nevertheless, its existence does support the reading of Slender Man as possessed of alluring symbolism.

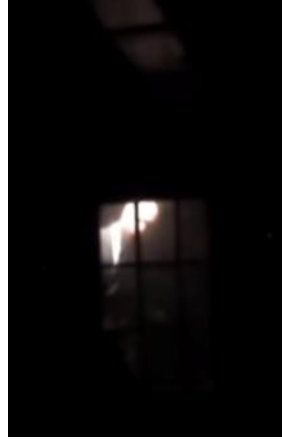


Figure 2: 'The Operator' in Marble Hornets "Entry #6"

This is an ambiguity that his aesthetic perpetuates, and provides a structure in which some enthusiasts might actively seek him out, as Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser claimed to be doing when they assaulted their friend Payton Leutner. Slender Man can thereby stand as a symbol for alienation intrinsically, and therefore as a representative of the alienated. In this way, Slender Man is able to reflect the similar facelessness of the filmic subject position. As discussed in Chapter 2, the male gaze itself becomes an invisible medium through which reality is distorted. This positions the large portion of the Slender Man text community that is young, male, affluent, inclined to video gaming, and socializing to a great extent in hypermediated and pseudonymous fora such that Slender Man can represent their own sense of alienation and confinement. This is one way in which playing games vicariously through an embodied other on screen as in Let's Play videos would illustrate this parallel of facelessness, in that videographers such as Mark Edward Fischbach can provide for them an affective avatar.

Slender Man, however, serves both sides of this alluring/discomfiting paradigm. Ernst Jentsch describes doubt as being integral to the uncanny, as that which is apparently inanimate (such as the anthropoid Slender Man) may in fact be animate, and vice

versa, but that doubt he suggests presents a need for resolution by the subject observing it.⁷¹ Doubt functions in a duality of outcomes in which a sensible outcome is contrasted with a disturbing sense of unreality. In the case of Slender Man, his obscured aspect can invite resolution by an observer as a consequence of both potential outcomes. Enthusiasts in the text community either seek to confirm the object either as monstrous or as human. The Slender Man texts as a whole strive to elude resolution of this doubt, however. They work within this paradigm to present probative uncanny images, utterances, and narratives that hint at an occult knowledge which can demystify the uncanny object, and thus achieve a catharsis. This suggests two conclusions: first, that viewers' inculcation in this way invites assimilation into the internal world of the text as they become internally motivated to resolve this doubt. Second, that continuously destabilizing what fragments of the occult knowledge readers and viewers might obtain as the narrative unfolds denies them the catharsis of resolution, and fosters instead a state of perpetual anxiety that never delivers tacitly-promised relief. The uncanny's capacity for assimilating the audience therefore becomes an endless pursuit of the intentionally elusive, and is often depicted in these narratives through characters like *Marble Hornets'* Jay and Alex as a consuming and affected madness. This condition is pervasive enough in the Slender Man text community that it, like the consistency of the suit imagery, becomes integrated with the practice of Slender Man text production. Characters in the ARGs, games, and stories become what has come to be known in the Slender Man mythos as "proxies": servants of Slender Man that act under his influence and on his behalf.

⁷¹ See Chapter 2.

In *Marble Hornets*, this condition becomes conflated with mediacy, and Slender Man's effects on media and technology hint at the condition's being a kind of digitized corruption of the individuals being affected as proxies. The word "proxy" itself, of course, has evolved from its archaic use denoting a personal representative (and the sense in which it is more readily applied in the case of Slender Man) to enter common parlance of computer networking. In *Marble Hornets*, while the word proxy is not used specifically, the word is often applied in related writings to characters such as Tim and Brian who are affected by this condition.⁷² The word 'proxy' also parallels the name Wagner gave Slender Man for the series, "The Operator." Each of these terms draws attention to Slender Man's own mediacy, as Slender Man ostensibly exists and operates within the material world, but is served by proxies and represented only through online media. Several of the videos from Wagner's ToTheArk channel suggest this blending of the digital and material spheres. In "Operator," for example, there is an interesting moment of intertitle use that is worth attention. At one point, using a similar intertitle arrangement as in the series' main channel, displays the message "Lakes In Stillnesss [sic] will Take Every life of the Night." In this case, however, the words from the statement appear one at a time, in evocatively "standardized" computer formatting. The font is sans-serif, recalling the Microsoft Word default font Calibri, and in random positions within a line-spacing schema

⁷² The Slender Man Wiki takes pains to differentiate between definitive 'proxies' and the characters in *Marble Hornets*, claiming that the series creators have stated that they are not associated with any other ARG, and therefore the term ought not to be applied, having been coined elsewhere. This is another example of the ways in which creators in the Mythos distance themselves from other creators so as to avoid the appearance of creative licence or control over Slender Man. In this way he remains a real object that the ARGs are (albeit creatively) documenting. Nevertheless, as the Wiki's disclaimer notes, characters in *Marble Hornets* are frequently referred to as proxies, and they are functionally very similar. In this way, the terminological association between 'proxy' and 'The Operator' remains relevant. (<https://theSlenderMan.fandom.com/wiki/Proxy>)

similar to that of many commonly used word processors, though with obviously inconsistent spacing. These apparently superficial details suggest a machine-generated text. It invokes a recurring trope from science fiction film in which an artificial intelligence is given to inhumane tendencies in service to some form of 'cold' computational logic, and is often represented on screen by a characteristically uncanny and cold banality. Examples include the benign and benevolent tone adopted by HAL 9000, the antagonist computer in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and MU-TH-UR, the navigational computer of the ship *Nostramo* in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), which delivers the news that the crew is expendable in pursuit of a malevolent mission on a small black screen in neutral green print and a spare tone.

This is a common evocation in ToTheArk's contributions to the ARG, such as in "Impurity," in which the message "There was m0re" is hidden among lines of zeroes on a black screen. The zeroes indicate the number dialed, '0' on a touch-tone phone used to access the telephone operator, denoting The Operator's name. Much like the other examples of this motif, the inhumanity of the machine is contrasted with the banality with which it is delivered, rendering it unsettling. That it is a motif derived from a "logic," however inhumanely applied, is significant in that it is inherently invested with the symbolic allure of 'correctness', and points once more to Slender Man as a figure both terrifying and fearsome. Critically however it also presents a form of interpersonal corruption that blends the material with the digital, in that Slender Man's capabilities appear rooted in the digital sphere in some way, and yet he is capable of exerting influence over others and transforming them into 'proxies'—a term which evokes the digital sphere, and often represented on screen by masked 'personae,' which appear to approximate alternate

identities with handles and avatars (in the form of characteristic masks and garb, such as hooded sweatshirts) which allegorize a material rendition of online personae. To this extent, there is a recurring theme in Slender Man texts which appear to pit users' digital selves against their material bodies, and to this extent, those users believing themselves to be better attuned to life online, or spending proportionately greater time online appear to occasionally identify themselves as proxies, with some measure of reverence for Slender Man. This is the vehicle, I argue, by which some members of the text community act—such as how Weier and Geyser claimed to in stabbing their friend in service to Slender Man—as proxies.

Impotence and Incunabula

Knudsen's original images of Slender Man feature a characteristic distinct from his rendition in Wagner's *Marble Hornets*, that he is often depicted surrounded by a corona of writhing tentacles or tendrils of darkness. These tentacles appear intermittently in Slender Man texts, and users commenting in the Something Awful thread claimed that they should be less obvious. Users such as Woodrow Skillson comment that “its [sic] better if you don't notice them at first, and only later you realize just how alien the Slender Man is” (Woodrow Skillson, 13 June 2009). This reference to an “alien” quality is derived in part from an intuitive association the tentacles appear to have for these users with H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, which has long been popular among these users, and which often features the tentacled monster, Cthulhu. Timothy J. Evans argues that “[one] way to think about Slender Man is to put him into the context of what might broadly be called horror culture. [...] “Horror culture” encompasses not only fans

of the horror genre but its creators, producers, scholars, and even, more peripherally, those who don't consider themselves fans but who have casual acquaintance with the genre, expressed in things like zombie memes and Halloween decorations that reference horror films. Horror culture includes [...] the shared motifs, conventions, and structures of horror stories in any media form—what Trevor J. Blank has called “cultural inventories,” a huge range of references drawn from all kinds of [places]” (Evans, 129).

Knudsen states that his influences for Slender Man were more instinctive than derived from careful allusion, having created the original images in mere hours, from elements he found to be personally terrifying from his inventory of horror culture. This cultural inventory has a central use value in authenticating Slender Man as it is used to reflexively parallel the indexical relationship between artefacts featuring Slender Man, (such as photographs featuring Slender Man appearing in otherwise incidental everyday activity which is the apparent subject of the photograph,) and similar indexical associations folklore possesses with regard to real-world legends. Paul Manning argues similarly, claiming that “just as some media project the monster, producing it but at the same time denying its reality (hypermediacy), other (indexical) media show the monster ostensibly; that is, they produce it as evidence of its existence (immediacy)” (165). He claims that certain monsters are associated with the genre of narrative in which they are featured, and acquire those genres’ “attendant presuppositions of ‘realness’” and draws on examples from the country of Georgia, in which some monsters are associated with “indexes of the superstitious ‘backwardness’ of rural people,” whereas others are associated with local fairy tales in the purely fantastical realm, and are thereby regarded with

less derision. In this way, those Slender Man texts which form indexical signs of his existence in reality as well as those which are firmly and acknowledged to be fictional become nevertheless constitutive, as there is little to differentiate the two for the diverse community of users in the text community. In this way, Knudsen prepared premediated “zoning” for Slender Man by drawing on a confusion of particular signs from a cultural inventory of horror and which played upon users’ inability to discern fantasy from reality in order to terrify them. In this way, the texts from which Knudsen drew reference can illuminate the genealogical history of Slender Man’s cultural affect.

All of these texts in one way or another foster a sense of *impotence*. Slender Man texts, as well as the texts from which Knudsen drew reference and which prepared Slender Man for acceptance and integration by the community of online users, each presents a sublime and obscured power—a “supernatural order”—to which its victims are ultimately subservient, and which no modern or cognitive tool is capable of rendering visible or sensible, thus rendering his victims powerless. In the ARGs, Slender Man is shown to have a manipulating effect on victims’ consciousness; on technology that might be used to capture his image; on apperceptions of history by possessing his own secret history; and many others. The example of the unlabeled pills in *Marble Hornets’* “Entry 16” suggests a power Slender Man possesses over science and medicine. While there are many examples from Slender Man texts themselves, Knudsen prepared for Slender Man’s situation (wittingly or not) by his choice of influences, and the sense of impotence which Slender Man texts offer readers predates Slender Man himself.

In an interview for the website *KnowYourMeme*, interviewer Tomberry asked Slender Man creator Eric Knudsen what his influences were for Slender Man. Knudsen replied:

“I was mostly influenced by H. P. Lovecraft, Stephan [sic] King (specifically his short stories), the surreal imaginings of William S. Burroughs, and a couple games of the survival horror genre; *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*. I feel the most direct influences were Zack Parsons’s “That Insidious Beast,” the Steven King short story “The Mist,” the [Something Awful] tale regarding “The Rake,” reports of so-called shadow people, Mothman, and the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. I used these to formulate asomething [sic] whose motivations can barely be comprehended and causes general unease and terror in a general population.” (Knudsen)

The particular elements which Slender Man shares with these sources (as well as the elements they share with one another) each centrally position themes of impotence and helplessness, characterized by a sublime unknown which undermines established institutions of order and knowledge, particularly in an American context. Whether as cautionary tale or as triumphalism, these texts present an intermittently “magical” use of willpower as antidote to this paradigmatic context. In an interview with author Ted Morgan for his book *Literary Outlaw: the Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, Burroughs outlines his belief in the contemporary occult movement known as chaos magic. He claims that

“In the magical universe there are no coincidences and there are no accidents. Nothing happens unless someone wills it to happen. The dogma of science is that the will cannot possibly affect external forces, and I think that’s just ridiculous. It’s as bad as the church. My viewpoint is the exact contrary of the scientific viewpoint. I believe that if you run into somebody on the street it’s for a reason. Among primitive people they say that if someone was bitten by a snake he was murdered. I believe that.” (Burroughs, qtd. In Morgan)

Burroughs’ perspective illustrates an underlying, fundamental, and universal “order” as a central precondition to the affect of these texts. This is a precondition of the

possibility of occult knowledge. As such, he is quick to undermine both the existing institutions of religion and science as sources of this underlying order, instead suggesting that it is the prevailing and ultimately illusory order. Will, he argues, is the basis by which all events universally occur. He also refers to the wisdom of “primitive people,” suggesting the primacy of an older knowledge, or a knowledge otherwise dismissed by broader society which supersedes that of the institutions to which he refers and derides. His privileging of “will” is central to the dynamic of power and impotence that informs the conflict at the heart of Slender Man texts, as well as in those texts with which he shares a cultural inventory. Burroughs’ use of “magic” as an extension of will is invested with contemporary occult movements, specifically chaos magic. In *Legend Tripping Online*, Michael Kinsella provides us with a distinction between the more benign ‘cultural inventory’ and a “legend complex,” which he sees as being invested in a goal of remediating reality itself. He writes that “[within] a legend complex, narratives, practices, and experiences build upon and reinforce one another to encourage legend-tripping performances” (Kinsella, 56). He argues that legend-trippers trip so as to reconstitute reality, and therefore do not appear to entertain the possibility that their experiences were imagined or fabricated (see Chapter 1).⁷³ He argues that proponents of a legend complex contextualize these performances--or narratives--within a “larger sphere of folk metaphysics comprised of legends, rumours, opinions, ostensive acts, and beliefs related to New Age mysticism, psychic phenomena, institutional religious views, past personal ex-

⁷³ In "Database as a Symbolic Form," Lev Manovich emphasizes that stories online no longer have beginnings or endings, but rather have sequential elements that can be sought and found at multiple points of entry with no clear exit--aside from the reader's decision to cease. In this sense, online narraforms are compiled, reinscribed, and reinterpreted continually by readers as they explore. Legend complexes such as that of Slender Man lend themselves perfectly to this kind of medial environment.

periences, information gleaned from the Internet, books, television, radio, and paranormal clubs and conventions” (56). He argues that a legend complex is used to recontextualize (and indeed remediate) ostensibly natural phenomena as supernatural phenomena. He also links this activity with magic in a similar sense that Burroughs does, claiming that “[traditionally], the occult refers to a body of esoteric lore that profiles supernatural or magical provinces and powers for the benefit of an *enlightened few*” (emphasis mine, 56). This points to the dichotomy of power (or capacity) and impotence in illustrating the nature of alterity to the mainstream, in which those enlightened few manipulate the masses through force of will alone. This is central to the concept of chaos magic. Inspired by the works of early twentieth-century surrealist Austin Osman Spare, author Peter J. Carroll developed what is considered broadly by adherents of chaos magic to be a seminal work on the subject, *Liber Null & Psychonaut*, in 1977. Carroll describes magic similarly to Burroughs, arguing that “Only the greatest determination can win even a few seconds of mental silence,” and that “Magic is the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will. The will can only become magically effective when the mind is focused and not interfering with the will. [...] If an attempt is made to focus on some form of desire, the effect is short circuited by the lust of result. Egotistical identification, fear of failure, and the reciprocal desire not to achieve desire, arising from our dual nature, destroy the result” (pp. 14-15). It is in this light that Burroughs and he posit all phenomena as a result of ‘magical’ will. Despite Carroll’s admonition against egotism in magical practice, he positions egotism and fear of failure as the central oppositional forces to the rituals’ desired results, as though the primary concern of the practitioner is their status within an egotistical apperception of power and impotence. This is

the “dual nature” to which he refers, which he somewhat paradoxically posits as the source of one’s magical affinity, arguing that “[the] Self alone is God and should recognize itself in all things. For those that uphold limited values bind themselves to mediocrity and failure. Those who self-righteously value their own contradictions are mighty on this earth” (p. 59). As with user Aleph Null’s post in Slender Man’s original Something Awful thread in which he calls Slender Man “the birth of an urban legend,” these users’ collective desire to manifest Slender Man as an urban legend is presented as an act of will manifesting material results. It also positions their having done so as an expression of superiority as an ‘enlightened few’, whether through their ability to manifest actually supernatural effects or through manipulating the mainstream public into believing it. At the same time, the paradigm of chaos magic Burroughs espouses is both offered as an inspiration for Slender Man’s creation, as well as illustrating the prevailing preconditions for Slender Man’s terrifying affect in which he is the product of an occult knowledge (or will), to which his victims are denied access and rendered impotent. In this way, Knudsen’s being influenced by Burroughs’ surrealist works in creating Slender Man points to this paradigm of magical thinking in which occult lore can remediate reality itself in such a way that those who possess it become inherently superior.

Each of Knudsen’s influences for Slender Man reflects this paradigm in different ways. For example, Knudsen claims to have borrowed from the image of the Tall Man in Don Coscarelli’s 1979 psychological horror film *Phantasm*, in which a tall, thin mortician in a black suit is the principal antagonist. In the film, the Tall Man is possessed of supernatural strength and powers, including immortality and changing his appearance at will, which the audience learns in later instalments is as a result of his having ventured into a

portal through space and time, and having returned changed. The first film anticipates this to some extent when the protagonists discover a nineteenth-century photo of the Tall Man, suggesting he lives somehow outside of normal time. The film ends with a sense that it was perhaps entirely the protagonist's dream, and the motif of dreams and fabular realities is particularly prevalent in the film. Thematically, the film strives to confuse dreaming and reality, and evades explanation for it. Neither plot contrivance nor exposition serve to explain the Tall Man's extradimensional powers, but the film's symbolic use of mirrors, portals, and dreaming offer a paradigm in which occult knowledge capable of subverting natural law empowers the magician—in this case, the Tall Man. The old photo serves to illustrate this point further by giving the magician a sense of historicity, and thus the occult knowledge he possesses as well. This historicity grants the knowledge a primal quality that predates modern conceptions of reality informed by those institutions that author H. P. Lovecraft asserts are our "only safeguard" against the unknown.⁷⁴

Chief among Knudsen's influences were the works of early twentieth-century weird fiction author H.P. Lovecraft. The tentacles or tendrils of shadow emanating from Slender Man's back in many depictions, including Knudsen's, are often treated as a direct reference to the distinctively tentacled face of Lovecraft's monster Cthulhu, whose cult popularity in and around the Slender Man text community (such as in the Something Awful forums from which he emerged) is well-documented (Peck, Evans). Lovecraft's connection to Slender Man is more methodological than aesthetic, however, in

⁷⁴ Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

that Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Mythos' parallels Slender Man's 'Mythos', and Lovecraft is often credited with creating the archetype of a modern Mythos in this way. Similarly, Lovecraft himself espoused (and represented in his fiction) a great deal of the same social sensibilities informed by alterity to a perceived mainstream that Slender Man text community members appear to espouse also. Unpopular during his lifetime, and dying in poverty, his fiction focuses on the machinations of an internal universe in which a vast and unknowable cosmos extends far beyond the reckoning of humankind and features what are sometimes called "Great Old Ones"--a class of ancient (possibly immortal) and dominant entities that possess great power, and who possess a characteristic indifference towards mankind and other mortals, epitomized by Cthulhu himself. This establishes the same paradigm of magical thinking in which mainstream institutions of knowledge and power are supplanted by an occult order to which they are unwittingly subservient. This order is apparently made manifest by the will of his "great old ones" such as Cthulhu, the knowledge of whom drives Lovecraft's human protagonists insane. In his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft defines his weird fiction (as it is known) as follows: "The true weird tale has something more than secret murders, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space." Lovecraft illustrates clearly the conflict at the heart of this paradigm, positioning "those fixed laws of Nature"

as the “only safeguard” against a potent and malevolent unknown. Kinsella claims that Lovecraft “encouraged many of his peers to add to the Cthulhu Mythos, which has since evolved into a complete fictional universe transmitted through a variety of media, including role-playing games, television, film, and the Internet” (p. 59) and argues that certain components of the Mythos became vehicles for fans to remediate Lovecraft’s fiction as authentic contact with supernatural forces in reality. He argues that “in exploring the Cthulhu Mythos, [readers] will inevitably seek out occult materials that draw heavily upon Lovecraft’s writings, such as the various versions of the *Necronomicon*. Several magicians claim Lovecraft had tapped into an occult reality that he had mistakenly assumed to be the product of his own imagination, and when their asserted works are explored, readers encounter numerous personal experience narratives describing ritual activities that have evoked visions of the Outer God Yog Sothoth or the Deep One named Dagon. No longer is the Cthulhu Mythos framed as fiction, but, rather, as fact” (59).⁷⁵ In this way, Lovecraft’s influence on the Slender Man Mythos offers a tested model of transmuting fiction into fact, and thereby enabling the paradigmatic position in which creators in the Slender Man mythos might claim superiority over the mainstream via (quasi-literal) magical thinking.

Author and scholar China Miéville, in his essay “Weird Fiction,” discusses Lovecraft's connection to a pastiche form of exposition which evades direct analysis, but which also constitutes an index of paradigmatic occult lore, as Kinsella suggests. This is

⁷⁵ The *Necronomicon* is a grimoire referred to in Lovecraft’s fiction that supposedly contained spells for summoning the Great Old Ones, and which Kinsella claims has been “conjured by real-world magicians interested in tapping into the collective authority (and economic potential) amassed by public interest in Lovecraft’s work, [and] several versions the *Necronomicon* have actually been published, and each of these, like other occult grimoires, promises esoteric knowledge,” (59). On a personal note, I purchased one such version myself in 2002 for the purposes of performing certain of those rituals that interested me at 17, with mixed results. I have since lost my copy through entirely mundane circumstances, and I must therefore remain among the unenlightened.

pervasive in weird fiction, and parallels the ways in which the Slender Man text community involve themselves in the mythos. Mieville quotes Lovecraft, claiming that “[Lovecraft] is largely uninterested in plot: “Atmosphere,” he says, “not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction” (Lovecraft 1995: 116). [...] At its best this works as pulp bricolage, where texts concatenate out of scattered scraps, in what looks like a deliberate undermining of “plot.” In Lovecraft’s key work, “The Call of Cthulhu,” there is no story, only the slow uncovering, from disjointed information and discarded papers, of the fact of the Weird, an ancient alien creature, Cthulhu, sojourning below the ocean. The story is explicit about its anti-narrative methodology, stressing that “all dread glimpses of truth” are “fleshed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things” (Lovecraft 1999: 140),” . This “accidental piecing together” is an apt descriptor for the work of Slender Man Mythos enthusiasts, particularly as it applies to Slender Man ARGs. This is in no small part because of the indexical capacity of mediacy. As Paul Manning in his essay “Monstrous Media and Media Monsters” describes, “[the] varied genres and media forms in which Slender Man appears, the [pastiche] are those genres or media forms that make some appeal to realness, to indexicality. [...]The] *indexical* medium of the photograph, albeit ‘faked,’ began the chain of events of ostension. Slender Man began as a character in a photograph circulated on an Internet forum attended by “eyewitness accounts”; taken together, they were designed to produce an aura of reality. The presence of a photograph of a mysterious character allowed that character to circulate through the Internet independently from narratives, and thus to become independent of its original context, which labeled it as “unreal,” and to accrete both legendary narratives

and even, for some, a sense of reality” (Manning, 158). In this way, the pastiche that informs Lovecraft’s weird fiction does so for Slender Man as well, and invests both with a sense of reality, filtered as it is through the index of an implied whole presented in unreal fragments. In effect, it foists the burden of inauthenticity upon the mediacy of the object, rather than on the object itself.

Mediacy used in this way to create a sense of paradigmatic reality for both the Cthulhu Mythos and Slender Man Mythos is as much a theme of these bodies of texts as they are a mode of presentation.⁷⁶ The assemblage of indexical text fragments signifying a hidden reality via their apparent disjunction is predicated on the existence of a hidden order of knowledge—a paradigm in which occult lore both empowers aspiring magicians and invests the otherwise mundane with spiritual significance. Slender Man’s creators strove to act in the role of magicians, conjuring him as an act of will alone and manifesting their own superiority to the mainstream, for whom knowledge of the truth is obscured. In so doing, they combat a pervasive sense of impotence they experience fostered by alienation in hypermediated environments. Michael Kinsella’s analysis offers a way in which this occult lore becomes a product of convergence. In *Legend Tripping Online*, he argues that “[folk] belief in the supernatural or magical powers of the Internet arises partially because online communication connects people, places, and events in ways that overcome conventional restrictions of time and space. But the Internet also supplies two conditions [...] necessary for the construction of any alternative belief

⁷⁶ As it is for the likes of William S. Burroughs as well. His practice of “cut-ups” in which he assembles a bricolage of printed text at random to produce new work he considered to be a process of magical divination and conjuration capable of prognostication, offering another mode by which pastiche becomes a vehicle for occult lore. (Burroughs, *Odier*, p. 28)

structure incorporating mystical awareness of immanent and/or transcendent reality: access to a wide variety of thematic materials or motifs—a database from which one may weave together many metaphysical ideas, and an environment that significantly lessens the influence of existent authorities ‘so that novel combinations of ideas can be proposed and taken seriously.’ One consequence of this is that people seek to develop direct, personal relationships with the Internet, ascribing to it a magical or supernatural character” (53). In this way, the Internet itself as a medial form becomes a collective consciousness which Kinsella argues becomes a vehicle for aspiring magicians to practice their art. He writes “The concept [...] attempts to reconcile the teleologies of singularity and radical pluralism by codifying reality as a hermeneutic circle generating alternate worlds, which eventually, when interpreted, lead to understanding, which then recursively generates even more alternate worlds, *ad infinitum*—all of which eventually converge” (54). The concepts he explores help to contextualize these folk beliefs as “[reframing] the concept of ‘natural’ to allow experiences had through—and with—communication technologies to be interpreted as “supernatural” (55). Part of how this complex frame of understanding is capable of being intuitively employed by the Slender Man text community is through familiarity with games, and their striving for realism. To this extent, ARGs offer a vocabulary by which users can remediate a fake photograph of Slender Man into a flawed indexical referent for an accepted alternative reality. As David Szulborski in his book *This is Not a Game* writes, “the goal is not to immerse the player in the artificial world of the game; instead a successful game immersed the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player” (2005). In this way, ARGs such as *Marble Hornets* relying on the pastiche of indexical text fragments for its exegesis

merges with the player's reality, and informs their desire (or indeed, delusional tendency) to interpret the pastiche of everyday phenomena as the willful products of an alternate reality. In this way, ARGs incorporate "players," such that they actively seek connections between associated media, such as Twitter feeds, corresponding user accounts on YouTube, and pose questions or comments to the creators where they respond 'in character', providing further "dread glimpses" of the occult lore by which they might anticipate the game, including the active discernment between those everyday mundane phenomena and those that are the product of the ARG creator's design. In seeking modes by which they might interpret these signs, any latent ideological content in ARGs such as *Marble Hornets* becomes extremely persuasive as a methodology required for players to succeed at the game. Furthermore, success in this regard is tantamount to self-empowerment as an enlightened magician, and a cut above the mainstream, and thus acts on feelings of anxiety and alienation produced by hypermediacy to incentivize them. In this way, use of the pastiche form in the Slender Man ARGs empowers it on many levels to become an ideological vehicle, capable of suggesting misanthropy, disregard for Anglo-American anthropocentrism, even as it appears to restrict its subject position to the same white Anglo-American affluent peoples, and its connection to the fabric of creation itself.

China Mieville presents a convincing argument for H. P. Lovecraft's latent ideological content as emerging from what he calls a "sublime backwash" in his texts. He describes Lovecraft as "a philosophical materialist, [who] disavowed spirit, and in the absence of such supernature his world-saturating Weird means the strangeness of the physical world itself." Mieville refers to a "permeating numinous" in which the quality of

the weird to which Lovecraft is referring can be connected to the sublime, citing Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. He claims that the “Weird, though, punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday—into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc.,” describing the weird as “a radicalized sublime backwash.”⁷⁷ The “strange limbs” to which he refers are often part of this weird fiction imagery, of which the tentacle is a primary tool, and which Cthulhu himself possesses:

The famous “monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers [...] (Lovecraft 1999: 148), is exemplary of Weird Fiction. [...] The monsters that inhabit his tales are a radical break with anything from a folkloric tradition. Rather than werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, Lovecraft’s monsters are [...] patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna notable precisely for their absence from the traditional Western monstrous. Paradigmatic is Weird Fiction’s obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic, and one which, after early proto-Weird iterations by Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, viralled suddenly in Haute Weird Fiction until it is now, in the post-Weird debris of fantastic horror, the default monstrous limb-type.”

In this way, Lovecraft evokes the deep ocean as a physical site long considered a source of the “everyday numinous” from which tentacled behemoths are hinted at by

⁷⁷ Mieville is eminent in his ability to describe weird fiction in his essay, which he capitalizes in an effort to identify weird with the numinous, such that it is both divine and materialist in nature. This paradoxical homeostasis parallels similar paradoxical notions discussed in this project. He will thus be quoted at length in this section.

oversized beaks in sperm whale stomachs and deep scarring of a frigate's sonar apparatus caused by hooked tentacle suckers of heretofore unseen size.⁷⁸ The numinous into which Mieville claims Lovecraft is tapping performs a backhanded emulsification of the sublime and the divinely mysterious. Mieville draws on the proto-weird fiction of Arthur Machen, claiming that he:

[uses] the theological term “perichoresis” to describe the intertwining of the heavenly and the [everyday...] Machen brings out how Weird Fiction writers are in a lineage with those religious visionaries and ecstasies who perceive an unmediated relationship with numinosity – Godhead itself. For many of those religious radicals this is an emancipatory/utopian revolt against a priestly class.

In this way, the numinous and sublime brought about in mere suggestion through Slender Man texts, evoking the same sensibilities as weird fiction become tied to creation itself, both in an effort to illustrate its sublime vastness and present enlightened religious scholarship as deluded and misguided. While Mieville appears to claim that revolt against a “priestly class” is a manifestation of contemporary class warfare, Lovecraft illustrates a more sweeping misanthropic discontent that might be better characterized as 'misanthropocentricity' if not for his suggestion that certain Othered members of society possess access to the obscured knowledge, yet are inaccessible to Lovecraft's confined white Anglo-American focus. His subject position suffers from a racism Mieville

⁷⁸ *Proceedings* magazine, published by the United States Naval Institute, reports this event in an article by C. Scott Johnson, et al, in 1978. It reports the damage by a squid to the USS Stein, determined to be by squid suckers of a size yet to be known to science.

claims borders on the “hallucinogenic.” In stories such as “The Call of Cthulhu,” his detective protagonist witnesses the same dreadful numinous reflected in both people of colour and those he calls “half-bred.” They dance frightfully around totems to Cthulhu, as if possessed. To this extent, Lovecraft offers a path to knowledge that both illustrates his fundamental sense of separation from those peoples as much as it does present a revolt against the supposedly learned members of his subject class. Mieville claims that the “burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality, Weird Fiction’s revolutionary teratology and oppressive numinous grows. This backwashed horror–sublime is investigated by scientists, doctors, [engineers...] and it is their very “rationality” that uncovers the radical and awesome monstrous.”⁷⁹ Mieville argues that all of weird fiction predicates itself on various forms of upheaval or discontent in some way. He calls the weird “an expression of upheaval and crisis,” resembling “an explosion in the timeline of (particularly Anglo-American) fiction,” with a “sense of defining trauma at the heart of the field.” He argues that the “great Weird Fiction writers are responding to capitalist modernity entering, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of crisis in which its cruder nostrums of progressive bourgeois rationality are shattered. The heart of the crisis is the First World War, where mass carnage perpetrated by the most modern states made claims of a “rational” modern system a tasteless joke.” For

⁷⁹ Mieville's essay gestures specifically to World War I as the source of this disenchantment with enlightenment values, given the retroactive and wholly inadequate rationalizing of the Great War. War trauma may inform the misanthropy of Lovecraft and his contemporaries, and there is ample reason to argue that the same is true today in relation to the various 'terror wars' in the Middle East in the early twenty-first century, faced with a similar resentful disenchantment by their eventual conclusion in 2011, and which maps convincingly onto the timeline of the Slender Man phenomenon as well. While this may be the case, it is beyond of the scope of this project to argue as much, though I would posit a likely comorbidity with the tensions of hypermediation as joint causes of the pervasive disaffection this project examines.

Mieville, this crisis is the failure of bourgeois rationality. While this Marxist classification is often a vehicle for alterity, positioned antithetically in the subject audience's socio-historical context, they operate, much like Felix Kjellberg's antisemitic statements, more as a stable vector by which alterity can be expressed.⁸⁰

The numerous thematic parallels the Slender Man mythos shares with weird fiction illustrates a significant genealogical relationship between the two, and serves to emphasize their ideological common ground. They use similar modes of sublime pastiche in which the sublime is presented in narrative fragments that inculcate readers in an active process of suturing, in order to alleviate their shared sense of unease. Their ultimate failure to do so as they play their part as a white, male, affluent and rational Anglo-American subject position led astray by its own inclination to apprehend the incomprehensible confronts them instead with ever-deeper uncanny obscurity, only growing their alienated unease. This subject position, presented with this occult knowledge somehow forbidden to them and which exerts an invisible influence over them becomes a radicalized “sublime backwash” by which the stable laws of nature on which extant social institutions are predicated to become destabilized. They are thus compelled to revolt against that which is normative through radical alterity—through transgression. This “sublime occult knowledge as destabilizing backwash from the unknown” parallels, I argue, the sublime unknown of hypermediated fora online.

⁸⁰ Marxism as a vehicle for alterity has a long history in the Old Internet. One of the original founders of the infamous early hacker group Legion of Doom used the username Karl Marx, and Eric Knudsen's online handle on SomethingAwful.com, Victor Surge, is derived from Victor Serge, a Belgian anarchist-turned-avowed Marxist revolutionary in the early twentieth century. Their reactionary involvement in an internal economy of authority derived from populism approaches a far more right-wing praxis, however, that precludes authentic Marxism.

What remains to be seen is how these stories securely suture the activity of the players (in the case of ARGs) to the activity of the afflicted protagonists, or how they come to imagine themselves as 'proxies' for Slender Man. The desire to resolve uncanny doubts, as the texts' fragmented presentation invites, is half of the equation. The other half is a presented solution, which the texts offer as effectively "embracing the chaos." As discussed in Chapter 1, Marrinho's story "What Lurks in the Backwoods" concludes with the protagonists unable to describe what they thought to be a log in the water, and they choose to ignore it and exit the park in silence. The narrator concludes, "I will never go camping again." This conclusion, much like the tradition of weird fiction from which it draws, denies the reader the catharsis of resolution. It also, however, presents in this sublimely sparse prose an ethos which seems shared by H. P. Lovecraft, in that one should simply strive to avoid attempting to apprehend the incomprehensible entirely. Instead, the text appears to suggest that apprehensive readers live in a state of fracture—ironic detachment from reality, as any notion of 'reality' itself is folly. In this subtext, shared by the vast majority of Slender Man texts, *surrender* or *submission* to the incomprehensible is synonymous with submission to the agents of the incomprehensible, such as Slender Man. This is the kind of surrender that, in theory, offers some measure of resolution as it may grant some measure of access to the occult understanding that rationality has been proven incapable of attaining. In Lovecraft's stories, such as "The Call of Cthulhu" or "A Shadow Over Innsmouth," there is a cult or religion at work in the narrative which denies the protagonists the knowledge they seek. The boundaries of this enlightened class are almost never clear, and there is a persistent

feeling that it is expansive, requiring that the protagonists surrender to the cult and become one of them in order to fully comprehend the knowledge they appear to possess.

In the Slender Man mythos, the ARG *TribeTwelve* is credited with providing it with the fleshed-out concept of proxies. Characters are shown to possess a double-consciousness bordering on the dissociative, as series antagonists are revealed to be the same protagonists in a dissociative state, acting on behalf of a broad and powerful cult of proxies, The Collective. W. E. B. DuBois uses this term, 'double-consciousness' in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* to refer to the way in which (black) subordination to a dominant (white) class fosters a reflexive self-image from the hegemonic perspective that departs from and struggles to reconcile with the subject's (comparatively) unmediated self-image. While somewhat ironized, to the extent that this project positions a latent white-Anglocentricity as part of the alienation at stake, DuBois' term is applicable in several respects. In part, in TribeTwelve's use, latent issues of bodily hexis persist in ways it does not in other Slender Man texts. The creator and principal protagonist, Adam Roser, created the YouTube account TribeTwelve as part of a Religious Studies class project discussing the twelve tribes of Israel, and focuses in a broadly unique way on family history as part of the same everyday numinous from which Slender Man knowledge erupts. Rosner plays the part of Noah Maxwell, an affluent white teenager living in suburban Florida. The series begins as Noah memorializes the apparent suicide of his cousin, Milo Asher, with footage of the two together, discovering Slender Man (under the series name "The Administrator"), stalking Milo in the background of the footage. Rosner also includes numerous references to *Marble Hornets*, such as symbols from that series carved into wooden posts or scratched onto concrete. The two series

share in the same modal considerations discussed above in *Marble Hornets*, including (but not limited to) found-footage format, the same use of video distortion in Slender Man's presence, and apparent emancipation from family, despite Noah's token familial associations in the narrative. These are token in part because of their uncanny affect, but also because of a lack of attention to the role of family in the characters' lives. Noah appears to live alone in a large suburban house with at least three bedrooms in an affluent neighbourhood, and does not integrate them in any significant way into Noah's life at all. They are, however, used as plot devices. In "My Grandfather Karl," Noah meets his grandfather, who speaks to him in German about experiences during World War II in which he encountered "Der Großmann," an fabular historicized version of Slender Man emerging from a manipulated image of a woodblock print appearing to depict a creature consistent with Slender Man.⁸¹ Maxwell's grandfather, Karl, possesses an unnervingly flat affect, and does not show any affection or regard for Noah. He instead insists that this figure is a curse that Noah has brought upon the family, though Noah eventually learns that both Karl and Noah's maternal aunt, Mary Asher, mother of Milo Asher, were also stalked by Slender Man, and later indoctrinated into The Collective. All of these names are etymologically consistent with German Judaism, and the focus on family lineage emphasizes an inescapable bodily hexis, the likes of which DuBois' double-consciousness is also accessing. Further, it associates its confining fatalism with an inevitable madness brought about by Slender Man, and integration with the Collective by association. Like *Marble Hornets*, Noah steadily becomes aware of a dissociated identity of his, "Firebrand," and those of others, such as "The Observer" (the "vessel" for which is a

⁸¹ This image is not created for the series, but accepted by the text community as a tacitly canonical part of the mythos and used by Rosner to lend historicity to the narrative.

friend named Kevin Haas), who sends him the cryptic packages of clues symbolically associated with The Collective, a cult eventually shown to be a hive mind of Slender Man proxies. Each individual experiences The Collective steadily eclipsing their individuated personality such that each persona is in conflict with itself. While the series has not ended at the time of writing, “Firebrand” is shown to be trying to aid Noah in fighting against The Collective, having somehow escaped its influence from within the realm the members cohabit (apparently separate from reality). The parallels between The Collective and hypermediated online spaces are abundant, with the same uncanny affect, names which resemble usernames, and anarchic and detached attitudes or agendas. The addition of family lineage into this paradigm at first appears to strive toward resolution by offering us a stable historicity, but serves instead to merely emphasize the confining nature of bodily hexis and double-consciousness, such that it becomes another vector for alienation in which the fatalism of history contributes to an imperative for the likes of Noah to surrender to a hegemonic self that conflicts with the individuated self.⁸² Surrender in this context goes so far as to hint at resolution *from within surrender itself* through the apparent good will of Noah's “Firebrand” persona. Among other reasons why double-consciousness is applicable to *Tribe Twelve* is its propensity for integrating crossovers with other Slender Man ARGs. Noah visits and interacts with other narratives (the *EverymanHYBRID* Slender Man ARG) thus establishing a dependency on the

⁸² In *Always, Already*, Lisa Gitelman describes how the ephemerality of the Internet allows for ways in which history (and in effect, a concordant sense of one's own identity, particularly in the sense that *Tribe Twelve* is employing it) is continually reinscribed through the mode of interpretation. As new media narraforms adapt to changing methods of (re)interpretation, such as through crowdsourced platforms like 'H-Bot' (a history querying AI) an inscription of oneself online becomes a similar narraform—a community-based interpretation of the self, as it is represented by what one has and is saying, the avatars they employ, etc. This becomes the kind of 'hegemonic self' to which Noah is asked to surrender in *Tribe Twelve*. In this sense, the inscription of an online presence creates for users a familiar tension between the self and one's image, but applied far more broadly than it has been historically, such as how marginalized groups must navigate their own sense of double-consciousness. See also Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, and Ian Hutchby, "Technologies, Texts, and Affordances."

cathartic resolution promised by those ARGs.⁸³ This positions double-consciousness within a slightly different paradigm for *Tribe Twelve*, in that it juxtaposes two sets of confinement. In this case, Rosner is contending with a secondary persona corresponding to the Slender Man text community. In part, this renders his series unable to reach cathartic conclusion without aligning with both *EverymanHYBRID* and the audience with which *Tribe Twelve* engages actively, in the manner of a game. Both the other ARG and the amorphous audience, hypermediated as they are, produce a hegemonic gaze which fosters this state of double-consciousness. As a result, without a relatively massive collaborative effort on the part of the text community and both production crews, a definitive conclusion for its audience, hungry for catharsis, is unlikely. In this way, it suggests an inevitable collapse not dissimilar to that which appears in weird fiction, and a contingent misanthropy as in the works of H. P. Lovecraft.

⁸³ While not discussed in this project, *EverymanHYBRID* bears a great deal of similarity to the other ARGs discussed in this project, where it deviates is in a historic and malevolent figure evoking Dr. Josef Mengele, Dr. Corenthal, who bears responsibility for the victims' being stalked as he has apparently afflicted four young boys in years previous and there is a connection between those victims and the series protagonists. This history does, however, perform the same feat as *Tribe Twelve* in utilizing lineage to create a confining bodily hexis which acts as a vector for the protagonists' sense of 'sublime backwash'. That state of shared confinement, both to hexis and to one another, gestures to a dangerous state of codependency in which neither can conclude or even evolve in significant ways without the other's tacit permission, and as each places a measure of control in the hands of their relatively large audiences, cathartic resolution via the narrative seems dubious.

Conclusion: 4chan, Culture Wars, and Bad Actors

Trolling Cultures

Stories in the Slender Man text community offer its members the promise of something authentic: a vehicle by which they might validate feelings of social alienation as a core component of human experience, rather than as a product of their own individual anxieties. Authors such as Dale Beran and Angela Nagle connect these anxieties to a historic context. Beran articulates it as a countercultural battle between consumerism and the efforts of counterculture to provide artistic expression that evades cooptation by commercial interests that would rob it of its intrinsic value. He argues that what would become central to the philosophies of the forums in which Slender Man was formed—SomethingAwful, 4chan, and others—was irony, specifically in the form born in the 1990s along with the Grunge counterculture movement, an irony notoriously difficult to encapsulate in a marketable product line. He argues that between the 80s and 90s, “counterculture fell into a deep confusion. Who was friend and foe? People kept switching uniforms. What exactly was counterculture asserting? [...] the border between the two blurred in a strange state of quantum uncertainty. The hunted counterculture of the 90s became an otherworldly dance of signifiers. How do you signal to your allies that you've been infiltrated by the enemy when at every instant your code is being broken?” (Beran, 21-22). Irony, he argues, was a flexible defence which succeeds to some extent in evading commodification, but suffers from the same confusion, unable to sort truth from fiction. To this extent, Slender Man appears as a late-stage expression of this same confusion and uncertainty—An artistic expression which acts as a vehicle to vali-

date social alienation, the kind in which every interest appears as a commodified enemy, the likes of which is rabidly contested in these fora. Slender Man obscures his relationship with reality in part because it echoes this interest in evading commodification. On its own, this kind of text is nothing new--there are many forms of medial participation and texts which operate within the same countercultural dynamic, often opposed to commodification, and often acting in good faith. These texts do not offer an implicit or explicit connection to real-world violence. Slender Man, however, does bear a substantive connection to real-world violence, however, in its point of origin: SomethingAwful and its spiritual successor 4chan. A quote from user LeperFlesh in the thread in which Slender Man was created details the spirit of ironic ambiguity which Slender Man was meant to embody, while the user's avatar offers a tangible connection to the world of trolling:

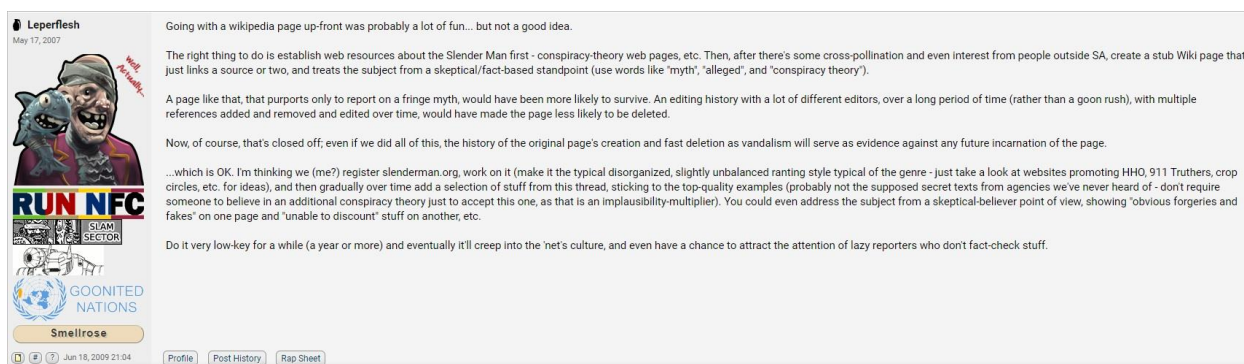


Figure 3: Post by Leperflesh

LeperFlesh's avatar, like many others in the thread, includes multiple in-references to trolling culture, most pointedly the "Goonited Nations" which makes use of the word "goon," another word for a troll, albeit one with a greater sense esprit-de-corps. It denotes affiliation with Something Awful in particular, but became part of some of the

most publicized and organized trolling efforts.⁸⁴ The conclusion of this project aims to encapsulate and trace the phenomenon of online trolling culture and to demonstrate its connections to Slender Man, both material and ideological. It will also attempt to draw tangible connections between trolling culture and acts of real-world violence in order to draw parallels between those acts of violence and the comparatively few that have emerged from the Slender Man phenomenon, in order to show how they are the result of similar feelings of disaffection and anomie that accompanies life in pseudonymous and anonymous spaces online.

This is not to say that Slender Man itself is the root cause of violent acts. It is not the intention of this project to associate the actions of Morgan Geysler and Anissa Weier with the bad-faith actions of those discussed in this chapter. There are parallels between them only insofar as the nature of the online worlds they occupy are similar, and that their actions, however different, may be rooted in the same feelings fostered by those worlds. Similarly, composing Slender Man stories in the countercultural vein we have been outlining is not an act of trolling in itself. There are good-faith text producers that are inspired by the spirit of Slender Man to tell scary stories with ambiguous connections to truth, and to share them purely for the joy of this obfuscating artistic expression. That inspiring spirit, however, appears split between that sense of joy and a nihilistic trolling energy bent on destruction for its own sake; an expression what scholar Emile Durkheim calls *anomie*: the breakdown of social and moral norms that occurs when individuals feel alienated from one another. This disconnect, I argue, is the product of

⁸⁴ These include events such as conning users of computer game *EVE Online* out of a great deal of in-game currency; swarming a Second Life conference of real-world personalities with flying penises; or falsifying documents to establish a career in a nonexistent department of a company, allowing him to be paid for doing nothing. (Dibbel)

hypermediacy, the state which Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter refer to in which multiple forms of mediacy are engaged at once, and the definition for which I have expanded upon with a suffusion of such mediacy eclipsing otherwise unmediated reality. In short, the hypermediate experience of life online can foster an anomie in users which they express by obfuscating the boundaries between truth and fiction--between fantasy and reality--through nihilistic trolling. The reactions of those experiencing life in such an uneasily navigable environment have been surprisingly violent, and they bear closer examination. It bears stating also that this trolling spirit with which Slender Man was imbued arguably precedes its joyful component, as there are few medial forms quite like it prior to its inception and from which a joyful sense of expression might offer precedent--an inspiration for his creation. It appears altogether more likely that his function as a tool for trolling came first, and the joy became an ancillary benefit shortly after the fact. Of course, Slender Man is not inherently hopeless, as this anomie is a reaction built on a *lack* of social cohesion. It aspires for truth even as it distorts it. It is a countercultural expression which promises something "real" readable between the lines of its mirthful distaste for commodification. As I have argued, however, these stories promise more than they can offer in substance, as neither they nor folklore in general can speak for a universalized human condition. As examined in Chapter 3, there are hints within the aesthetic content of the compositions that suggest an endemic community to which these anxieties can be attributed. To this point we have only speculated as to the contours of that community, and we have done so because the incidents of real-world violence that have some connection to Slender Man, no matter how trivial that connection, necessi-

tate it if we are to understand how and why they occur. This project has aimed to position Slender Man texts as a 'canary in a coal mine,' showing how something difficult to detect can exist in a body of users that is, itself, difficult to discern. As an art form, it reflects its situation in history for the people that have produced it. The various traits that we have seen underlying Slender Man texts have hinted at an ecotyped subculture, and pointed to ideological motifs. I have suggested in the process that there is an indexical parallel between these motifs and a broader array of incidents of real-world violence emerging from a subculture with the potential to unify and mobilize. The aims of such a mobilization are difficult to discern as well, considering the ideological disposition thus articulated points toward little other than anarchistic nihilism. We need not merely speculate as to the potential existence of a misanthropic subculture, however: there is a real misanthropic subculture that shares an origin point with these texts. They both emerge from the transgressive and pseudonymous sectors of online society such as 4chan and SomethingAwful. Both have discernible connections to online gaming culture, as well as central figures in that subculture such as PewDiePie. Most significantly, they both hinge upon the same *uncertainty principle*: they both valorize transgression through trolling.

On 3 August 2008, Mattathias Schwartz wrote an article for The New York Times Magazine, "Malwebolence," which chronicled the lives and minds of a couple of internet trolls whom he met in person and remained embedded with for a few days. One of these users, Jason Fortuny, had been involved in what he allegedly thought of as a social experiment following the death of Megan Meier, a thirteen year-old girl from Missouri who had hanged herself after having received cruel messages from a boy with whom she had been flirting on MySpace. The boy, it was later uncovered, was not real,

instead being impersonated by a woman named Lori Drew, the mother of one of Meier's former friends. According to Schwartz, Drew had "hoped to find out whether Meier was gossiping about her daughter." Among the sensation that followed, a blog appeared called Megan Had It Coming. The blog was supposedly written by a classmate of Meier's and called her (among other things) a "drama queen" for having killed herself over a MySpace boy. In the third post on this blog, the writer revealed herself to be Lori Drew, and was hotly discussed on national news outlets in the US. This was in fact untrue, as Schwartz reveals the author of the blog to have been Fortuny. Fortuny claimed his blog was written "to question the public's hunger for remorse and to challenge the enforceability of cyberharassment laws like the one passed by Megan's town after her death." When Schwartz asked about his fear of being caught by the authorities trying (and failing) to discern the post's author, Fortuny replied, "What's he going to sue me for? [...]" "Leading on confused people? Why don't people fact-check who this stuff is coming from? Why do they assume it's true?"

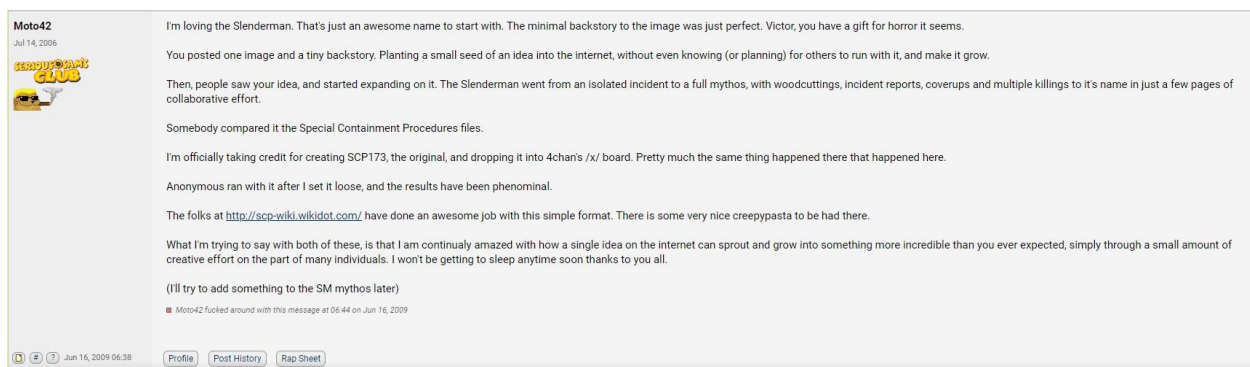
After having engaged in a campaign posting flashing images and animated colour fields to the website for the Epilepsy Foundation, Schwartz documents Fortuny's chat with another troll about it: "WEEV: the whole posting flashing images to epileptics thing? over the line. / HEPKITTEN: can someone plz tell me how doing something the admins intentionally left enabled is hacking? / WEEV: it's hacking peoples unpatched brains. we have to draw a moral line somewhere." Schwartz writes, "Fortuny disagreed. In his mind, subjecting epileptic users to flashing lights was justified. 'Hacks like this tell you to watch out by hitting you with a baseball bat,' he told me. 'Demonstrating these kinds of exploits is usually the only way to get them fixed.'" Fortuny described his litmus

test for whether or not a person might be susceptible to trolling, characterizing it as a vulnerability. He asked Schwartz if he was aware that his hair was green. When Schwartz laughed and replied no, saying that he knew it wasn't because it was what he saw when he looked in the mirror--his hair was black. Fortuny replied, "That's uh, interesting. I guess you understand that you have green hair about as well as you understand that you're a terrible reporter." When Schwartz asked what he meant in a more serious tone, Fortuny went on, "'That's a very interesting reaction,' [...] 'Why didn't you get so defensive when I said you had green hair?' If I were certain that I wasn't a terrible reporter, he explained, I would have laughed the suggestion off as easily. The willingness of trolling 'victims' to be hurt by words, he argued, makes them complicit, and trolling will end as soon as we all get over it." Schwartz also documented his interactions with another troll, "Weev," who would not reveal his real name, though his identity was later revealed to be Andrew Auernheimer. Schwartz writes that some of Auernheimer's exploits include blackmailing the rich and powerful. He quotes Auernheimer, "'I hack, I ruin, I make piles of money,' he boasted. 'I make people afraid for their lives.'" Schwartz goes on, claiming that Auernheimer demonstrates "a misanthropy far harsher than Fortuny's." Quoting Auernheimer, "'Trolling is basically Internet eugenics,' he said, his voice pitching up like a jet engine on the runway. 'I want everyone off the Internet. Bloggers are filth. They need to be destroyed. Blogging gives the illusion of participation to a bunch of retards. . . . We need to put these people in the oven!' I listened for a few more minutes as Weev held forth on the Federal Reserve and about Jews. Unlike Fortuny, he made no attempt to reconcile his trolling with conventional social norms." Ac-

ording to Schwartz, Auernheimer sounded almost gleeful about his aspirations to violence and disorder. He quotes Auernheimer, "'We are headed for a Malthusian crisis,' he said, with professional confidence. 'Plankton levels are dropping. Bees are dying. There are tortilla riots in Mexico, the highest wheat prices in 30-odd years.' He paused. 'The question we have to answer is: How do we kill four of the world's six billion people in the most just way possible?' He seemed excited to have said this aloud. Ideas like these bring trouble. Almost a year ago, [...] Weev gave a talk called "Internet Crime" at a San Diego hacker convention. He expounded on diverse topics like hacking the Firefox browser, online trade in illegal weaponry and assassination markets -- untraceable online betting pools that pay whoever predicts the exact date of a political leader's demise. The talk led to two uncomfortable interviews with federal agents and the decision to shed his legal identity altogether. [...] As a member of a group of hackers called "the organization," which, he says, bring in upward of \$10 million annually, he says he can wreak ruin from anywhere. We arrived at a strip mall. Out of the darkness, the coffinlike snout of a new Rolls Royce Phantom materialized. A flying lady winked on the hood. 'Your bag, sir?' said the driver, a blond kid in a suit and tie. 'This is my car,' Weev said. 'Get in.'"

Schwartz' article reveals several traits of trolling culture that bear closer examination in their proximity to Slender Man. One is, of course, the irreverence they seem to display. There is an excitement proceeding from the transgression itself, but also that these two appear to treat their transgression as *instructive*. Within trolling subculture, there appears to be a theme of social engineering in their discourse, evidenced by re-

peated coordinated actions, a persistently political bent to their activities, and the actions of "influencers" as documented by several researchers in their article for the academic journal *New Media and Society*. They document an experiment with 4chan's /pol/ (political) board, in which they noted a user that acted as part of an unofficial "Baker's Guild," through which certain users generate activity within a thread to keep it active and which shape the nature of the conversation. In the case of their experiment, it was in the vein of white supremacy (Colley, Moore). Similarly, the theme of social engineering takes place in the forming of Slender Man as well. A well-known user, Moto42 writes in the thread in which Slender Man was conceived:



Moto42 is credited with starting what became a well-known source of similar media in the SCP Foundation. They state that "Anonymous ran with it after I set it loose," referring to the 4chan community as a whole, and notes that they are "continually amazed with how a single idea on the internet can sprout and grow into something more incredible than you ever expected, simply through a small amount of creative effort on the part of many individuals." Schwartz's subjects speak as though their actions are retribution for what they perceive as others' ignorance. Juxtaposed, both Slender Man and this kind of trolling activity appear more connected in their potential for

instrumentality. Fortuny asks, 'why do they assume it is true'? Put another way, "Why do they trust what they read"? It implies that they should *assume* a duplicitous intent in what they are reading, at all times.⁸⁵ He claims users should 'fact-check', again assuming falsehood first before trusting. Whether or not this is true, germane to the cases in question or not, his admonition suggests that Fortuny himself is by nature antagonistic toward the stranger on the opposite screen. In his article, Schwartz claims that he spoke on the phone with Fortuny's estranged mother. "Jason's mother later told me [...] that he was molested by his grandfather. The last she heard from Jason was a letter telling her to kill herself. 'Jason is a young man in a great deal of emotional pain', she said, crying as she spoke. 'Don't be too harsh. He's still my son.'" Fortuny claims that he isn't the bad guy for doing these things, claiming "Am I the big horrible person who shattered someone's life with some information? No! This is life. Welcome to life. Everyone goes through it. I've been through horrible stuff, too." Schwartz is implying that Fortuny has become accustomed to suffering in his life and so is predisposed to viewing it as universal. If it is what 'everyone goes through', then that universality becomes a way in which he can expect himself to shrug off his pain. This is a similar mechanism to what I argue is taking place in the Slender Man text community, in that their apprehending the stories as a new form of folklore (albeit incorrectly, and with an incorrect apprehension of folklore) then the alienation in the texts becomes similarly

⁸⁵ We might also assume of course that Fortuny is implying they are trusting what is written out of ignorance as much as duplicity. In the case of Lori Drew, I would argue that the facts of the case are outlandish enough that even the outrageously insensitive blog posts become suddenly plausible, and imagining someone like Fortuny writing as he did would be unconscionable for commonly decent people. An assumption of common decency might also account for epileptic users assuming that no one would be so insensitive as to post flashing images to the site's forum.

alleviated. In both cases, the drive to universalize can be seen as a way of bridging the gap of unknowability that is created in communication between parties online.

As another user in the original Slender Man thread, Wonder Bra, writes, "It's because he lives in our primal, ancient, subconscious mind that he appears more often when people begin to think of him. [...] And the more stories you post, the more images you find, the more you think about him and the stronger he grows." There are many instances of users in these spaces seeding this kind of 'instructive misleading' process. If it is normalized within these spaces, it is distinctly possible it is emerging from the tensions of online anomie in hypermediacy. It is also possible that, like in Fortuny's case, the source of the mistrust and tension users like Auerenheimer and Fortuny are experiencing could of course be external. But activity like trolling also conditions others to this kind of worldview as well--it is contagious, and what Fortuny is describing as his project. There is evidence of the influence of online interaction, however. In Fortuny's discussion with Aearnheimer (as 'weev'), Aearnheimer refers to "peoples unpatched brains" and Fortuny describes displaying the flashing images to epileptics without regard for the human component, instead in the language of a computer process, calling it a "hack." The conflating of hacking with living people is akin to the popularized expression of "life hacks." It reads as an attempt to reconcile the human element with the technical. By exclusion, the vulnerabilities Fortuny and Auerenheimer strive to correct in others seem oriented towards robotic dispassion, blaming others for their sensitivities and vulnerabilities. In a well-known haven for such trolls, 4chan's /r9k/ board, users are called "robots," alluding to their emotional numbness. This tendency has echoes of those characters in the Slender Man ARGs under his influence that appear

dispassionate and unable to communicate with others effectively. Another similarity is the severed ties with family and commitment in these two figures. Auernheimer lives freely and subversively, presumably paying for his Rolls Royce Phantom through the proceeds of his misdeeds--the only suggestion we have of his income is from day trading and blackmail. This is similar to the lack of evidence of similar connections in the characters of the Slender Man ARGs. Whatever the material case, each ultimately *devalues* the presence of these factors of life. It may be merely convenient that Fortuny lives in similar circumstances, given his estrangement from his family, but the parallel results might suggest a kind of emotional parallel between users as well.

Politics and Transgression

Slender Man texts, as we have discussed, are not universally trolling. There is a strong sense that this is how they *began*. Many (if not most) subsequent iterations of Slender Man are produced in good faith by content creators interested in nothing more than telling compelling scary stories online, and the art form in that context has distinctive and compelling features in its own right. The mode in which they are produced, however, is inseparable from both the disjunction at its heart--the narrator is, by design, obscured--and the imp of perversity at the heart of its aesthetic content--what it is that makes it scary. It is these features, I argue, that diffuse fantasy and reality, and enables not only such phantasmal misadventures as that of Anissa Weier and Morgan

Geyser, but also the delusional violence perpetrated by particularly bad actors.⁸⁶ In obscuring the narrator and refusing to acknowledge it in the forums where the stories are shared, the possibility for some readers that what they previously thought fantastical is indeed real emerges. This would be largely benign--confined to a number of small edge cases like Weier and Geysers', but for the parallels incidents like these share with other acts of violence emerging through similar fora and means, and perpetrated in the name of similarly delusional fantasy. This possibility of the fantastical eclipsing reality, particularly for young people, is bolstered considerably in an online world where ever more authoritative voices are rendered ever more suspect. This dovetails with the transgressive nature of the stories' form and content. In form, it is positioned by the text community as an *alternative* literary production. It devalues authorship through anonymity. It devalues material economy through free distribution. It devalues authority by its ambiguity. It devalues ownership through its aspirations to emergent folklore. In content, it is equally transgressive. It eschews cohesion by its fragmentary nature. It relies on nested and unreliable narration to disrupt narrative voice. Order is not reestablished by its end, nor is the monster vanquished by the enlightenment of its human victims (as is often the case in the horror genre). Slender Man himself does not display clear motivations or methods, and has an ambiguous connection to humanity.

⁸⁶ Ryan Milner, in his essay "FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz" provides an architecture through which this indeterminate comingling of fantasy and reality might also be applied to what he refers to as the "logic of lulz." This is a media logic I have thus far referred to in this project as ironic detachment or disaffected nihilism. He argues that "this ironic and critical logic often antagonizes the core identity categories of race and gender, essentialising [sic] marginalized others. However, the logic can also be employed to 'troll' those categories themselves, at the expense of those invested in their rigid distinctions." (5-6) Similarly, this trolling logic can be applied to creepypasta, to the extent that it denies (or criticizes) the existence of the storytelling category--its fictitiousness, even as it indulges in the art form. It is a similar paradoxical relationship which invites those who can navigate the distinction and trolls those that cannot.

Not just that, but his suit and facelessness are (heavy-handed!) expressions of anti-conformity.

The subculture that shares these qualities of transgression and trolling in the name of an amorphous nihilism and emerging out of the pseudonymous Internet is only now being recognized and is difficult to define because of how it operates. It emerges from 4chan, the pseudonymous (indeed, fully anonymous) forum where users can air their darkest thoughts without fear of reprisal. Angela Nagle, in her book *Kill All Normies*, describes the challenges of interpreting their intentions best: "[in] rightist chan culture, [...] interpretation and judgement are evaded through tricks and layers of metatextual self-awareness and irony" (31).⁸⁷ Much like the double-talk involved in trolling, the discourse in chan culture is often misleading in its complex relationship with sincerity. This ironical inability to be "nailed down" is what safeguards members of this community from judgement and censure, which she connects with the rise of a commensurate left-leaning strategy emerging from the culture of social media such as Tumblr that creates indefensible identities rather than relying on pseudonymity. She connects the culture of 4chan and the rise of the online alt-right political sphere, by positioning it against the existing social pressures of the de-anonymized Internet as something of an arms race. "Every bizarre event, new identity and strange subcultural behavior [...] from otherkin to far right Pepe memes, can be understood as a response to a response to a response,

⁸⁷ It should be noted that Nagle has met some criticism for her work, as it does not include as much in-text citation as typical academic rigour might require. She has also met criticism for her condemnation of the political left (and alt-left) as much as of the political right (and alt-right). Her work, however, embodies evidence and argument that proceeds consistently with other work on her subject matter, and does not lack for implicit evidence of academic rigour. Similarly, I would argue that her criticisms of the left, and in particular her indebtedness to the work of the recently deceased Mark Fischer (by suicide), who levied similar criticisms of the new left are not only prescient, but timely, and help to mitigate her works' implication into a specifically political debate. Had she been less even-handed, her work would be lost in a discursive morass of invective and polemic surrounding the presidency of Donald Trump, and the importance of her work, in my view, would be lost.

each one responding angrily to the existence of the other. Trumpian meme-makers ramped up their taboo-breaking anti-PC style in response to gender-bending Tumblr users, who themselves then became more sensitive, more convinced of racism, misogyny and hetero-normative oppression of the world outside of their online subcultures. At the same time, the 'deplorables,' from the Trumpian trolls to the alt-right, view the Hillary loyalists--the entrenched identity politics of Tumblr and the intersectional anti-free speech campus left - as evidence of their - equally bleak view of a rapidly declining Western civilization, as both sides have become increasingly unmoored to any cultural mainstream, which scarcely resembles either bleak vision" (11). The reason I refer to the leftist pressure as a 'strategy' is because I argue that both approaches are ramping up against the pressures of the other, but both are strategies with which to negotiate the same pressures I have described in this project so far: those of hypermediacy and pre-mediacy. The anxieties fostered by the establishment of an online presence for any one person is a burden that manifests as, in effect, defensiveness against a perception of the 'whole' of normalcy. Nagle uses incidents such as the Harambe episode and *Kony 2012* to demonstrate the peak of public outrage and sensitivities that escalated the "culture wars" to which her subtitle refers.⁸⁸ She contrasts the two fronts of these culture

⁸⁸ Nagle describes the unfolding of both *Kony 2012* and the incident with Harambe the gorilla as examples of mainstream excitability that follows a pattern from "virtue to cynical inscrutable irony" (8). In March of 2012, a video was released promoting a charity effort to stop the criminal activity of Ugandan militia leader Joseph Kony, and quickly became the most viewed and shared video on YouTube. It was endorsed by celebrities and motivated political resolutions in the US government. It came under scrutiny shortly thereafter by the Ugandan government and regional experts, which led criticism and denunciation for, as Nagle puts it, "its crass oversimplification, inaccuracy, emotional manipulation and 'slacktivism'--a now common pejorative also called 'clicktivism'," (8). This culminated in the video's creator Jason Russel suffered a public breakdown in which he was filmed naked in public, urinating, and masturbating. The video was shared virally and the movement became symbolic of the 'cynical inscrutable irony' to which Nagle refers. The incident involving Harambe the gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo was similar. A child fell into the gorilla enclosure in May of 2016, whereupon a barrage of public virtue signaling was unleashed blaming the parents for the gorilla's death, whereupon as Nagle puts it a "kind of giddy ironic mocking of the social media spectacle took over" in which "Justice for Harambe" became a faux cause-celebre among trolling cultures, going so far as actively casting ballots in the 2016 election for Harambe as a write-in candidate (though fortunately, Politifact repudiates claims that

wars with the promise with which Henry Jenkins' convergence culture is associated: "Writers like Manuel Castells [foretold] the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. [It's] not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for" (7-8). Nagle's observations are key to understanding how Slender Man texts fit as an early warning sign of what was to come. She refers to "call-out culture" at the time of Slender Man's ascension, which characterized the de-anonymized social media sphere's response to the pressures of self-identification online:

The once obscure call-out culture of the left emanating from Tumblr-style campus-based identity politics reached its peak during this period, in which everything from eating noodles to reading Shakespeare was declared 'problematic', and even the most mundane acts 'misogynist' and 'white supremacist'. While taboo and anti-moral ideologies festered in the dark corners of the anonymous Internet, the de-anonymized social media platforms, where most young people now develop their political ideas for the first time, became a panopticon, in which the many lived in fear of observation from the eagle eye of an offended organizer of public shaming. At the height of its power, the dreaded call-out, no matter how minor the transgression or how well intentioned the transgressor, could ruin your reputation, your job or your life." (11-12)

as many as fifteen thousand votes were cast in this manner, as these claims preceded any final counts for write-in candidates). Nevertheless, the event became another major episode in which trolling mockery of the virtue/ironic detachment cycle in popular culture had widespread exposure.

This is essential to understanding how and why chan culture escalated in response and became politicized as it did, and why it is that the "actionable" status of its ideological foundations can be connected with incidents of real-world violence. As a response, the politics of chan culture developed, as Dale Beran describes, as an embracing of their own deplorable status, represented by the Pepe the Frog meme which emerged from 4chan. The "rule" that "*Nothing on the Internet is to be taken seriously*" is the embodiment of the guiding philosophy behind these cultural battles. Among the many ways in which this loosely affiliated community we have been calling "chan culture" can apply this philosophy, however, two stand out. On the one hand, trolling culture waged campaigns of online terror in response to left-leaning hypersensitivities with anti-PC invective and hate. On the other, the philosophy is an embracing of anomie emerging from the rendering of that which *is* taken seriously online as carnivalesque spectacle. This is the root by which these two branching paths diverge--the first, as polemic backslide into alt-right misogyny, and the second into philosophic, mirthful, anarchic nihilism. Dale Beran, in his book *It Came From Something Awful*, describes the latter course as resulting in the election of Donald Trump as US president in the 2016 election.⁸⁹ He argues that many of those in chan culture embraced Trump as an avatar of their anomie, and elected him, arguing that as "'a labyrinth with no center', as filmmaker Errol Morris called [Trump], he embodied their beliefs in how the world worked--as a series of flickering, promotional lies. What better described a basement with a terminal to an endless set of fantasy worlds than a 'labyrinth with no center'? And who better embodied it than a late-

⁸⁹ In "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online," Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis offer a similar analysis, stating that "In the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. election, a number of subcultural groups who organize online made a concerted effort to manipulate the existing media infrastructure to promote pro-Trump, populist messages." (2)

night infomercial president?" (162-163). For Nagle, the former course resulted in serious courtship and marriage with the ideals of Western Decline and the alt-right. She argues, "To understand the seemingly contradictory politics of 4Chan, Anonymous, and its relationship to the alt-right, it is important to remember that the gradual right-wing turn in chan culture centred around the politics board /pol/, as compared to the less overtly political but always extreme 'random' board /b/. Along the way left-leaning 'moral fags' who had gravitated towards AnonOps IRCs suffered from a degree of state spying and repression during the height of Anonymous's public profile from around 2010 to 2012. This absence of the more libertarian left-leaning element within chan culture created a vacuum in the image boards that the rightist side of the culture was able to fill with their expert style of anti-PC shock humor memes." (16-17)

For Nagle, the alt-right politicization of chan culture is connected to a movement Beran also describes (with personal experience): Anonymous. Sometimes known as a hacktivist group, Anonymous was depicted at the peak of its public profile as a powerful secret collective organization, in no small part because this was the language chan culture applied to it, however ironically. Beran writes that users on 4chan had begun to "[refer] to themselves and those who adhered to the void of their belief structure as "Anonymous," the author, as the joke went, of all posts" (77). Anonymous achieved some wider fame when they were described ominously on Fox News and responded by posting a video to YouTube on January 15th 2008 which propagated their depiction as a "shadowy international cabal of powerful hackers" (Beran, 85). They organized real-world protests against the Church of Scientology and others with some acclaim, and were swept up as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. In response to their activism,

the FBI became involved in investigating and sometimes disrupting their activity. Nagle argues that Anonymous absorbed much of the left-leaning political actors in chan culture that became invested in progressive activism, and their migration to more secure online climates (as well as their periodic detainment by authorities) led to a brain drain in 4chan's /pol/ (political) board, thus leaving only the right-wing, anti-PC extremism flourishing in anonymity. This, she argues, resulted in and contributed to the rise of the alt-right. Both Nagle and Beran argue for the eventual politicization of the community, even as they represent two branches of the same path. I agree, but I argue that the ends result from the same cause we can see in ancillary phenomena like Slender Man stories, that inherent attendant anxieties of online society are the cause. This helps to better explain both how their belief structure is "void" and how transgression itself appears to be the goal of their irreverence.⁹⁰

The Violence of Bad Actors

Much of what Nagle articulates as political movements motivate particularly violent actors. These movements include the "men's rights movement" such as Men Going

⁹⁰ Similarly, Beth Coleman in *Hello, Avatar* offers a method by which agency is attained for individual users through an affirmation of what psychologist Albert Bandura calls 'innerknowledge.' As she describes it, Bandura "sketches a mechanism of agency that is based on an innerknowledge; a predictive sense that one can affect the world outside oneself. However, this innerknowledge is based on a feedback loop between agent and environment. In seeing the results of one's intentions objectified in the world, one confirms a 'self-appraisal of capabilities.'" (40) As Coleman applies this sense of agency to online spaces, I would argue it does something similar in these pseudonymous spaces, where a capacity to navigate a trolling atmosphere constitutes such an 'innerknowledge,' but it becomes almost narcissistic as a confirmation of one's own abilities--particularly as it applies to those with such an innerknowledge punishing those users that lack such a knowledge. Her model outlines a way in which this activity becomes affirming for these users--alleviating anxiety.

Their Own Way.⁹¹ Both Nagle and Beran describe chan culture as being dominated by men who are both deeply steeped in the traditional gender binary and deeply resentful of their failures within it. Stories in the Slender Man text community are almost certainly gender-inclusive, featuring female protagonists and characters, and the interest in the subject matter appears to cross gender lines (considering, at the very least, Weier and Geysler), though it is difficult to ascertain for certain what a demographic split might look like due to the nature of the spaces in which it is shared. It became a common practice in chan culture to "sockpuppet" women, for example. Among creators of the most prolific texts in the community, there appears to be a male skew, however. The games *Slender: The Eight Pages* and *Slender: The Arrival*, both feature women as their protagonists, and both were created by largely male developers. While women do not feature prominently in the ARGs such as *Marble Hornets* or *Tribe Twelve*, what is often thought of as the end of the Slender Man phenomenon is when mainstream culture finally co-opted it (in the way that Dale Beran describes motivates the ironic countercultural detachment of the 90s generation) when Sony Pictures released a Slender Man feature Hollywood film. The film featured a group of victim-protagonists typical of horror films, but was notably all-female. While there is little to clearly establish whether or not the female cast had an impact on its success, its mainstream sensibilities certainly functioned in the way that Baren describes when a transgressive and countercultural object becomes commodified, and was widely rejected. To whatever extent the Slender Man text community

⁹¹ In previous chapters, I have referred to movements which lampoon or otherwise imitate progressive movements on the left. Principally these movements are part of what Nagle describes under the umbrella category of "Western Decline," a theory of occidental declination by way of eroding moral and social values written by Oswald Spengler in his book *The Decline of the West*, and popularized among the political right in the US. General acceptance of this notion, Nagle argues, is what unifies movements such as MGTOW that advocate to a return to classical gender norms under a political counterforce.

reflects a male condition (or even a gender binary), its transgression of commercialization and socio-institutional norms, as well as its anti-conformist symbolism suggest that it is at the very least invested in social binaries and an underdog positionality that echoes, however distantly, the gendered resentment that emerges from chan culture. That same transgression against the mainstream may be instrumental in explaining the seductive capacity of fantasy over reality that has the potential for violent results. In hypermediate online spaces such as anonymous message boards, gender must always be represented before it is determinately embodied, and that hypermediacy fosters a pressure to do so with emphasis, and often. The resentment that emerges from chan culture often seems to reflect a sense that ("toxic") masculinity is given a uniformly negative apprehension in mainstream culture, and so their self-identifying as men becomes, like their investment in Harambe, an indeterminately ironical and vociferous investment in that masculinity. Beran writes, "as a society of ribald boys, 4chan has always been obsessed with masculine competition (and the subsequent humiliation when the contest was lost).⁹² The popular slang 'epic win' and 'fail' were 4chan inventions. But [4chan's successors] soon elaborated on these, referring to themselves as 'beta males', and those out in the world, enjoying romantic success as 'alpha males' or 'Chad Thundercocks' (a buff jock who was healthy, social, and went outdoors), first as a joke, then earnestly" (122). This self-effacement eventually evolved into anger, and users migrated to specialized climes online devoted to insular (and particularly misogynistic) rage. It should be noted of course that Slender Man's chosen attire in particular seems to reflect

⁹² Adrienne Massanari provides an excellent breakdown of how this reflexive self-image as "nerd" creates a "stereotypical image [...that] still conflates interests in computing and technology with a specific kind of gender and racial formation as it conjoins five statements: (1) Computers are an important but problematic type of technology. (2) Nerds understand and enjoy computers. (3) Those who understand and enjoy computers are nerds. (4) Nerds are socially inept and undesirable. (5) Nerds are white men." (Massanari, via Kendall, 519)

some measure of particularly masculine success. From these arenas, bad actors such as Eliot Rodger and Erik Minassian as well as a host of others emerge. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of these actors, each of whom has sought to exact some form of revenge or violence in the name of some form of rebellion against societal norms and progressive movements and/or causes. In each case, as is noted, some concrete connection to chan culture has been established:

1. Elliot Rodger (22) - 23 May 2014 - Isla Vista, California - Kills 6, injures 14 in an act he calls his "day of retribution" in which he intended to exact revenge on women who had rejected him. Incel. 107k-word manifesto posted to 4chan.

2. Chris Harper-Mercer (26) - 1 October 2015 - Roseburg, Oregon. Kills 9, injures 8 at Umpqua Community College. Papers given to survivor detailing his plans based on Rodger in Isla Vista, including sexual frustration and animosity toward black men. Posted on 4chan in anticipation of shooting shortly prior, stating "Some of you guys are alright. Don't go to school tomorrow if you're in the northwest. Happening thread will be posted tomorrow. See you later space robots."

3. Lawrence Scarsella (23), Daniel Thomas Macey (26), Nathan Wayne Gustavsson (21), Joseph Martin Backman (27) - 23 November 2015 - Minneapolis, Minnesota - 5 injured. Opened fire on Black Lives Matter protesters organizing to protest the police shooting of Jamar Clark. Posted video to 4chan's /pol/ board in anticipation of the shooting, "We just wanted to give everyone on /pol/ a heads up. Stay White."

4. Alec Misassian (29) - 23 April 2018 - Toronto, Ontario - Drives a rental van down Yonge street, killing 11, injuring 15, aiming for women. Posted on Facebook prior to the attack, "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan

please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!"

5. Brenton Harrison Tarrant (28) - 15 March 2019 - Christchurch, Canterbury (NZ)
- Live streams the shootings for 17 minutes on Facebook Live. Opens fire with multiple weapons on Al Noor Mosque, Linwood Islamic Centre. Kills 51, injures 40. 74-page manifesto emailed, posted to Twitter and 8chan. Argues for "Great Replacement" alt-right conspiracy. Tells investigators on arrest that he frequents 4chan and 8chan. **Announces during live stream "Remember lads, subscribe to PewDiePie" before opening fire.**

6. John Timothy Earnest (19) - 27 April 2019 - Poway, California - Opens fire in Chabad of Poway synagogue, killing 1 and injuring 3, including rabbi. Attempted to livestream shooting to Facebook. Posted racist, anti-semitic open letter to 8chan, signed by name shortly before shooting.

7. Patrick Wood Crucius (21) - 3 August 2019 - El Paso, Texas - Opens fire in a Walmart, killing 23 and injuring 23. White nationalist, anti-immigrant. Argues for "Great Replacement" alt-right conspiracy theory. Posts Manifesto to 8chan shortly before attack.

Each of these events is connected to some degree to chan culture. This does not mean explicitly that their motivations proceed from chan culture, only that 4chan, 8chan, and others like it have operated as a vehicle for many of the ideals they represent. What stands out about this vehicle is its adherence to an indefensible anonymity. It is indefensible as it is positioned against its opposite front in the culture wars, the similarly inde-

fensible identity status protection offered by what Nagle refers to as the "cult of suffering" in the left-leaning de-anonymized social media sphere. Both act as defences against the same pressures for which Slender Man is symbolic. These pressures, as we have discussed in previous chapters, is *hypermediacy*. This is a condition in which users experience a heightened degree of stress and anxiety in light of an Internet panopticon of anticipated mediacy which bleeds into reality itself and enables more easy transitions between fantasy and reality.⁹³ As discussed above, this becomes apparent for users in this environment when we observe their conflating of the virtual with the material, as Jason Fortuny and Andrew Aurnheimer do when they discussed user's "unpatched brains."

Nagle's (albeit politicized) observation that 4chan experienced a 'brain drain' after the succession of Anonymous gave rise to US federal scrutiny is picked up by Beran as he interviews Fredrick Brennan, responsible for founding 4chan's principal successor, 8chan. 4chan evolved after Anonymous to accommodate those who did not take up the banner of social activism as more liberal-minded users did, and its original founder, Christopher Poole, created a board to replace the well-known /b/ (random) board that was the font of 4chan's creative capacity, as well as its most insidious content. This board became known as /r9k/, with "r" standing for "robot." "In /r9k/, former self-identified /b/tards took to calling themselves 'gentlemen'. In their cartwheeling way, they converted their old jokes about how they were forever alone in their moms' basements, raging and frustrated, into jokes about how they would become the height of sophistication. [...] The board had slowly filled up with people who referred to themselves as 'robots'

⁹³ See Alice E. Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life."

because they identified as autistic or intensely withdrawn loners. One of these robots was a boy [...] named Fredrick Brennan. [...] 'I felt like 4chan was this secret portal into what people were thinking,' he told me. 'I felt like everyone in the real world was lying, [that] they weren't telling me their true beliefs. I felt like I was looking behind the mask. But in reality, I learned much later, that wasn't what most people were thinking at all. But as a kid I couldn't tell the difference'" (119-120).

Beran (with Brennan) clearly articulates the anxious conditions for which fora like 4chan provide relief. In interviewing with Beran, Brennan describes the active transition from storytelling into reality: "'We would write in the high Elizabethan style, hence the 'gentlemen'. Instead of saying 'LOL', we would write 'this gave me such exquisite laughter.' But over time... it started to evolve into stories, then personal stories. Then people started writing about their own lives. And we were all on 4chan so all our lives sucked! If our lives hadn't sucked, we would have been on Myspace or Facebook. The kind of person an image board attracts...it led /r9k/ into a lot of depressive stories. What's the common link between these stories? Well, we're all ugly. We're all alone. [...] We used to say that there's an oppression Olympics [in American culture], like, a competition among oppressed minorities to see who was the most oppressed. Well, instead of an oppression Olympics, it became a *depression* Olympics. So the most depressed people started to gang together and accuse anyone that had a single friend or went outside of just faking it'" (Brennan, qtd. in Beran, 120-121). Brennan describes an increasing seriousness with which the jokes became less and less ironic and the embracing of their own degeneracy became less funny. He claims that as an administrator of a 4chan

successor (prior to 8chan, called "Wizardchan") that no less than four moderators committed suicide. The rage that followed eventually became concretized in the likes of the mass killers outlined above. Beran considers the case of Elliot Rodger, writing that:

[in] 2012 [4chan] discovered a new, even more obdurate low that presented the same question: how long could 90s nihilism endure? How long could you believe in nothing? The answer, it turned out, was not indefinitely. [...] Rodger boxed himself in as he grew increasingly detached from reality. [...] He drew inward, finding solace in video games, fantasy, and internet message boards. Unable to understand social interactions, he dwelled instead on concrete statistics that he thought would make him appealing to the opposite sex: his wealth, his looks, his possessions, and so forth. In real life, Rodger had close contact with the blockbuster fantasies most betas adored absorbing through the screen. [...] He had attended the premiere of a Star Wars film because his mother knew George Lucas. His father had been a second-unit assistant director for *The Hunger Games*, a science-fiction tale about teens competing against one another in a murderous contest for supremacy. Rodger's favorite show, *Game of Thrones*, reworked old romantic children's fables about dragons and knights into a similar theme: life was a brutal and bloody competition for status and power. And it was this metaphor that Rodger extended into the world of competitive and conspicuous wealth and consumption among the youth of Southern California. It didn't take long for 4chan to recognize a fellow screen-obsessed beta in Rodger. His killing spree was celebrated on /r9k/

and many other boards on 4chan in the only way it celebrated anything--in meme form. The antisocial users of 4chan had always reveled [sic] in crazed acts of violence. [...another killer stated] his purpose as 'the message is, that there is no message', a philosophy that echoed the Joker's [...who] emphasized a nihilistic absurdism through meaningless acts of violence. For this reason, anonymous soon became obsessed with his character." (126-128)

Through Beran's argument, we can start to see the joint of the content-based ideological roots that this kind of withdrawn character shares with Slender Man. In this passage, Beran describes the community's fixation with the Joker in "the message is, there is no message," which could be said to describe Slender Man himself as well. In his facelessness, Slender Man appears akin to the Joker with his rictus grin. His amorphous appearance, motives, directions, and contagious nature seem to act both as threatening abuser and as role-model. Beran argues that the nihilism of directionless malice--'nothing is to be taken seriously'--becomes a vacuum into which fantasy can supplant a misapprehension of reality. For the likes of Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, it became a mythological apprehension of the natural world that acted as counterargument for the real world around them. For the likes of Elliot Rodger, it became a misogynistic and gamified fantasy world that he was losing. In both instances, they acted out in violence.

This is not to say that the acts are virtually interchangeable, but it is to suggest that the two events might share a common and influential cause. Among the most significant is one which Nagle identifies, and in a prescient way appears to speak to what is

accepted by both fronts in articulation of the 'culture war' as a virtue, that of transgression. She argues that "Transgression has been embraced as a virtue within Western social liberalism ever since the 60s, typically applied today as it is in bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*. So elevated has the virtue of transgression become in the criticism of art, argued Kieran Cashell, that contemporary art critics have been faced with a challenge: 'either support transgression unconditionally or condemn the tendency and risk obsolescence amid suspicions of critical conservatism' [...] But, Cashell wrote, on the value placed upon transgression in contemporary art: 'In the pursuit of the irrational, art has become negative, nasty and nihilistic'" (29). As has been noted in many ways, Slender Man texts are transgressive. In particular as they are presented metatextually. A major component of her argument is that by the 'grain' of society, the alt-right misogynist is not acting from the majority, but transgressing against the rules presented by liberal society. In their widespread philosophy of Western Decline, they imagine themselves as a beleaguered minority representing themselves rebelliously against the dogmatic language-policing left.

Nagle uses the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White to associate Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to establish how both trolling activity and the alt-right philosophy are radical transgression against the hegemonic social order:

'The grotesque tends to operate as a critique of the dominant ideology which has already set the terms designating what is high and what is low.' This is very much how 4chan has long self-described and how it was described by its early 'progressive' boosters, except that the dominant ideol-

ogy at the time of 4chan has been cultural liberalism, and the 'low' therefore meant un-PC poor taste, rudeness, shock, offence and trolling, [...] The transgressive style is not without precedent on the formally political conservative right, either. [...] Like the right, [feminism] has run up against a deep philosophical problem about the ideologically flexible, politically fungible, morally neutral nature of transgression as a style, which can characterize misogyny just as easily as it can sexual liberation. As Lasch understood, for progressive politics anti-moral transgression has always been a bargain with the devil, because the case for equality is essentially a moral one." (35)

Nagle in this case uses feminism as a lens to demonstrate her assertion, but it applies more broadly as well. The essence is that amoral transgression as a virtue poses as much of a threat to the liberation movements of the 60s and their more modern incarnations the more mainstream that liberation becomes.

Premeditation and Anomie

The state of mind that preoccupies the internet trolling culture from which I have argued Slender Man emerges is, at its heart an anarchic and rebellious despair in the face of a perceived disharmony between modes of thinking that have collided in a short period of time within the hypermediate Internet. Of the bad actors on the list above, the majority were born between 1989 and 1992, with only the latest two born later, in 2000 and 1997 respectively. Each are what we would call 'millennials', coming of age during the ascension of Internet access as a household capacity. To reiterate, in Richard

Grusin's *Premediation*, he reviews what he calls the "contradictory media logics, which aimed respectively for immediacy and hypermediacy, roughly understood at the end of the 1990s as transparency and multiplicity" (1). He argues that:

After 9/11 the logic of hypermediacy is marked by the multiplication of mediation among sociotechnical, commercial, and political networks--less the hypermediacy of formal features or technologies of mediation than the hypermediacy of network connectivities, of affective participation and distribution of one's networked identity across multiple sociotechnical and medial networks. [...The] real is no longer that which is free from mediation, but that which is thoroughly enmeshed with networks of social, technical, aesthetic, political, cultural, or economic mediation. [...] Leaving traces of yourself on socially networked media sites is seen as a necessary goal--and interacting with such sites is made pleasurable or desirable in part because they work to produce and maintain positive affective relations with their users, to set up affective feedback loops that make one want to proliferate one's media transactions. [...Premediation is] about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11." (2-4)

Grusin's argument for premediation emerges from a collective desire to anticipate and prevent shock by anticipating multiple mediated versions of reality prior to its occurring. Regardless of 9/11, an anticipated medial relationship to the real is what is at stake, with

multiple forms of mediacy with which to both engage and anticipate reality. It is in this way that users are primed to anticipate fantastical formations based in no small part on mediated forms. Rodger processed his real-life frustrations through a mediated fantasy, as did Geysler and Weier.

In this project I have argued that there is an attendant anxiety to the pressures of integration within this 'affective participation' and the potential for alienation--essentially a critical shutdown that some users experience in light of failing to integrate themselves in the way that Grusin suggests is desirable. I have added this anxiety to Grusin's (and his colleague Jay Bolter's) definition, which Grusin anticipates already as he incorporates a politicized fear and anxiety in the early 2000s based on 9/11, but I would argue that this is an ancillary cause for an extant pressure. While I have suggested this is an alienation resulting from the limitations of online society, felt particularly in pseudonymous and anonymous culture, perhaps a better term for this alienation is sociologist Emile Durkheim's *anomie*. Durkheim argues that there is a copacetic harmony that can exist within co-present modes of thinking that have endured proximity for time enough to become acclimatized. He argues that:

In all [social roles], if the division of labour does not produce solidarity it is because the relationships between [sic] the organs are not regulated; it is because they are in a state of *anomie*. [...A] state of *anomie* is impossible wherever organs solidly linked to one another are in sufficient contact, and in sufficiently lengthy contact. Indeed, being adjacent to one another, they are easily alerted in every situation to the need for one another and conse-

quently they experience a keen, continuous feeling of their mutual dependence. [...] Yet if, on the other hand, some blocking environment is interposed between them, only stimuli of a certain intensity can communicate from one organ to another. [...] [Division of labour] has often been accused of diminishing the individual by reducing him to the role of a machine. And indeed, if he is not aware of where the operations required of him are leading, if he does not link them to any aim, he can no longer perform them save out of routine." (304-306)

In other words, Durkheim is describing anomie as a state in which one operates anticipating a meaningful understanding of one's integration into a system of thinking, and when confronted with the demand to merely function without that understanding, their labour becomes meaningless--a state in which social mores and value systems collapse into anarchic nihilism. "The message is, there is no message."

If we apply Grusin's media logic, the pressure of hypermediacy is a demand for integration into a sociotechnical system in order to produce "affective feedback loops." Grusin draws on Andy Clark's work, arguing that these affective loops are part of a natural process by which humans are natural "affective cyborgs," capable of extending our capacity for affective relations through technology in a kind of proprioception. I argue, however, that Grusin's own arguments for the conflicting media logics of immediacy and multiplicity are accomplished through instinctive (sometimes called "intuitive") stimulus response in our devices' user interface. In reality, these mechanisms are, as former Google product philosopher Tristan Harris describes, part of a system of "variable

scheduled rewards.” In Grusin's terms, our capabilities as "affective cyborgs" could render violent actors emerging from these fora simply a collective of individuals failing to socially acclimatize. I argue that the hypermediated conditioning to which they are exposed sets them up for that failure, and in effect, they have become accustomed to pre-mediating their own perceived status as "failures.” In this way, the particular type of meme-making undertaken in 4chan in which debasement is simultaneously (ironically?) celebrated (such as in the notorious "Pepe the Frog" memes) is rendered sensible.

In her article for *The Atlantic*, Bianca Bosker describes the mechanisms that Harris is exposing in software design. This philosophy is echoed just as readily in hardware design, and baked into the call-and-response post exchange practices in forums and chat rooms.⁹⁴ Bosker writes:

While some blame our collective tech addiction on personal failings, like weak willpower, Harris points a finger at the software itself. That itch to glance at our phone is a natural reaction to apps and websites engineered to get us scrolling as frequently as possible. The attention economy [...] has kicked off what Harris calls a 'race to the bottom of the brain stem'. 'You could say that it's my responsibility' to exert self-control when it comes to digital usage, he explains, 'but that's not acknowledging that there's a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job is to break down whatever responsibility I can maintain.' [...] [In Stanford's Persuasive Technology Lab] Harris studied the psychology of behavior

⁹⁴ Though it is only personal experience, I witnessed many of my peers in high school in 2002 in our computer labs and elsewhere hitting the refresh button repeatedly in their browsers while watching for replies to their posts in old BBS-style chat rooms, in the manner of variable scheduled rewards.

change, such as how clicker training for dogs, among other methods of conditioning, can inspire products for people. [...] Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter hook us by delivering what psychologists call 'variable rewards.'" These variable rewards are part of classical conditioning practices that engage with the amygdala (among others), which is part of the limbic system. This part of the brain--to which arguably all reward/punishment systems belong--is built into our survival needs, and the amygdala itself governs fear responses. Put simply, there is a categorical way in which those who dwell in spaces like these online are engaging anxious parts of their brains playing a slot machine in the hopes of receiving social validation. Grusin's notion that individual users are encouraged to spread themselves across an integrated network of sociotechnical engagement sites interacts with the same parts of the brain. Bosker reports that "[sites] foster a sort of distracted lingering partly by lumping multiple services together. To answer the friend request, we'll pass by the News Feed, where pictures and auto-play vides seduce us into scrolling through an infinite stream of posts [...] The 'friend request' tab will nudge us to add even more contacts by suggesting 'people you may know', and in a split second, our unconscious impulses cause the cycle to continue: Once we send the friend request, an alert appears on the recipient's phone in bright red--a "trigger" color, Harris says, more likely than some other hues to make people click--and because seeing our name taps into a hardwired sense of social obligation, she will drop everything to answer." (Bosker)

Bright red is a colour activated by the same risk/reward processes of the brain as it evokes blood. What Bosker argues about lumping services within a single site applies to a social media presence across platforms as well, and many sites present media content using cross-platform iconicity and linking to spread users' attention. While Grusin's argument that co-presence online is a capacity to which we might adapt, and Durkheim's research supports the idea that we can become accustomed and integrated successfully with multiple networks, the rapid hypermediacy to which we have been exposed in an extremely short period of time has produced a state of *anomic* alienation, within users that predisposes us, I argue, to feelings of anxiety, and fosters detachment from shared reality, towards a premediated and fantastical reality instead. For some, that is a misogynistic and reactionary "golden age" regression toward fixed gender roles, nationalism, and racism. For others, it is different kind of "golden age" regression, reaching for a more "authentic" way of sharing stories that, in the vein of magical thinking, reveals the mechanisms of a collective consciousness to which we might awaken and find meaning: "We did it to appease the Slender Man."

Conclusion: The Failure of Insurrection

This project began in 2017, with the release of Dale Beran's essay "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," posted to the website *Medium*. This was revealing in that an online community of disparate and disaffected young nihilists were not merely an apathetic backwash of the first of those connected to the Internet, uninvested in politics or in influencing society. They were capable of organizing, and motivated to do so,

not necessarily for a conventionally discursive cause, but out of anarchistic transgression, potentially seeking upheaval for its own sake. Studies in the ideological underpinnings texts offer their reading publics, combined with a childhood and upbringing deeply embedded in this generation of disaffected youth as well as the online spaces which they attended are suitable for grasping just how far this leviathan will might very well extend. Beran argued that through ballot spoiling (with votes cast for "Harambe") and their ability to kick up obscuring clouds of misinformation to disrupt political momentum for any candidate other than Trump had been instrumental in getting a president elected that mirrored their transgressive sensibilities, Trump's election in 2016 was such an upset that the possibility that they had become large enough and organized enough to subvert that election I concluded was the most reasonable answer for how it had gone the way it had.

Slender Man texts offer exactly the kind of reality-warping capacity that took place in this collective action, and Slender Man offers a perfect view of its ideological underpinnings and exactly how this capacity was manifesting in a relatively new medial form. It was at the time imperative to understand, because there was a real possibility that this same capability--to bend reality in the minds of Internet users--had the potential to generate serious social upheaval. The significant number of young suburban white men of the early millennial cohort that represented a great deal of those on 4chan and typified by the likes of Fortuny and Auernheimer demonstrate a lack of perspective as it pertains to real-world violence. How foolish and vulnerable might they feel if their actions were to lead to violent uprising and revolution? Suffering something as simple as a loss of electricity would rob them of the online spaces in which they felt in control and

present them with real pressures such as the need for food they might be unable to obtain or domestic safety on which they could no longer rely, provided in the past by institutions they had mocked and derided. As the likes of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian came to the fore, it appeared as though the delusional offspring of their childish nihilism were living out the fantasy worlds they had retreated to online and were feeling the consequences of their actions. Those consequences appeared (at least, at first) to go unheeded by the online communities from which they emerged.

More alarmingly was the spreading influence of Qanon, a mysterious online alt-right prophet voice parroted by the alt-right through the likes of Alex Jones and the traditional right on Fox News. In an article in *The New York Times* on the conspiracy theory-turned-alt-right movement by Kevin Roose, he writes that Qanon first appeared "[in] October 2017, a post appeared on 4chan, the notoriously toxic message board, from an anonymous account calling itself 'Q Clearance Patriot.' This poster, who became known simply as 'Q,' claimed to be a high-ranking government insider with access to classified information about Mr. Trump's war against the global cabal." The cabal to which they refer is the central antagonist in this conspiracy.⁹⁵ This voice became the source for the most outlandish conspiracy theories clearly emerges from the same 4chan trolling milieu that so much else has, and appeared to gain traction in significant right-wing voting blocs. It appears to possess some lingering influence still, with *New York Times* articles

⁹⁵ The conspiracy involves a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibals running a child-sex ring for the rich and powerful and that controls a world government, and against which Donald Trump's unlikely presidency was meant to fight. On Jan. 6th, Qanon supporters believed that Trump would announce the conspiracy to the world and that he would be fighting back against the Washington establishment (firmly in the control of the cabal) and would declare martial law to take back the country from them. They were also responsible for the "pizza gate scandal" which claimed that Hillary Clinton secretly ran a child-sex ring out of a pizza restaurant. The sex ring was associated, they believed, with the cabal. The conspiracy embraces so much offensive capacity as to appear comical—expressly the kind of outlandish comedy for which trolls are specialized, and getting "normies" to believe this kind of theory would be seen as a triumph among them.

written on them as recently as the day of my writing this.⁹⁶ These theories read like the most outlandish acts of trolling appearing in forums like 4chan, deliberately evoking the most offensive possible activities (in particular to the old religious right in the United States), and echo the same reality-bending power of Slender Man as the creation of an urban legend.

Slender Man begins to appear almost as though it is a kind of proof-of-concept for this kind of extensive operation, that, between Qanon and Anonymous, appears almost like a reckless recreation of the social engineering of Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel *Ender's Game*, in which the protagonist's siblings, the violent sociopath Peter Wiggin and his sister Valentine orchestrate a game that takes charge of the world's political sphere by sockpuppeting radical figures from both ends of the political spectrum, appearing opposed, but acting in manipulative concert. They do so in pseudonymous spaces through the "global communications system," taking on the names Demosthenes and Locke, which in light of their social engineering appear to be satirizing the notion of public cooperation and organization, taking on more of the aspect of Thomas Hobbes than John Locke. Considering the viewpoint offered by the likes of Auernheimer and Fortuny, the suggestion that the ignorant deserve to be manipulated so that they might "learn better," and the willingness to deliberately gaslight huge Internet populations through a mythologized apprehension of reality, whether as an urban legend like Slender Man, a shadowy cabal of powerful hackers like Anonymous, or a deep-state insider like Qanon, such a feat of social engineering appears altogether possible. While on the one hand, this project is largely focused on Slender Man's power to warp reality

⁹⁶ In fact, the article in particular to which I refer is from *The New York Times International* and has its date of publication as tomorrow (from the day of my writing).

as a text, it has always been a subset of a greater, more consequential phenomenon that might, if not better understood, be capable of full and reckless social upheaval.

On 6 January 2021, well into this project, it appeared that what I had only speculated was possible was being realized. A mob of over two thousand, there to protest the transition of power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, descended on the Capitol Building in Washington, DC in the United States and broke in, looking for evidence of global conspiracies and deep state power manipulating the fortunes of the world. Many of these were part of anti-government conspiracy groups, including reactionary misogynist groups like the "Proud Boys"--a byproduct of the same online sentiment with which this project was concerned. Pointedly, there was also an extravagant-looking masthead to the mob in the form of Jacob Chansley, the "Q Shaman," dressed in horns and fur bearing various "Q" iconography symbolizing Qanon. Among the many videos taken and posted to social media by these rioters, several featured young people rooting through papers in senators' desks looking for evidence of their involvement in conspiracies, to no avail.⁹⁷ Others featured some such as rioter Elizabeth Koch, who protested to Yahoo! News reporter Hunter Walker that she had been maced when she tried to enter the Capitol building, sounding affronted. When Walker asked her why she was trying to gain access, she claimed it was "A revolution!" The reactions reflect the short-sightedness of the participants. They had, in the parlance of Richard Grusin, premediated the narrative of their triumphant revolution, and incorporated the social media outrage of Donald Trump and his cabinet as part of that fantasy.

⁹⁷ Mogelson, "A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege."

For many, including Chansley, this was a realization of the outlandish claims by Qanon. In February 2022, Josh Marcus of *The Independent* reported that linguistic analysts from OrphAnalytics and a pair of French computational linguists analyzed over 100,000 words written by Q, and determined that their identity was, "what researchers and journalists have long believed," that it was a South African software developer and 4chan enthusiast Paul Furber, with the identity taken from Furber at some point shortly after the posts became popularized by Jim Watkins and his son Ron, administrators of 2channel, 4chan's Japanese inspiration, also host to an insular and anonymous collective of Japanese introverts, as well as 8chan, having taken it from original founder, Fredrick Brennan. Brennan has since recanted his commitment to channels like 8chan, and has stated that he believes that the Watkins' are Q, and has suggested that he thinks they are unhinged. In testifying before a Department of Homeland Security committee on the Jan. 6th insurrection (as it has become known) in February, Jim Watkins posted a photo of himself in Washington with a "Q" pin on his collar. The connection between Qanon and chan culture appears incontrovertible. Events such as these, as well as the rude awakening that seemed to have occurred for many in the Qanon conspiracy suggests that the phenomenal threat, or the potential thereof, has largely passed. To paraphrase Dale Beran, nihilism cannot sustain a community for long.

To whatever extent that the Slender Man phenomenon represented a watershed moment for what would result in extremist political movements, mass shootings, or indeed killings in his name, the capacity for this kind of fantasy to supplant reality has proven to be possible within the confines of Internet society, and the propensity for it to extend into reality itself possible as well. The answer to the question "what is Slender

Man doing?" is that it is offering a phantasmic antidote to anomie in light of a culture clash online. Whether the strange and sporadic acts of violence that seem to emerge from this phenomenal paradigm are purely its products or its volatile mixture with the schizophrenic, the abused, the disenfranchised, or the brainwashed is yet to be seen definitively.

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