

## Building a Legend: The 'Skinny' on the Slender Man

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In 1950, the folklorist Richard Dorson expressed great dismay at the encroachment of popular tales into the study of folklore. Dorson cited the case of the North American folk hero Paul Bunyan as an example. Although Paul Bunyan did originate in the folktales of loggers in Eastern Canada and the Northeastern United States, his status as a cultural icon is the direct result of a reworking of the lore used in an advertising campaign in the early 20th century. Dorson claimed that although Paul Bunyan was at one point a genuine folkloric figure, the Paul Bunyan most people knew was essentially a commercial gimmick, and therefore not worthy of study by folklorists. He coined the term "fakelore" to describe this phenomenon (cf. Stekert 180).

Fakelore contrasts with folklore in a number of ways. Firstly, while folklore arises naturally and reflects the values of a group of people, fakelore is created consciously in order to reinforce dominant cultural ideologies. Folklore is imaginative and malleable and may change significantly from telling to telling, whereas fakelore is associated with standardization of form. With fakelore, there is also an emphasis on mass-mediated transmission, especially through electronic media—at the time, Dorson was referring to radio and television. This is perhaps the key difference Dorson saw between the two types of lore, claiming that authentic folklore was, ideally, transmitted on a person-to-person level.

A lot has changed in North American culture in the six decades since Dorson proposed this dichotomy. Cities have grown and become more culturally diverse. Television has become more ubiquitous, with a greater variety and selection of programming. And, of course, the internet has emerged and become an everyday part of many people's lives. The face of folklore has changed in light of this cultural progress, begging the question: *is Dorson's distinction still a meaningful one?*

In June of 2009 a thread entitled "Create Paranormal Images" appeared on the message boards of SomethingAwful.com, a humour website. The first two pages of the thread saw quite an enthusiastic response, with most altered pictures depicting strange ghostly figures and UFOs. Some pictures included other legendary figures such as Bigfoot. Most users included messages with their photographs, which added a storytelling element to the images.

Two days after the thread had been created, a user named Victor Surge posted two black and white photographs. The first depicted a group of unsmiling children with a tall, faceless figure in the background. The caption beneath read: " 'we didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time...' / 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead" (Victor Surge [a]). The second depicted a smiling young girl climbing a slide, with other young girls laughing and playing nearby. In the background, in the shade of a tree, is a tall figure whose arms appear to branch off into long tentacles. The caption beneath this one read:

One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as "The Slender Man". Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as

evidence.

1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986.  
(Victor Surge [a])

At the requests of a couple other posters, Victor Surge posted two more pictures of the Slender Man the next day, and others soon followed suit with their own altered photographs, drawings, and short stories. It was around this point that back-stories and alleged "real accounts" of the Slender Man began to appear:

There are woodcuts dated back to the 16th century in Germany featuring a tall, disfigured man with only white spheres where his eyes should be. They called him "Der Großmann"[Sic], the tall man. He was a fairy who lived in the Black Forest. Bad children who crept into the woods at night would be chased by the slender man, and he wouldn't leave them alone until he caught them, or the child told the parents what he or she had done. [...]  
(Thoreau-Up [b])

I know of an old Romanian fairy tale [...] It might be based on a particular event, or perhaps it is an extrapolation from existing Slender Man stories. The translation I'm most familiar with goes a bit like this: [...]  
(TombsGrave)

I work in a radio newsroom, and I saw this come down a few months back. Didn't think much of it then, but all this "Slender Man" stuff made me think of it. [...]  
(ScottyBomb)

I find this tall man stuff Fascinating and wanted to learn more. So I chcked [sic] around and found some really cool stuff. This was the scariest cause [sic] it occurred so close to where I live: [...]  
(Viet Timh)

As the thread continued, posts pertaining to the Slender Man practically monopolized conversation. A meta-discussion about the Slender Man emerged, in which users gave their opinions about what made the figure scary and discussed the possibility of making the Slender Man a "proper urban legend" (Nashie 0). One user

created a Wikipedia page compiling much of the 'information' from the thread, although this was quickly pulled from Wikipedia (apsouthern). Others hatched plans to slowly establish the figure of the Slender Man on paranormal and conspiracy theory message boards to lend credibility to any later reference pages (Leperflesh). Still others discussed calling in to the radio program *Coast to Coast AM*, known for its frequent paranormal content (JossiRossi, Donny Brook).

On June 18, a user named ce gars posted a story about the strange behaviour and disappearance of his friend Alex while shooting a student film (ce gars). He posted the same story in video form on Youtube two days later under the name MarbleHornets, as well as the first entry of a series of videos allegedly recovered from the missing friend (MarbleHornets). The video, which featured a Slender Man-like figure that later came to be known as "The Operator," was met with interest by SomethingAwful members, and other videos soon followed, sometimes featuring the figure, but often simply hinting at his presence.

The thread that gave birth to the Slender Man has been inactive since February of 2010. In the eight months it was active, it accumulated over 1,800 posts, encompassing media such as photographs, text, animations, drawings, audio, and video. The MarbleHornets Youtube channel continues to post video entries telling Alex's story on an intermittent schedule; there are at this time 74 videos on the channel, the most recent having been posted less than a week ago. MarbleHornets is generally credited with bringing Slender Man into greater public consciousness on the internet, and several other Youtube users have created their own ongoing Slenderman vlogs (notably EverymanHYBRID and TribeTwelve). There are

numerous stories and accounts of the Slender Man on various blogs and websites, at least two wiki-based Slender Man encyclopedias, and an online Slender Man community that has over 1000 members ("Slender Nation"). Most recently, a free computer game called *Slender: The Eight Pages* was released in June 2012. It was received and reviewed well, and a paid sequel to the game called *Slender: The Arrival* is currently in development (Matulef). As well, the first 52 Marble Hornets video entries have recently become available for sale on DVD.

There are a number of reasons 'Slenderlore' might be considered a contemporary legend. It's not difficult to imagine a group of adolescents sitting around a campfire at night, scaring each other with tales about the Slender Man in the same way they might about a hitchhiking ghost or a hook-handed killer. In fact, this is almost exactly how the lore functions online. Furthermore, the Slender Man is recognizable *as* the Slender Man to a large number of people—that is to say, he has a form and a group to which he belongs. The Slender Man figure is, broadly speaking, similar to a number of figures found in either folklore or popular culture. Comparisons have been made between the Slender Man and Cabadath of the Chzo Mythos game series (SirSamVimes), the "Gentlemen" antagonists of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Wonder Bra), and the wendigo of Algonquian myth (ZALGO!), as well as others. More generally, Slenderlore contains the idea that there is "something dangerous out there," an idea found in many contemporary legends. This category greatly varies from legend to legend in regards to what is dangerous, what the danger specifically is, the location signified by "out there," and so on. Within Slenderlore, these factors also vary, depending on who is telling the tale.

Despite these similarities, there are two obstacles that might prevent Slenderlore's classification as legend, and they are big ones. Firstly, there is no real *story* to the Slender Man. According to Elliot Oring, a legend needs a narrative—that is, a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end (128). While it is true that many users of the SomethingAwful forum have created their own stories about the Slender Man, these are quite clearly literary endeavours, often including literary devices not usually found in folklore (for example, one user presented their narrative in the form of a transcript of an audio recording that did not actually exist [geekchic]). There is no particular privileged narrative surrounding the figure, or even anything that roughly approximates such. The Slender Man is basically predicated on two things: his unnatural physical form, and the idea that he is somehow dangerous or harmful. Every description of the Slender Man seems to hit on at least one point of contention, and there are plenty to choose from: does the Slender Man have extra appendages or not? Does he actively hunt down his victims, or passive-aggressively stalk them until they go insane? How tall *is* he? And is he in fact a he? The only description of the Slender Man that would not contradict with some other account would indicate that it is tall, it lurks, and it's bad news.

In at least one aspect, Slenderlore has more in common with works of fiction than with legends, for it has a clearly traceable origin. The lore should therefore have a definitive and authoritative voice, just as one might expect of any authorial text. In this case, the authority should (in theory) belong to Victor Surge. However, this is not the case. Victor Surge's original Slender Man (as depicted in his first handful of accounts) had tentacle-like appendages and impaled his victims on trees (Victor Surge [b]). Other early features picked up on by others included his presence

at locations later consumed by fire (LeechCode5), his abductions of children (Thoreau-Up [b], Warm und Fuzzy, Mr. 47), and the insanity he is apparently capable of inflicting on those who encounter him (BooDoug187, Viet Timh). Since the MarbleHornets videos began gaining attention, theirs has become the most widely known Slender Man: a tall figure in a dark suit, with strange proportions and no face, who stalks people with an ambiguous malevolence (although it should be mentioned that some of these former features—e.g., the fires and the insanity—have been briefly touched upon in certain MarbleHornets entries).

*The Slender Man Wiki* notes that some Slenderlore enthusiasts adhere to "Surgism"—that is, the view that Victor Surge's Slenderlore is the scariest, and that the more mainstream versions have strayed too far from his original portrayal of the Slender Man as a monster ("Surgism"). Opponents of Surgism counter that MarbleHornets' take on the Slender Man occurred early enough in the lore's creation that it should be accepted as legitimate ("Surgism"). Surgists are apparently a minority in the community, given the number of blogs and videos influenced by the MarbleHornets tradition. It is unknown whether or not Victor Surge is himself officially a Surgist ("Surgism"), but his early posts suggest that this isn't very likely; at several points throughout the thread, he encourages people to run with their ideas, and expresses appreciation for even those depictions that differ from his own (Victor Surge [c], [d]).

As Oring notes, the authority of a source depends (at least partially) upon the source's social position (131). Social position in a message board community is difficult to determine (especially as an outsider who is not a part of the community),

but it may be based on factors such as duration of active membership, post count, helpfulness, "reputation points" (given from member to member), and respect for other members. These factors are hard to quantify, and may or may not be present in certain communities. Lacking this information, we must assume that every member is of *roughly* equal status—with the exceptions of clear hierarchical positions such as forum moderators or administrators.

The negotiation of Slenderlore on the SomethingAwful forum exemplifies this principle quite well. Contributing members simply gave their own accounts of the Slender Man, sometimes building on others' ideas and sometimes branching off, but always acknowledging the equal status of contributions. Comments in which members expressed dissatisfaction with certain elements of the lore (e.g., "I think the Slender Man's tentacles need to be a little less obvious. It seems a lot less freakier [sic] if you can see them so clearly" [Thoreau-Up (a)]) were overwhelmingly presented as opinions or preferences rather than doctrine that needed to be followed.

Unless the Marble Hornets story is considered the definitive narrative, then, it's hard to see what the legend of the Slender Man encompasses. Yet there are also problems with lending authority to this version. For one, the story is ongoing, and as such does not as of yet have an ending. Furthermore, the Marble Hornets story is in many ways too specific to be a folkloric tale. This version has been influenced as much by "found footage" horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) as it has been by Slenderlore itself, and there are various aspects of the videos that are too cinematic to translate well into oral



transmission—for one, the all-important "scare factor" of *seeing* the Slender Man with our own eyes. The video format of the story also means that people might recognize the actors or filming locations, or be able to disprove information mentioned in the videos. In short, we are given too much information that can be easily debunked.

This is the second major issue with Slenderlore as legend. The thorough documentation of the Slender Man's creation makes it difficult to believe that the lore *could be* true, and it is therefore problematic to group the lore with other contemporary legends, of which there is an element of possibility. Every major information source for the Slender Man lists the SomethingAwful forum as its origin, and the cast members of the Marble Hornets videos are listed by name on the Internet Movie Database. This has been a very conscious concern for some Slenderlore creators, who have attempted to legitimize the legend by explaining the Slender Man as a *tulpa*, a figure borrowed from Tibetan Buddhist ideas and described as a being brought into physical existence through collective belief (I ; "The Tulpa Effect").

It seems fairly obvious at this point that Slenderlore does not cleanly fit the standard definition of folklore. Does this mean that it is fakelore? Dorson's dichotomy is problematic in the case of Slenderlore, especially in its implication that the electronic transmission of fakelore undermines the role of imagination (Fox 253). Slenderlore is situated heavily on the internet, but does this really make it any less imaginative? Dorson also argues that fakelore should not be included in the study of folklore because it ignores the "scientific folklore procedure"; that is, no

informants are given, no verbatim transcripts are made, and there are no comparative notes (101). The same cannot be said of Slenderlore, in which the informants provide *their own* transcripts that can be easily and readily compared with those of others. Finally, the concept of fakelore relies on the lore being institutionally situated. Although this could foreseeably happen in the future (for example, if the upcoming commercial *Slender* computer game alters the existing lore, or if a mainstream Slender Man book or movie is ever produced), this is not the state of current Slenderlore, nor does it represent the circumstances under which it arose.

Historically, there has been some debate about technology's effect on folklore: does it detract from the traditional communication techniques under which folklore thrives, or simply add another colour, so to speak, to our communicative palette? Alan Dundes has noted that not only has technology increased the speed of folkloric transmission, but also that *technology itself* has become the topic of certain folklore (32). This is true for many contemporary legends, and Slenderlore is a prime example; the Slender Man is, after all, a figure grounded in photography, and some versions of the lore (including Marble Hornets') incorporate technological motifs, such as the depiction of electronic equipment malfunctions as signs that the Slender Man is near.

How, then, should we classify the Slender Man? It should be noted that Slenderlore is not a unique exception to an otherwise sound distinction. Popular sites such as "Creepypasta" and "The SCP Foundation" (see references) also house user-written stories, often presented as real events. As Alternate Reality Games

(ARGs) become increasingly popular as marketing tools, they also become popular as mediums for storytelling, in which the lines between reality and fiction are blurred, as they are in legendry. Found footage-style videos are plentiful on YouTube—many of which, like Slenderlore, blend the conventions of legendry and mainstream horror films.

Dorson's "folklore/fakelore" opposition may appear to be helpful in describing internet-generated lore, but in reality it is not. Slenderlore, and other lore like it, occupies a strange liminal space that shares features with folklore and literature, but cannot fully be called either. The evolution of technology continues to create new mediums through which folklore can be transmitted, and it is perhaps natural that in light of this evolution, our definitions of folkloric terms need to be adjusted. User-created internet lore can give us many of the same sorts of insights about culture that more traditional folklore can, and to ignore this based on slight shortcomings of terminology would be a great loss.

## References

[Note: All forum post timestamps listed below are what appeared during research as a non-member of the forum, accessing the pages from a CST (UTC -6:00) location. Timestamps sometimes differ when accessed from varying time zones.]

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