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SPECIAL

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## Why the Slenderman legend confronts us with our most modern, scariest unknown

*Part of Slenderman's appeal is the ambiguity of his face and non-descript uniform. It makes him like a screen on a blank slate that we can project our fears onto*

August  
23,  
2018  
AM  
Hot  
Last  
Updated  
August



It happened to a friend of a friend of mine ...

Their son flushed his pet alligator down the toilet. Years later a city worker was attacked by a full-grown gator in the sewer.

Another friend told me about a girl they knew who got bit by a spider. The bite swelled up into a huge boil, and when it burst, thousands of baby spiders crawled out of her face.

A girl who went to my cousin's school said Bloody Mary into the mirror three times, and the next morning, she was found dead.

For most of human history, stories of this type were shared by word of mouth, around a campfire. Embers fly towards the stars on a clear night. Hungry

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mosquitoes search for exposed flesh and curious moths reflect light as they bounce overhead. Warm and safe, everyone around a campfire shares their horror story, unbelievable tales they heard from a friend of a friend.

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campfire for the blue glow of phones and computer screens. Person-to-person storytelling has been replaced by message boards and social media, and contemporary urban legends have evolved to reflect our new technological age. Along the way, the myths themselves have also become inseparable from the technology used to transmit them.

Urban legends are nothing new. Nor are their reliance on technology. The term itself is a bit of a giveaway: urban, when contrasted to rural, has traditionally been equated to industry. It connotes densely populated areas where reliance on mechanization is an almost perverted way of life that threatens the peaceful and virtuous rural settings on its outskirts. The myths associated with this sinister backdrop are presented as true stories, typically with grim, gross-out or humorous elements.



While those living in the country may spread these tall tales in order to justify their decision to stay put, city-dwellers share these stories as a means of confronting the anxieties of modern life without necessarily having to face persistent fears head-on. Even in the pre-internet age, tales like “the killer is calling from inside the house” or “the cat in the microwave” play on uncertainties that emerge through our increased reliance on technology.

With the internet, urban legends have become further veiled under a guise of anonymity. We are no longer listening to stories by trusted friends and acquaintances around a campfire, but rather, random and unknown people on the internet. In fact, there is a whole culture of creating and sharing these kinds of viral stories. The new user-generated urban legends are called Creepypastas, a play on words that references the way these stories are copied and pasted from one online forum to another.

The most infamous Creepypasta is Slenderman (also stylized as Slender man or Slender Man), a popular internet legend that captured the public's

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imagination on an unprecedented scale when two teenage girls committed a heinous act in his name, bringing a reality-check to what has often been dismissed as harmless tales. On May 31, 2014, a 12-year-old girl from Waukesha, Wisconsin was stabbed 19 times by her two best friends. It was

26 share    

Partly cloudy  
Feels like 26 °C

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the stuff of urban legends regrettably come to life. The two girls claimed they were acting as proxies for Slenderman, an internet boogeyman, and if they did not sacrifice their friend, he would come after them. In addition to inspiring months of media coverage and local outrage, the story was also the subject of a 2017 HBO true crime documentary, Beware the Slenderman.

SPECIAL

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JUSTINE SMITH



Anissa Weier, one of two Wisconsin girls who tried to kill a classmate to win favour with a fictional horror character named Slender Man, is led into the Waukesha County Court for her sentencing hearing, Thursday, Dec. 21, 2017, in Waukesha, Wis. *Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel via AP*

Twitter

The documentary presents the two girls as suffering from a shared psychosis at the time of the killings. They were highly co-dependent and spent a lot of time reading and discussing Creepypastas – in particular, stories about a thin, faceless, unnaturally tall humanoid wearing a suit, called Slenderman. No longer able to distinguish between reality and the things that they had read, the young girls acted out in a new reality they had created for themselves: one that combined their online and real lives into one.

While the past is littered with feeble attempts to understand what prompts a young person to turn wicked – rebellion is caused by rock and roll, hip hop gives kids bad attitudes, violent video games beget school shootings – the horrific irony in this case is that there is a literal boogeyman at the centre of this story. Part of Slenderman's appeal is the ambiguity of his featureless face and non-descript uniform. It makes him like a screen, a blank slate that we can project our fears onto.

For many parents, the Waukesha attack was a confirmation of their worst fears about an unsupervised internet. Lose track of what your kids are doing online and they might fall prey to violence. While some argued that the Slenderman story was no different than a zombie or vampire tale, the truth is, Creepypastas like Slenderman purposefully toy with plausibility. Unlike your

Saturday

Sunday

Monday

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average vampire legend, there is an element of reality that sets Slenderman apart from other monsters that go bump in the night. [Check out our Video Centre for a brand new video experience. Learn More](#) →

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Morgan Geysler is led into the courtroom at Waukesha County Court, Friday, Aug. 19, 2016 in Waukesha, Wis. Geysler, one of two girls accused of trying to kill a 12-year-old classmate to please horror character Slender Man two years ago pleaded not guilty Friday by reason of insanity. *Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel via AP*

Slenderman was born in 2009, when a popular message board hosted a paranormal Photoshop contest. A user, going by the handle “Victor Surge,” inserted a shadowy figure stalking children in the background of two black and white photographs. This spectre had long limbs, no face and tentacles sprouting from his back. Accompanying the images were captions that alluded to dead children, madness and missing people. The photographs were embraced by the community and quickly spread throughout the internet on similar forums.

From there, the legend of Slenderman was built collectively through fan-fictions, Photoshops and doctored videos. Its mythology thrived on the blurred line between reality and fiction, reminiscent of the new wave of horror cinema that began in the late 1990s with films like the Blair Witch Project. Presented as a true found footage film, the movie was presented as the remnants of a failed documentary in which filmmakers went missing while investigating the legend of the Blair Witch.

Shot with cheap equipment and unknown actors, the film’s marketing team set up a fake website in which the “filmmakers” presented their desire to make a documentary alongside a timeline of their research on the legendary Blair Witch. In the era of dial-up modems, limited bandwidth and unreliable search engines, the marketing campaign flourished. Mixing a primal fear of the woods with the technological possibilities of affordable cameras and the early Internet, the Blair Witch Project became the perfect urban legend for the modern age.

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August  
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2018  
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I'm pretty sure I have posted a few of these individually but here's the whole collection  
under [Creepypasta](#)  
#creepypasta #slendervideo #slenderman #j #laughingjack #ticcitoby #bendrowned #ej  
#eyelessjack #jeffthekiller #masky #hoodie #marblehornets Credits to the artist

A post shared by Creepypasta (@\_creepypasta\_night\_) on Aug 21, 2018 at 9:40pm PDT

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The myth surrounding Slenderman focuses on similar anxieties, while also creating a type of self-perpetuating loop that prompts those most inundated with the legend to spread it. One way this is done is through Slenderman video games, which have been instrumental in growing the Slenderman legend. In the two most popular Slenderman games – Slender: The Eight Pages and its sequel Slender: The Arrival – the more information you gather, the more likely Slenderman is to target you.

We also see this in the alternate reality games (ARGs) that utilize a Slenderman narrative. ARGs blend components of video, text and sound to tell stories that simultaneously rely on player involvement to shape what's happening in real time. Think of it as a choose your own adventure influenced by the wider internet community in which videos are encrypted with secrets and codes that players have to decode in order to advance the plot.

One of the most popular of these ARGs is a YouTube series called Marble Hornets. In a series of more than 100 videos, most just a couple of minutes long, users follow along as a young student mentally unravels while being pursued by Slenderman. Throughout his journey, one message is consistent: those who seek to learn more about Slenderman are most likely to become his next victims.

*The Slenderman phenomenon has also  
weaponized the search for more  
information*

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If urban legends do indeed exist as a means of indirectly confronting our fears over modern life, Slenderman can be seen as representing our concerns with



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and fiction, muddying the waters that separate our existence in the natural universe and our avatars in the online world, the Slenderman phenomenon has also weaponized the search for more information.

Traditionally, urban legends have been stories that teeter between funny and scary while seeming to take the shape of a cautionary tale. At its roots, however, this form of folklore has always targeted technology or mechanization. The latest step in its evolution, as so eerily exemplified by Slenderman, not only takes on our unexpressed fear pertaining to technology, but it uses that technology – that very fear – to propagate itself.

Making this legend even more terrifying is that it began as an online fiction, but played itself out in real life with the 2014 Waukesha stabbing. While the details of the murder are gruesome and truly harrowing, there is an added element of horror attached to it. The incident reveals how ill-equipped we are to deal with the ambiguities of our newly augmented lives in which the physical world and online reality is no longer at odds, but blended together in one.

In this, the Slenderman legend confronts us with our most modern, scariest unknown: how do we know who we are when we're not entirely sure in what world – physical or digital – we're living?

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JUSTINE SMITH

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August 23, 2018 8:00



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