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## “Dark and Wicked Things” Slender Man, the Folkloresque, and the Implications of Belief

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**BEHIND** the success of many great works of fiction is a convincing appeal to “fact,” or at least to everyday experience. A case in point: as a Maryland native and an inveterate fan of horror cinema, I look back fondly on that controversial classic of the late 1990s, *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999a). I confess to being one of many who initially believed in the literal reality of the film’s fictional events, which centered on a group of college film students who disappeared while exploring a local legend. I was sixteen when it was released, and the film and its accompanying promotional material—particularly the Sci-Fi Channel companion “documentary” *Curse of the Blair Witch* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999b)—contained precisely the right mix of chilling detail, localness, and sound bites from (apparent) authority figures to convince me that it was all real.<sup>1</sup> And I wasn’t alone in this: infamously, believers flooded Burkittsville, Maryland, near which the fictional village of Blair supposedly once stood, in the months following the film’s release. These legend-trippers (of a fictional legend) vandalized town property and snatched souvenirs in a witch-inspired frenzy that itself seems to have entered the town’s folklore (Fiore 2010).<sup>2</sup>

*The Blair Witch Project* is, of course, far from the only creative work to so effectively confuse fiction and reality. Other notable examples are Orson Welles’s infamous radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* (Welles 1938) and the 1992 fake BBC news special *Ghostwatch* (Manning 1992). Welles’ realistic drama allegedly caused an uproar among listeners (primarily in the New York area), leading him to formally state the day after the broadcast that it was not intended to be taken literally (Heyer 2003:149-50, 159).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the initial airing of *Ghostwatch*, which was presented as a primetime news special on a haunting in a London suburb, was linked to a subsequent real-world suicide as well as the only known instances of television causing

post-traumatic stress disorder in children (Leeder 2013:174). And the release of the Animal Planet TV mockumentary *Mermaids: The Body Found* (Bennett 2012) prompted concerned citizens to contact the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Oremus 2012). In a statement posted to the NOAA’s website, the organization wryly pointed out that no evidence exists to support the existence of “aquatic humanoids” (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2012).

This list is far from exhaustive, but hopefully the point is clear: in each case the “panic” (a term I use loosely) stemmed from the confusion of fiction with reality. None of these broadcasts were “real,” but all were presented in ways that mimicked real media conventions and were therefore *convincing* (Harris 2001:76; Heyer 2003:150; Leeder 2013:175). This playful (or cynical) manipulation of the boundaries of fiction and reality—akin to what historian Michael Saler (2012:14) has called the “ironic imagination”—is discursively powerful, and seems particularly easy to effect when the creators of popular media invoke the conventions of folklore. In this article I consider a case with several important parallels to these irruptions of fiction into the real—i.e., human, experiential—world. Slender Man, the ubiquitous Internet monster, is not “real,” in precisely the way that the Blair Witch, the “aquatic apes” of *Mermaids*, the ghost named Pipes haunting the London family in *Ghostwatch*, and the alien invaders in the “War of the Worlds” broadcast are not real.<sup>5</sup> But like each of these believable fictions, surprising and distressing events have taken place in the “real” world based, at least in part, on alleged failures to recognize Slender Man as “unreal.” The most dramatic of these events was the attempted murder of a twelve-year-old girl in Wisconsin, as discussed earlier in this issue.

Beginning with the assumption that all these cases of fiction-mistaken-for-reality do indeed have something in common, there are two organizing principles informing this study: first, the issue of believability, the capacity of self-conscious works of fiction to be convincingly “realistic;” and second, the potential for the savvy manipulation of folkloric forms and conventions—what elsewhere Michael Dylan Foster (2016a) has called the “folkloresque”—to produce potent rhetorical devices which can in turn be enlisted by others to serve various discursive ends. These themes are inextricably linked. As Foster shows, the folkloresque is a complex process for the creation of new expressive forms and may take many guises, but it always involves an appeal—through vague resemblance or direct imitation—to familiar, pre-existing folklore. Through this appeal the folkloresque imbues new texts with cultural authority, but the appeal can only be successful if audiences “buy” the connection between the

folkloresque material and established real-world traditions. It must be, in other words, believable. The folkloresque thus imparts one kind of “realness,” in this case, the suggestion that a text (such as a Slender Man narrative) might actually exist in traditions that predate its appearance on the Internet.

But particularly where supernatural belief is concerned, this can lead directly into another type of “realness”: if there were a pre-existing Slender Man tradition, with legends told about it as about any other supernatural being familiar from folklore, then it would be reasonable to assume that the tradition exists in what might be termed an *atmosphere of belief*. By this I mean a context in which tellers and audiences of supernatural narratives may be open to the possibility that a supernatural narrative is real. This is not to say that everyone who hears or tells a legend narrative literally believes in it: as folklorists have long held, legends are always regarded with differing degrees of belief (Dégh 1996; Hufford 1982; Kinsella 2011:5-6). The point is that by forging connections to real-world belief traditions and thereby attributing the *possibility of belief* to Slender Man narratives, the folkloresque adds another dimension of “realness” to the fictional Slender Man Mythos, as it is called by participants. The end result of all of these interrelated processes, as we will see, is that the being himself, the supernatural Slender Man, becomes believable in a way that belies his fictional roots.<sup>6</sup> The quality of believability is bolstered by the combination of news accounts about the monster, real-life practices (i.e., ostension, the acting out of a narrative) surrounding the tradition, and the inherently cyclical nature of folkloresque texts, which are created from disparate traditional elements and ultimately form the basis of new traditions (Foster 2016b). Adding another layer of complexity to this discussion is the simple fact that whether one believes in him literally or not, Slender Man *is* real, in that he is present (in countless iterations) throughout our physical and digital worlds.

I suggest that in the discourses emerging after the violence in Waukesha, belief in Slender Man was often framed as a form of deviance, a view that I attempt to problematize.<sup>7</sup> Folklorists, who make it their business to document the creation and dissemination of such phenomena as Slender Man, are uniquely well-positioned to counter the negative or problematic discourses that may arise in their wake (Ellis 1996:182). In this article I focus on these discourses, rather than the texts of the Slender Man Mythos itself, to emphasize that it is human actors, not narratives or characters, that are ultimately responsible for real-world actions. Folklore is emphatically not to blame. In the wake of the Waukesha incident, several folklorists and other scholars argued this and related points in various news outlets.<sup>8</sup> While it is impossible

to say whether these voices helped to calm the rumblings of a nascent moral panic, it is nevertheless important and encouraging that they were raised at all.

### The “Facts” of the Case

As is now common knowledge, Slender Man was created on the Internet as a deliberate fiction, part of an ongoing challenge for users of an online discussion forum to create frightening images. Victor Surge, the online alias of the “Something Awful” forum user Eric Knudson, who created the monster, made its origins explicitly clear: “The Slender Man as an idea was made-up [sic] off the top of my head, although the concept is based on a number of things that scare me. The name I thought up on the fly when I wrote that first bit” (Victor Surge 2009). But despite its avowedly fictional status, the Slender Man Mythos was tailored to resemble actual legendry (Peck 2015). I have referred to this process as *reverse ostension*, through which some users actually sought to generate narratives that would come to be regarded as real legends by people outside of the original digital community (Tolbert 2013:8-11).<sup>9</sup> Despite these aesthetic moves on the part of his creators, though, Slender Man largely remained an amusing, if frightening, fiction.

But the monster was violently shaken from his fictional frame on Saturday, May 31st, 2014, when a bicyclist called police after he discovered a twelve-year-old girl lying on the sidewalk outside of David’s Park in Waukesha, Wisconsin. As noted in this issue’s introduction, the girl had been stabbed—nineteen times, it was later reported—and left for dead. Two other girls of the same age, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, confessed to the attempted murder. They had done it, they said, to gain the favor of Slender Man (Gabler 2014). The victim survived and was released from the hospital on June 6<sup>th</sup>. Weier and Geyser were charged with attempted first-degree intentional homicide (Barton 2014).

Much of the news coverage following the Waukesha attack focused on the mental health of the accused.<sup>10</sup> Geyser was initially found incompetent to stand trial and ordered to receive psychological treatment; experts testifying on her mental state claimed that she believed she had real-life relationships with other fictional characters as well, including the *Harry Potter* antagonist Voldemort (Vielmetti 2014). Geyser was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia (Vielmetti 2015a). Both girls’ attorneys tried to have their cases moved to juvenile court, but the judge eventually ruled that the case should remain in adult court (Vielmetti 2015b). Nearly two years after the attack, the accused were still awaiting trial (Vielmetti 2016).

Another theme that emerged in some discussions of the attack related to perceptions of the Internet as a source of danger. On June 2, 2014, the Waukesha Police Department released a statement, reproduced on the website of the *Los Angeles Times*, outlining the case. In the statement, Police Chief Russell Jack notes, “Both suspects had a fascination in a fictitious character that often posted [sic] to a website that is a collection of small stories about death and horror” (2014). Jack continues:

Keeping children safe is more challenging than in years past. The Internet has changed the way we live. It is full of information and wonderful sites that teach and entertain. The internet can also be full of dark and wicked things. It is also providing an opportunity for potential child predators to reach children like never before.

Unmonitored and unrestricted access to the internet by children is a growing and alarming problem. This should be a wake up [sic] call for all parents. Parents are strongly encouraged to restrict and monitor their children’s internet usage. We must also remember that “online” is much more than spending time on the computer. Now smart phones and even video games are completely connected to the outside world.

Parents, please talk to your kids about the dangers that exist online.

Speaking from his position of authority as a law enforcement officer, Jack leaves no doubt as to the source of the problem: the Internet and its “dark and wicked things.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, some writers ran with the notion that people needed to be educated about the reality of Slender Man—that is, about his unreality. An article on *Rolling Stone*’s website featured the telling subtitle, “Everything you need to know about the Internet’s disturbing boogeyman” (Raymond 2014). And CNN’s Kelly Wallace wrote, “Warning signs for parents that their children may be having trouble absorbing what they’re engaging with online, or differentiating fantasy from reality, include withdrawing from real friends, not engaging with other aspects of their lives, self-injury and injury to others, experts say” (Wallace 2014).

After the attack, the media attempted to link other stories to Slender Man as well. On June 6th, Cincinnati television station WLWT posted a story to their website detailing another stabbing, this time of a mother by her thirteen-year-old daughter. The mother herself, after learning about the events in Waukesha, suggested there may be a connection to the fictional monster, citing references to Slender Man in her

daughter’s writings (B. Evans 2014). Two days later a husband and wife in Las Vegas shot and killed three people before killing themselves; a neighbor told reporters that the husband had frequently dressed up as Slender Man (Murray 2014). And in September, a teenaged girl in Pasco County, Florida set fire to her house with her mother and brother inside (both of whom fortunately escaped). Sheriff Chris Nocco told the press that the girl had visited the site Creepypasta.com and had even written in her journal about the Waukesha stabbing (Orlando 2014).

The flurry of news coverage focusing on Slender Man and real-world violence and the cautionary statements to parents have a whiff of panic about them. In a Newsweek piece on the attack, writer Abigail Jones noted

a rising cultural panic this case seems to encapsulate. The response to what these girls are accused of doing reflects our deepest anxieties about girlhood, technology and the growing gulf between parents and their children. And that’s why this kind of news story rivets us. We say to ourselves, “How awful,” while yearning for more. (Jones 2014)<sup>12</sup>

In the next section I consider the implications of the incursion of fictional texts into the real world, and suggest a different, though closely related, cause of the intense interest in the case: the issue of belief.

### Legend and Belief, Deviance and Moral Panic

Moral panics, as Stanley Cohen outlines in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972 [2011]), are responses to perceived deviant acts which are seen as a threat to social norms and which are presented in stereotypical and moralizing ways by the mass media (1). On this point, the case of Slender Man differs from the fictional works mentioned earlier. While the “War of the Worlds” broadcast, *Ghostwatch*, and similar works may have trailed controversy in their wakes and prompted widespread fear among their audiences, those responses notably lacked the element of deviance, of a (perceived) widespread social problem borne out in the actions of a few individuals, which is central to moral panic discourses. In fact, these episodes represent the inverse of the moral panic scenario Cohen describes in at least one important respect: rather than a case of the news media fixating on a real act (or series of acts) of deviance, these fictional works and the panics they induced began *in the media*, with two of the four—“War of the Worlds” and *Ghostwatch*—actually framed diegetically as journalistic reports on current events. (*The Blair Witch Project* and *Mermaids*, meanwhile,

both appealed to the documentary film genre to establish authority.) The panics caused were therefore the result of a generalized confusion of fiction with reality: instead of a hyperbolic response to a real event, these “fake” media prompted real (if disproportionate) responses by the viewing/listening public.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the media treatment of Slender Man began by fixating on the real-world attack in Waukesha and the subsequent incidents, and the discourses that followed, as we have seen, clearly do reflect concerns with deviance. No one took Slender Man for a “real” being, ironically, except for the young girls accused of acts of terrible violence. The panic that followed those acts was a moral panic induced not by the fear of a murderous supernatural being, but by the fear that stories of this being could incite belief (and hence action) in the most vulnerable members of society, its children.

While the fear of alien invasion or angry ghosts, on the one hand, and the fear of young girls behaving violently, on the other, are clearly very different, they are linked in this case by the issue of belief. Paralleling audience responses to the “War of the Worlds” and *Ghostwatch* broadcasts, the seemingly “real” legend of the Blair Witch, and the pseudoscience of *Mermaids*, the fictional Slender Man was interpreted as real and invoked to justify real-world actions (albeit on a far smaller scale). And paralleling conventional moral panics, the media picked up the story, forging tenuous links between it and other current events, because “once a dominant perception is established the tendency is to assimilate all subsequent happenings to it” (Cohen 1972 [2011]:273). Despite the questionable connections between the post-Waukesha acts of violence and the Mythos, the mention of Slender Man in this context creates a web of real-life intertextuality, an association between a dark but highly creative and entertaining pastime and a violent reality.

This real-life intertextuality is particularly fascinating because of the processes that gave rise to the Slender Man Mythos. Slender Man is not, after all, of the same order as “real” legendary figures such as Bigfoot or the Chupacabra: unlike these beings, stories about Slender Man did not arise in lived vernacular experience. There was never an atmosphere of belief surrounding the Slender Man creature (at least, not initially), because he was created as an entertaining pastime. But in a statement cited by several news and opinion writers in the wake of the Waukesha stabbing, an administrator for the Creepypasta Wiki (where Weier and Geyser got their information on Slender Man) suggested this might not be entirely the case:

Of course, only a small minority of people (mostly newcomers) on the wiki (and the Internet) truly believe what they read here. And for most people, they will not attempt to



replicate atrocities presented in some of the literature on the wiki. Something like this was bound to happen, considering the size of the Creepypasta community. All it takes is one person to do something insane and radical in the name of someone or something. (Sloshedtrain 2014)

It could be argued, then, that from the perspective of the news media and the other sources I consider here, the underlying deviance present in the Waukesha incident and the events following it lay in the act of believing itself. “Normal” people would never believe in the reality of a tradition known from the start to be fictional; in the absence of belief, there would be no cause for the violent actions that have come to be associated with that tradition. Steps must be taken, by this logic, to ensure that children—who are the most vulnerable to such misguided beliefs—are educated about the unreality of Slender Man and related phenomena. The issue of mental health serves to reinforce the perceived deviance of belief: Geysler’s belief was a symptom of her early-onset schizophrenia (Vielmetti 2015d).<sup>14</sup> And unlike the “War of the Worlds” broadcast and the other fictional media considered above, which (despite disclaimers announcing their fictional status) were presented in singular form in such a way as to “trick” audiences into believing, the truth of Slender Man’s fiction is only a few clicks away. In the case of the broadcasts and films, panic, based on belief, was in some sense a “normal” response, given the authoritative media presentation style of each fictional work; but in the case of Slender Man, belief was framed as deviant.

Like the *Creepypasta Wiki* statement, some responses from within the Slender Man community understandably capitalized on this sense of deviance. In my previous study of Slender Man (Tolbert 2013) I posted questions on the online Slender Nation discussion forum (Slendernation.forumotion.com) about the process of the monster’s creation. I returned to the forum after the Waukesha incident to gauge the reactions of community members. In addition to asking about the impact of the attack on the Mythos, I posed questions to forum members about the reasons why Slender Man in particular was invoked by the attackers (The Angry Scholar 2014). Their responses varied, but some themes emerged, including the supposed inevitability of the attack, concerns about mental healthcare, and parental supervision.

Forum user UncleDark showed a keen awareness of media discourses. He also likened the Waukesha incident to an earlier moral panic:

My heart goes out to the families of all involved.

Too many people will blame “evil influences from the media” or “mental illness,” or both, as if that explains everything. I have to wonder what was going on in the lives of these girls that running away to live with Slendy was better than what they had, worth killing for.

I remember the 1980’s Satanic Panic, which (among other things) included a parental rampage against Dungeons and Dragons. Not HappyFunTimes. I don’t want to see something like it again. (UncleDark)

UncleDark’s mention of the “Satanic Panic” is especially noteworthy. In an important study, Bill Ellis (1989) addresses this widespread fear of Satanic-cult-inspired murders in the 1970s and 1980s, and the specific case of two murdered Ohio teenagers which was linked to these fears. Noting how local events may be assimilated into existing legend complexes, Ellis simultaneously argues that traditional narratives are more than just stories to be analyzed: “They are also maps for action, often violent actions” (218). This type of engagement with a legend text constitutes what folklorists have come to call ostension. Discussing another Internet legend complex, the Incunabula Papers, Michael Kinsella argues that “engineered or constructed legends have the capacity to become traditionalized”—that is, their origins may become obscured and they may be accepted as real legends. Once this occurs, people may engage in ostension, the acting-out of their content (2011:107-8). Legend-tripping, the form of ostension wherein people attempt to experience legends directly, enables people to “concurrently discover and create, or perhaps more correctly, *perform into being*, liminal realms bordering between fantasy and reality” (145; emphasis in original). Kinsella also points out that individual ostensive experiences may become part of the legends themselves (2011:x, 58, 145).

The alternate reality games (ARGs),<sup>15</sup> creepypastas, video games, and other cross-genre multimedia forms in which Slender Man has appeared all partake, to varying degrees, in ostension, thus contributing to the Mythos’ liminal status between reality and fiction. And the crimes committed in Slender Man’s name may also be seen as constituting a kind of ostension. This was undoubtedly the case with the girls accused of the stabbing in Waukesha, who claimed that their actions were motivated by a desire to become “proxies” of Slender Man (a term used within the Mythos to refer to people who are somehow brainwashed into doing the monster’s bidding), and to prove that the monster really exists (Gabler 2014). Here is a clear example, then, of a folkloresque tradition being directly engaged with in precisely the same way as “real” folklore, indicating that there has been considerable

slippage between the categories of "real" and "fake," both in terms of experience and of cultural expression. If ostension brings legend texts more fully into the real world, it has the same effect on texts which may not match conventional definitions of folklore, but which ultimately operate in identical ways.<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, though, this does not suggest that the Slender Man Mythos is somehow to blame for the tragic uses of its content outlined here. Slender Nation forum user NearTheEnd felt that the Waukesha attacks were inevitable, and that Slender Man could as easily have been any other supernatural character:

You have to keep in mind that they were 12. Very easily impressionable. If not Slenderman, it could have been... oh, I dunno... Henry the flying child-eater that Joe Schmo made up on the internet one day that just so happen to catch attention. So on and so forth. Basically, anything of this genre can easily wiggle its way into and really mess up a child's mind. Anything. Vampires, werewolves, creepy-pastas, fears from the fear mythos... Absolutely anything. This time it just so happened to be Slenderman. (NearTheEnd)

Similarly, Magnus96 wrote:

I knew that someone would take their obsession to an extreme, I didn't think something like this would happen but I knew something extreme would happen.

Once again I don't wanna anger anyone with this post but I did see this coming, it was inevitable with all the fanboys/fangirls obsessing over these characters. But I will say that if it wasn't Slendy, then it probably would've been something else, like Vampires, Werewolves, or other mythical creatures. (Magnus96)

On June 8th, user timeobserver2013 posted a link to a story about the Ohio attack, the second to be associated with Slender Man. User eudaemon was the first to respond:

I have to admit, after this second incident, I did consider pulling my stuff down. But that wouldn't actually address the problem at all and really, the cat's out of the bag. I think the mythos has a lot of features that could appeal to people on the edge. A lot of the characters in the series are, themselves, deal with issues like obsession and feelings of hopelessness and people reading could identify with that. Unlike vampires, werewolves, ect [sic], those deal with

giving power to the afflicted in exchange for humanity. A lot of Slender Man stuff is the opposite, it's more like a sickness that wears the characters down, isolates them. In some of the series the characters with the most severe mental issues seem to summon or attract Slender Man making things worse for them but also causing chaos for those around them. I guess that would be a kind of power to inflict some of the pain they are feeling onto those around them. So while I agree that if it wasn't Slender Man it would be something else, I can also see why Slender Man might be appealing to those suffering from issues that make them feel powerless or hopeless. (eudaemon)

While not all users agreed that the attacks were “inevitable,” several focused on mental health as a major issue, and some advocated for greater awareness and sympathy toward people suffering from mental illness. Others called for increased parental involvement and supervision of Internet use. There was concern among some forum users about the negative impact the subsequent events would have on the Mythos, but this was countered by the emerging discourses of mental health and parental supervision.

These are sophisticated responses, revealing both forum users' deep attachment to the Mythos and their awareness of the important social issues raised by the Waukesha attack and events following it. But importantly, belief is linked, in these responses as well as in the media treatment of the case, to mental illness and immaturity. On one level this is appropriate enough, as in all but one instance the alleged perpetrators of the violent acts were minors. Further, as we've seen, Slender Man is generally known to be a fiction—unlike, for instance, Satanic cults, the real existence of which is doubtful but which have been surrounded at various points by an atmosphere of belief. But the relationship of fiction to fact is complex, and not only for children. In a study examining how readers process information from fictional sources, psychologists Deborah Prentice and Richard Gerrig write:

We contend that in many or perhaps most of their experiences with fiction, readers assume that authors are attempting to represent real life. The plot of the story may be fictional, and the characters and events may be fabricated, but basic facts about the world should remain true. Thus readers may be vulnerable to fictional information because they have (misplaced) faith in the truth standard to which authors subscribe. Even though a novel is fictional, they may

assume that there is no reason to doubt its general assertions about the world. (1999:531)

According to Prentice and Gerrig, the belief which fiction can engender in readers is caused by their unwillingness or inability to critically consider the fictional text. They developed their theory in a series of experiments, each of which involved presenting groups of students with short narratives. The narratives all included various truth-claims, some matching real-world facts, and some not. In all cases they found that "[readers] do incorporate fictional information into their real-world knowledge structures, but selectively, with an eye to its potential value for expanding their knowledge base. Compared to fact, fiction seems to be approached with greater credulity and greater abandon, but also with greater selectivity" (542).

One particularly compelling argument Prentice and Gerrig advance is the suggestion that information embedded in narratives labeled as fiction may be more persuasive precisely because, as fiction, these narratives are not subjected to the same critical scrutiny by readers as presumably factual statements (1999:539-40). Moreover, they argue that readers engage actively in narratives by identifying with characters or puzzling out details of the plot; and the more readers engage in these types of activities, the more likely they are to accept the truth claims a narrative makes (543-44). This would seem to suggest that all audiences, regardless of age or mental health, are capable of mistaking fiction for fact—indeed that this is a relatively normal part of engaging with fiction. It is clear how, in the case of a multimedia, multigenre, participatory phenomenon such as Slender Man, which in some manifestations masquerades as "real" folklore and which deliberately plays with the boundaries between "real" and "fictional" worlds, the potential for believing the fiction increases considerably over "normal" fictional texts.<sup>17</sup> And as media scholar Marjorie Kibby has pointed out, "With computer transmitted stories, the computer screen itself lends instant credibility. There is a lingering perception of the computer's accuracy and a conviction that computers do not make mistakes" (2005:764).

That some individuals incorporate fictional information with less selectivity than in the examples described by Prentice and Gerrig reminds us that age and mental health are important factors in cases like the Waukesha attack, precisely as forum users emphasized. More generally, the situation also calls our attention to the fact that belief in fictional narratives is not as outlandish as it may at first appear. Countering the narrative of deviance can help us avoid the mistake of making a "folk devil"—"a visible reminder of what we should not

be”—out of Slender Man or the troubled children who committed violence in his name (Cohen 1972 [2011]:2).

### Conclusion: Emerging into Reality

Michael Saler (2012) has discussed the capacity of certain works of fiction to effectively transcend their own fictionality, to create imaginary worlds that become, through deliberate inhabitation by their audiences, virtual worlds (4-5). Although Saler is generally optimistic about the creative and critical capacities of these other-than-real worlds, he acknowledges that “imaginary worlds can still become confused with reality when the protections of the ironic imagination are undercut—not only by the desires these worlds fulfill, but also by the security they provide. Unlike the messy contingencies of ordinary experience, imaginary worlds, for all their exoticism, are manageable and safe, appealing sanctuaries from life’s uncertainties” (51). Belief is central in the processes Saler outlines, and he distinguishes between “naïve” and “ironic” believers. Naïve believers in his usage are those who buy fictional worlds, as it were, at face value, accepting them as literally true. Ironic believers, conversely, are those who merely *pretend* to believe—though their pretense may be extremely convincing, as in the case of the Sherlock Holmes fans Saler discusses (113-16).

The Slender Man Mythos unquestionably functions as a virtual world in Saler’s sense: it is a fictional universe which countless individuals from around the world have chosen to both inhabit and build upon through creative contributions in the form of videos, games, and written narratives. The overwhelming majority of these contributors and participants also exhibit what Saler would term ironic belief: they know that Slender Man is a fiction, but winkingly create media that pretend otherwise. But as we have seen, not all responses to fictional media are ironic. Despite this, it seems overly reductive to label audience belief in the fictional media considered here—the Slender Man Mythos, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Ghostwatch*, and the rest—as simply naïve. These media exhibit a similar verisimilitude, a characteristic and calculated “realness” that breaks the so-called “fourth wall” of conventional fiction and enables audiences to become participants. All have also been accompanied by varying degrees of belief on the part of their audiences.<sup>18</sup>

But again, a startling difference is that Slender Man, as a massively participatory online phenomenon, has from the moment of his creation been entirely open to dissection and scrutiny by anyone with Internet access. Whereas the more or less straightforward video/audio texts of the other examples are essentially self-contained, only inviting testing

and criticism outside their diegetic frames, Slender Man is wholly visible, the monster’s entire history laid out for public perusal. The same forums that gave rise to the Slender Man meme criticized and encouraged various aspects of its creation: thus its fictive status was expressed in the same metaphorical breath as the narrative fragments that suggested its reality. And as a monster that resides wholly on the Internet, it seems inevitable that Slender Man’s unreality would be discovered almost immediately, as a result of the same search terms that revealed its existence in the first place.

But as an exemplar of the communal processes that constitute what Robert Glenn Howard (2005; 2008; 2009) calls the *vernacular web*, Slender Man is a powerful symbol available for deployment in a wide range of contexts. The participatory nature of the vernacular web amplifies the persuasive power of fictional texts: bombarded with information, much of it presented as truth, readers are left to their own devices to determine what is “real” and what is not. And as Prentice and Gerrig have shown, distinguishing between fiction and fact is not as straightforward a process as it may seem at first. (The popularity of the website Snopes.com, which seeks to prove or disprove the reality of contemporary legends, chain emails, and other folklore genres, is evidence of the continuing persuasive force of Internet texts.) So perhaps the fictional status of the monster is less obvious than it appears.<sup>19</sup> In a June 2014 article for Salon, Andrew O’Hehir wrote:

Go to absolutely any homemade YouTube video that claims to prove the existence of Slenderman (some of which are highly entertaining) and scan the user comments. (Or start typing “Is Slenderman real” in a search bar.) Without even trying, you’ll encounter confused young people by the score, inquiring anxiously whether Slendy really exists or being successfully trolled by other people’s stories about a friend’s cousin’s classmate who read too much Internet Slendermania – ingeniously, that’s how he gets a fix on you — and then disappeared. In a culture where people believe in angels and aliens, believe that 9/11 was an inside job and Sandy Hook a hoax, believe that Barack Hussein Obama is a Muslim socialist, why should 12-year-olds not believe in a rubber-faced, baby-eating monster who looks like a cross between Cthulhu and the villain of an Occupy Wall Street comic book? (When I was that age, my friends and I spent our lunch hours discussing what we would do after we found a portal into Narnia.) (O’Hehir 2014)

Another reason for this confusion may be the Mythos' overt attempt to mimic "traditional" folklore as already discussed. In adopting the trappings of legend, the Mythos' creators imbued it with an additional layer of authority. Individual narratives within the Mythos are not only making a kind of truth-claim: they are also (supposedly) backed up by many similar experiences, spread through time and space, attested in the folklore record as (fictional) legends and personal experience narratives. It is this folkloresque quality, the strategic appeal to real-world folklore, which makes the Slender Man meme especially participatory, uniquely available for direct experience in numerous forms. In my previous study of Slender Man I argued, "Reverse ostension is [...] an act of reverse engineering: *an effort to arrive back at the sign*, that is, to create a narrative tradition by correlating and connecting fragmentary narratives (themselves representations of experience, albeit fictional ones)" (Tolbert 2013:6, emphasis in original). Following John McDowell (1982:122), this argument presupposes that traditional narratives have an experiential core: that they relate events supposed to have taken place. Ostensive acts in turn assume that these experiences, or variations or continuations of them, can be repeated; as Kinsella (2011) notes, such ostensive engagement with legend texts can loop back into the legend itself. He coins the term "legend ecologies" to refer to "the interactions between legends, legend-telling situations and communities, the material means and technologies of communication, and the environments throughout which legends circulate," as well as intertextual connections and debates about legends' veracity by the legend-tellers themselves (5). This is a particularly useful formulation in that it calls our attention not only to the contexts in which legends appear and through which they are communicated, but to the larger-scale, macro process of "legending" itself, involving not only the creation and performance of individual texts but the elaborate construction of entire legend-oriented communities.<sup>20</sup> The Slender Man Mythos may be primarily a collection of "texts," but the larger Slender Man community constitutes a network of individuals and groups involved in creating and commenting on those texts; thus the "ecology" of Slender Man includes all of the various Internet-based forums and social networks dedicated to him and related phenomena, as well as the individual texts and ARGs hosted on sites such as YouTube, and all of the communicative processes by which human actors tie these locations and texts together. It also includes the violent acts done in Slender Man's name: as O'Hehir observed, "The pathetic notion that those girls would prove their devotion to this imaginary evil god, or prove his existence to skeptics



(as one suspect purportedly told the cops), by committing murder was, so to speak, their contribution to the Slenderman mythos” (2014).

Folkloresque texts, then, can become a part of legend ecologies as surely as “real” folklore. The intertextual links that form between the new text and its real-world analogues may be one source of the potent rhetorical force such texts can muster. For example, the Blair Witch indexes real-world traditions of witches and their curses. *Ghostwatch* likewise echoes any number of haunted-house and poltergeist legends. These are what Michael Dylan Foster (2016b) calls “fuzzy allusions,” a central characteristic of the folkloresque and, I suggest, a major reason for its discursive potency. And if the capacity of such texts to challenge the fiction/reality binary remains in doubt, another recent event may tip the scale toward belief: in early 2015 a British paranormal enthusiast linked several ghostly sightings in Staffordshire to Slender Man. Significantly, the sightings occurred in an area called Cannock Chase, a place associated with other supernatural legends as well (Cassady 2015). The fictional status of Slender Man seems lost in this account, but this is precisely the point: whether “real” or not, “believed” or not, the invocation of his name in this context connects this local, physical place and its preexisting legends with the largely digital, but increasingly corporeal, Slender Man Mythos.

The cycle by which folkloresque texts are reabsorbed into vernacular tradition seems to be greatly facilitated by ostensive engagement with the text in the real world.<sup>21</sup> This level of engagement represents the final removal of the apparent barrier between fiction and reality, and between the folkloresque—which begins life as a known product engineered by specific individuals to resemble existing traditions—and folklore.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Another part of the film's promotional campaign was the website [www.blairwitch.com](http://www.blairwitch.com), which further blurred the fiction/reality border by fleshing out the Blair Witch legend and providing viewers access to fictional "official" documents about the missing filmmakers (Harris 2001:77-78).

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of the film's truth-claims and audience responses, see Harris (2001). See also Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas (2007:217-19). For my own part, I can't say with any certainty just when I discovered the truth of the film's falsity, but I can say that this discovery in no way lessened my love of *The Blair Witch Project*.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Hayes and Battles (2011) question the degree to which listeners panicked during the broadcast. In contrast to studies that emphasize listener panic, Hayes and Battles suggest "that the primary audience response was an effort at communication through social and technologically mediated networks. Listeners drew on these networks to interrogate the meaning of the broadcast, share information with others and consult authorities. In this way, they acted as participants in an increasingly interconnected world with multiple nodes of exchange and communication that, while highly centralized, still opened up spaces for public response and intervention" (53). Regardless of the extent of the "panic," the episode illustrates the potential for believable fictions to motivate real-world action and discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Leeder also likens *Ghostwatch* to both *The Blair Witch Project* and the "War of the Worlds" broadcast, as well as contemporary ghost-hunting shows and other films in the found-footage genre.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, I am not referring to the actual existence or nonexistence of these types of beings; I am only indicating that these particular works and the specific characters and creatures they contain are fictions.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Kitta explores the ultimate effects of this process in her contribution to this special issue.

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere I advance a similar argument in regards to popular treatments of supernatural belief (Tolbert, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Tim Evans (2014) made this point particularly well in a *New York Times* opinion piece. Media scholar Shira Chess argued a similar point in an interview with the *Washington Post* (Dewey 2014), as did the present author in an interview with a BBC reporter (Parkinson 2014).

<sup>9</sup> "Real" in this case means, again, having actual traditional existence in real-world folk narratives. This is in contrast to "real" in the sense of the literal reality of the supernatural content of those legends, a shade of meaning that came into play after the creature's creation.

<sup>10</sup> Many stories also focused on the recovery of the victim, who was later identified on an episode of the primetime current events program *20/20* (Effron and Robinson 2014).

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Jack's alarmist tone did not go unnoticed by journalists. *Washington Post* writer Caitlin Dewey (2014) references Jack's "dark and wicked things" comment and argues, "The Internet, truth be told, has very little to do with it." Dewey goes on to claim that blaming the Internet masks real issues such as mental health and parental neglect. Abigail Jones of *Newsweek* likewise cites the melodramatic passage, suggesting that "Diluted advice to parents and ill-informed attempts at making sense of this case won't get us far. We do not know enough about the two girls' mental states, friendship, families and backgrounds to generalize about their motivations. And their act is so unusual that it tells us little about our daughters" (Jones 2014).

<sup>12</sup> For a pertinent discussion of the broader moral panic surrounding girls' Internet use, see Cassell and Cramer (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Though as Cohen emphasizes, moral panics often do depend on the creation of fake, or at least greatly exaggerated, news accounts. Using the term *inventory* to refer to the media's portrayal of a given deviant individual or group (1972 [2011]:24), Cohen

notes that such portrayals often employ convenient fictions: “Built into the very nature of deviance, inventories in modern society are elements of fantasy, selective misperception and the deliberate creation of news. The inventory is not reflective stock-taking but manufactured news” (41).

<sup>14</sup> The relationship between schizophrenia and supernatural belief seems to be well-documented by psychologists. See Hergovich et al. (2008) for a review of the literature. Importantly, though, in a somewhat older study, Williams and Irwin (1991) argue, “It is tentatively proposed that the endorsement of paranormal beliefs by believers is facilitated by an attempt to structure their world in terms of personally charged and somewhat magical notions of causality. While believers largely reject the notion of chance they do not necessarily ‘misunderstand’ the operation of randomness. Rather, believers may be exhibiting a distance from their causal ideas that is indicative of mature cognitive functioning; magical causal ideas may thus exist side by side with ‘logic’. That is, the appeal to magical notions and their generalisation to paranormal belief systems might well represent a rational (if deviant) attempt to achieve a metacognitive understanding of the world” (1347). Notably, Anissa Weier, the other girl accused in the Slender Man attack—who was not diagnosed with schizophrenia—recanted her belief in the monster (Vielmetti 2015c; 2015d). For her part, Geyser’s delusions were reduced after she received treatment (Vielmetti 2016).

<sup>15</sup> ARGs are complex game-narratives that cut across multiple genres and media and typically require players to take some action in the “real” (non-digital) world (Kinsella 2011:60-61; McNeill 2012:88).

<sup>16</sup> For more on ostension and its relevance to the Slender Man Mythos, see Andrew Peck’s contribution to this issue.

<sup>17</sup> Significantly, Prentice and Gerrig point out in a footnote that the fantasy genre may be particularly persuasive: “Note that the fantasy elements in children’s stories like *Peter Pan* and *The Wizard of Oz* increase their distance from real-world concerns even relative to other forms of fiction, and thus liberate viewers to indulge their emotional responses fully. We expect that animation functions similarly” (1999:544n5). It could be argued that Slender Man and similar supernatural-themed contemporary folklore likewise inspire a more emotional than logical response. On the potential of other forms of Internet folklore to erode the real/virtual or real/fictional distinction, see also Blank (2013:47-50).

<sup>18</sup> In this way they resemble the literary hoaxes by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe that Saler discusses (2012:61-62).

<sup>19</sup> On the interplay of “reality” and “fiction” in scholarly (specifically, sociological) analysis, as well as in the context of schizophrenia and the emergence of the discipline of psychoanalysis, see Gordon (2008: 36-41).

<sup>20</sup> Julian Holloway describes a similar “doing of legend” in the context of ghost tours, during which “the affective milieu of the legend trip can assemble a sense of being engrossed in the supernatural possibility of the city” (2010:629).

<sup>21</sup> For an example of this process, see Peretti (2016). Peretti discusses how the popular character Superman becomes folklore through fan engagement in such acts as joking and cosplay.

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