Horror Memes and Digital Culture



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Largely lacking geographic or temporal boundaries and allowing almost total anonymity, the Internet itself is a gothic space. Its enabling of free communication and largely limitless content, as well as real-life instances of criminals using the Internet to stalk or groom victims, have given rise to urban legends that characterise the Internet as a dangerous global phenomenon. Stories of cursed images, "red rooms" or live streams of actual torture and murder, and encounters on the famed dark web merge anxieties about the Internet's capabilities with fictional media that may be valued alongside more traditional media like literature and film. Yet these media modes are not identical. Internet-based gothic and horror media, particularly those that find wide success, are understood at the intersection of folklore and participatory culture.[1] Rather than passive consumption, participatory culture is achieved within communities, particularly those associated with fandoms or interests, when members are able to create, share, and discuss artefacts without strict gatekeeping.[2] These participatory communities remain distinct from commercial creators, but their media contributions are no less valuable to the genres in which they work.

Horror memes have arisen as a particularly significant manifestation of this intersection. Comprising several modes and limitless in their transmission, these memes utilise gothic and horror tropes, styles, and imagery. Often beginning as discrete creations within larger digital communities, they transform through the work of multiple participants and spread across platforms over time, achieving varying degrees of popularity outside either digital communities or the genre, or both. This chapter outlines the creation and transmission of horror memes with particular regard for their place in digital folklore and, respectively, participatory culture. These intersections are also examined for the unique considerations for ownership they invoke, as well as for the cultural discourses at work in the memes' evolutions.

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C. Bloom (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33136-8_58

It would be impossible to consider all horror memes here. Therefore, a sampling is used. The selected memes exemplify key elements of the phenomenon altogether.

The creature that would become the Rake first appeared in 2005 on the social media platform 4chan in the subforum /b/. In a thread entitled "hey /b/ lets make a new monster", the original poster provides a description of a pale, blank-faced creature that is "Humanoid, about six feet tall when standing, but usually crouches and walks on all fours" and simply "watches the observer" unless provoked.[3] Interest in the creature inspired further posts, which migrated off-site as part of a larger phenomenon that would be labelled *creepypasta* (discussed later in this chapter). The following year, Brian Somerville elaborated on the creature on a personal blog (now reprinted on the Creepypasta Wiki), presenting a series of brief anecdotes of encounters with the creature from 1691 to 2003, with a note that similar stories have been documented beginning in the twelfth century.[4] One commonality in these fictional artefacts is the appearance of the Rake in the victim's sleep and, later, their sense of continued assault by him. In "A Suicide Note: 1964", the writer relates a "fear of what I might next wake to experience" and, in another note, tells the addressee, "I have prayed for you. He spoke your name". In the 2003 narrative, a woman's husband and daughter die in a car accident after being terrorised by the Rake, whom the child identifies by name. This narrative ends with the woman's discovery that the Rake had previously appeared in her home and a fear that he will return. Through fan-generated art and videos, the Rake has been depicted as a deformed human, a humanoid monster, and an animal that looks like a man-dog hybrid.

Somerville's version of the creature gained wide acceptance, and he is thus credited as one of its creators. His expanded concept for the Rake establishes its human origin as the "lone survivor" of an exiled community that ate their own dead to avoid starvation.[5] As a prominent early example of the digital horror meme, the Rake has a clear influence over many memes that followed it and has continued to appear in digital horror media.

While the image that provided a basis for the Jeff the Killer meme appeared on a Japanese website in 2005 under the label "white powder" and in a separate video uploaded to YouTube as a fake broadcast in 2007, the first known Jeff the Killer narrative appeared on the forum Newgrounds.com in 2008 when user killerjeff posted the infamous image, claiming it to be his own. Writing in the third person in the original post before switching to first person in the subsequent comments, killerjeff describes the character as "like a Bloody Mary game" in which a person wanting to see Jeff goes into a closet, chants "He's in here with me", then speaks Jeff's name.[6] In the comments, killerjeff explains the character's appearance as the result of an accident with bleach as he cleaned his bathtub.

While killerjeff's treatment of the character has a flippant tone, Jeff the Killer's mythos became more sinister as it developed through other fan-creators. Subsequent Jeff narratives imbued him with emotional turmoil or supernatural powers, some attaching "Go to sleep" to the entity as a spoken catchphrase to his victims just before their murder. The mythos departed more dramatically from its

origin in 2011 with the addition of a longform text narrative that was posted to the Creepypasta Wiki. Here, Jeff is reimagined as a thirteen-year-old boy who begins to experience strange pains and psychological disturbances after his family moves to a new town. Jeff and his brother, Liu (also originally created by killerjeff), are victimised by local bullies, who douse Jeff in bleach and alcohol and set him on fire. Driven mad, Jeff glories in his newly deformed skin, burns off his own eyelids so that he can always see his "beautiful" face, and cuts his mouth into a perpetual smile.[7] At the end of the narrative, Jeff murders his parents and brother.

The SCP Foundation initially began on 4chan's /x/ subforum, which frequently hosts paranormal stories, with a post by user S.S. Walrus in 2007. The post reads as an entry in a larger log or database and describes a concrete object that cannot move when it is observed but becomes "animate and extremely hostile" when out of direct sight. Labelled SCP-173 and subtitled "The Statue", the homicidal object appears to secrete blood and faeces from an unknown point.

Interest spawned by the first post led to similar log entries by other writers, culminating in the establishment of a dedicated website in 2008. Presented as the database of a clandestine agency known as the SCP Foundation, the site catalogs user-submitted entries for other phenomena in the vein of the original SCP-173. The stated goal of the foundation is to contain and study supernatural phenomena that "pose a significant threat to global security by threatening either physical or psychological harm".[8] Each such entity is designated with an SCP ("Secure, Contain, Protect") number, a retroactive means of contextualising the first independent artefacts' titles, and is classified according to the difficulty of its individual containment procedure. To date, users have contributed thousands of descriptions and narratives to the site, creating an astounding variety of SCPs. These range from small, seemingly innocuous objects such as the night light labelled SCP-122, to large, habitable structures, such as the house labelled SCP-1171, to mostly invisible entities (such as SCP-072, which inhabits bedframes) and parasitic organisms (such as SCP-940), to absurdities such as SCP-426, a toaster that can only be described using first-person pronouns, and SCP-1247, a man who is otherwise normal but perceives all animals as the actor Shia LaBeouf.

As a prominent example of the cursed image urban legend, Smile.jpg is both the name of a narrative meme and the object it concerns. Likely originating on /x/ in 2008, the narrative first relates the (fictional) narrator's search for a famous image that has escaped proper cataloging despite its internet infamy. The image, given the filename smile.jpg, depicts a husky with large human teeth and, less visibly, an outstretched human hand; in the original version, the image is presented as a Polaroid photograph with bloody fingerprints on the outer frame. The creature itself is given the name Smile.dog. (An alternate, more heavily edited version that uses a butchered pig's head as Smile.dog also exists.) Merely seeing the image may render the viewer epileptic or inspire them to commit suicide. The narrator receives an email from a woman called Mary E., who claims to have been haunted by Smile.dog. In a manner similar to Somerville's treatment of the Rake, Smile.dog appears to Mary E. as she sleeps, charging her to "spread the word" by sending the cursed image to others. At the end of the story, following Mary E.'s

suicide, the narrator is contacted by an unknown person who has included smile.jpg as an attachment. The narrator decides that if he does look at the image, he will be willing to share it with others.

Appearing to originate from a WordPress site in 2009, The Russian Sleep Experiment reflects residual political anxieties as it purports to reveal a top-secret effort by Russian scientists in World War II. Fifteen political prisoners are sealed in a room and prohibited from sleeping through the use of a stimulant gas. The prisoners become increasingly paranoid and violent. Nine days into their captivity, all but two of them begin screaming; the remaining two use faeces and book pages to cover the chamber's portholes so the researchers can no longer see them. Afterward, the chamber goes completely silent. Three days later, with no audible signs of life from within the chamber and only an oxygen gauge to indicate the captives are still breathing, the researchers use an intercom to attempt communication with the prisoners, promising freedom in exchange for compliance. A prisoner responds, "We no longer want to be freed".[9]

After another interval of three days, the experiment is shut down and soldiers are sent into the chamber. The four surviving subjects, it is discovered, have disembowelled themselves and have begun cannibalising their own tissues. They have also developed superhuman strength and an ability to resist anaesthesia; indeed, to prevent falling asleep, some welcome pain. Those who do fall asleep die shortly thereafter. The last survivor identifies what the prisoners have become, saying "We are you. We are the madness that lurks within you all" and suggests that it is only through perpetual consciousness and its subsequent psychosis that he and his fellows can be free.[10]

The most prominent horror meme to date is that of Slender Man, a supernatural entity first created on the Something Awful forums in 2009 in a thread by user Gerogerigegege entitled "Create Paranormal Images". In the thread, users posted pictures (often edited photographs) and narratives of unsettling or disturbing occurrences. Under the username Victor Surge, user Eric Knudsen posted an edited photograph of several solemn-faced adolescents appearing to walk towards the camera with a tall, blurry figure behind them. The image is accompanied by the caption "'we didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time…'/1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead".[11] A second black-and-white photograph of happy young children on a playground appears beneath the first; the tall figure also appears in the background. The accompanying caption reads: "One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze, the event notable for being taken the day on which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as 'The Slender Man'. Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at the library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence./1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986". To make the image appear more authentic, a "City of Stirling Libraries Local Studies Collection" watermark has been added. Beneath Knudsen's first post, forums user slidebite predicts that some of the images from the thread will eventually be disseminated off-site as real.

In a process similar to that of the Rake, Slender Man became the dominant topic of the thread. Some users contributed to the developing lore of the entity by creating their own images or narratives; others simply voiced appreciation of this particular creation. Departing somewhat from Knudsen's early visual characterizations, the entity was gradually established as an uncommonly tall, blank-faced figure with inhumanly long arms and typically dressed in a black suit. In some depictions, including Knudsen's second edited photo, he also boasts a set of tentacles behind his arms. He continued to be associated with child abductions, though his victim range expanded to include adults. The purpose of these abductions is ultimately unclear in the holistic mythology, as it varies across narratives.

While Slender Man is rarely depicted as violent, encounters with him, much like encounters with the Rake, affect victims profoundly. Standard tropes in both Slender Man and Rake narratives are stalking or haunting, recognition of the entity by young children, and psychological and physical disorders. In many such narratives, these effects are prolonged, lasting years before victims are driven to violence against themselves or others.

While Slender Man is not the first internet-based horror entity, he is perhaps the most popular, and the most academically recognised. Indeed, he may be the defining entity. Since his creation, Slender Man has received a number of scholarly and popular studies, including entire books dedicated to analysing his creation, evolution, and fictional construction. In some such studies, Slender Man serves as a springboard for the discussion of horror memes predating him. Furthermore, his fame has carried beyond horror-affiliated fan communities to garner corporate participation in his continued dissemination, as well as news media attention following his association with an actual attempted murder in 2014.

In general, such media may be initially viewed through the lenses of, most conspicuously, digital culture and, respectively, folklore. Many popular internet-based horror media, whether in text, audio, or visual form, have achieved meme status, at least within internet subcultures sharing an interest in the genre. Established by Richard Dawkins as ideas and behaviours that spread throughout a large group of people, memes manifest as a variety of concepts and practices that are transmitted through replication or imitation.[12] However, following Web 2.0, the meme is now often understood as a phenomenon emerging from digital culture. Indeed, the internet facilitates the qualities Dawkins finds in memes as a whole.[13] Digital memes concern limitless topics, from global politics to subculture in-jokes, and deploy a variety of tones in their treatment of those topics. When responding to particular events, memes arise and spread quickly; for instance, memes referencing Donald Trump's 2018 misspelling of "coverage" as "covfefe" on Twitter were created and disseminated in fewer than 24 hours after the tweet. Some memes enjoy only fleeting popularity, but others persist, transforming to address recent developments. While some may receive wider media recognition through news coverage, they generally spread from user to user on digital spaces. Within those spaces, memes are not limited to the particular subspace in which they originate, but, rather, cross websites and social media platforms.

Many discussions of memes focus on those that begin as static images or image macros, images with added text. Others concern linguistic memes, which are typically taken as snippets from larger dialogues or are designed to be easily quoted and transmitted. In both cases, memes typically remove the language or image from its original context. Perhaps due to their fleeting popularity as individual texts or their mistaken association with lowbrow culture, memes have not found easy acknowledgment as academic subjects, though their worth is increasingly—albeit inconsistently—recognised.[14] Digital culture's intersection with the horror genre has proven especially worthy of study for its exemplary modes of transmission, as is discussed in this chapter. Though the often-humorous or wry nature of memes may make horror seem an unlikely subject for meme-ification, horror entities have been adopted into meme culture. In late 2016, for instance, the eponymous entity of the horror film *The Babadook* (2014, dir. Jennifer Kent) was remixed as an LGBT icon; though humorously intended, the remix resulted in a meme that then manifested in LGBT media (such as signs at Pride marches).

Meme scholarship and popular recognition of horror's intersection with digital culture has, however, primarily concerned horror media that is created in digital spaces that then spreads to achieve meme status. Such memes incorporate gothic and horror themes into nontraditional, multimodal forms comprising written text, images, curations, audio, blogs, and forums. Due to multimodal, transmedia manifestations, these narratives can spread to wider audiences than many traditional texts might, and certainly spread beyond the text's intended audience.[15] This, as demonstrated by the spread of Slender Man to commercial and news media discussed later in this chapter, enables additional interpretations and deployments of the source material.

While corporate and commercial entities may attempt to create memes, the multimodal texts that typically become memes are user-generated within particular digital spaces. Creators may devise new artefacts from scratch or may remix existing artefacts, giving them new meaning within the context of the mythos, and then posting and disseminating their creations.[16] Furthermore, it is common for memes to borrow from or refer to each other, and horror memes make that ability to build off pre-existing or developing materials particularly conspicuous, as many emerge through linking unrelated images and media texts.

Such nuances are important in distinguishing between memes and their viral counterparts.[17] Horror memes in particular do not often achieve virality. Some memes remain largely within the groups that spawn them or, as in the case of genre-specific memes, within spaces catering to the genre. Yet these media objects may still attain meme status within those spaces. Originating on a personal Angelfire website in 2001, "Ted the Caver" is a narrative of a man's search for, and subsequent disappearance in, a mysterious previously undiscovered cave. Compared to such stories as that of Slender Man, the narrative has achieved little attention outside of spaces dedicated to discussions of gothic experiences. However, within those spaces, the narrative continues to be disseminated. Degrees of popularity vary, but gothic and horror memes have (despite their dark subject matter), exhibited the same qualities of transmission as more commonly known digital memes.

Scholarship on horror memes has also been particularly concerned with their role in digital folklore, though there is disagreement among folklorists about what internet-based artefacts constitute folklore and, in addition, how precisely the Internet alters conventional views and practices of folklore.[18] Memes themselves have folkloric value, and their potential in folklore studies has received wider recognition in the 2010s.[19] Multimodality plays a significant role in establishing the meme as digital folklore, as it aids in folklore's necessary transmission.[20] Indeed, horror memes in particular correspond to Propp's qualifications of folklore.[21]

Like word of mouth transmissions of traditional folklore, the Internet is a space that does not necessitate a division between truth and fiction. This lack of division enables the spread of misinformation, fake news, and the modern urban legends that have previously been recognised as folkloric in function.[22] Many popular horror memes, including several discussed in this chapter, comprise media texts that welcome and indeed rely on crowd-sourcing, with participants altering or adding to the central myth with their respective creations.[23] This, too, aligns the horror meme with more traditional forms of folklore.

Some gothic internet-based narratives and memes actively engage with folklore by presenting themselves as such. Following initial interest in the two Slender Man images, Knudsen further participates in the language of folkloric transmission by announcing that he will try to find more "legit" images of the entity (rather than, as he means, offering to create more). The origin for Slender Man provided by Knudsen establishes a fictional folklore behind the entity, and other early participants in the meme continued this practice. Working within the confines of artificial truthfulness (discussed later in this chapter), Something Awful poster treepunk as hell fictionally located Slender Man in medieval German folklore as a child-abducting entity called Der Großmann. Another user, GyverMac, described an image from Hans Holbein the Younger's 1538 *Danse Macabre* as a woodcut attributed to Hans Freckenberg depicting an entity called Der Ritter. Both stories have been incorporated into the larger Slender Man mythos, providing a fictional folkloric origin for the actual digital folklore.

Other engagements with folklore appropriate pre-existing lore for the author's or group's purposes. This is especially important in memes' transmission, as it contributes to the necessary sense of a meme-entity's transhistorical, cross-cultural nature. Similarly, memes originating outside of a culture may come to incorporate elements of that culture's own lore.[24] This carries the risk of cultural appropriation, as can particularly be seen in engagements with entities from indigenous lore. Slender Man, for instance, has been associated with the Algonquian wendigo and Western approximations of the Tibetan *tulpa*. The creepypasta known as Anansi's Goatman Story, which relates a group of young campers' encounter with a shapeshifter, bears a resemblance to the lore of a pre-existing cryptid of the same name. The text further invites association with actual folklore by deploying unnamed Native American background characters who enable the narrator to realise the creature is "kind of like the Wendigo".[25]

However, it must be emphasised that these associations are typically based on assumptions and translations of the originating culture's myth by outsiders.

Associations with the *tulpa*, for instance, bear little resemblance to actual Tibetan lore, to such a point that Slender Man-as-*tulpa* can be critically discussed *without* close examination of Tibetan myth and culture. A similar separation from the originating culture occurs in Reddit's creepypasta-ready r/skinwalkers, in which users post narratives of encounters with entities appropriated from Native American lore that depart wildly from the lore itself, to the consternation of some indigenous Reddit users. Yet in turn, the perpetually evolving entity may then be reconsidered from those cultural contexts. Slender Man was referenced in a rash of Native American youth suicides in South Dakota in 2014 and 2015 due to his similarity to some actual pre-existing indigenous spirit entities.[26]

Slender Man's simplistic conceit enables both his meme-ification and his ability to be translated widely as a myth. His uncanny appearance allows his correspondence to transhistorical and transglobal fears and myths, as does his archetypal similarity to other entities of global lore.[27] A literally blank face and a generic black suit prevent him from being confined to narratives of a particular place for the most part, especially since some imagery obscures his clothing to the point that it need not be interpreted as a suit. He is similarly free from historical constraints due to fans' early work in identifying his presence in fictionalised accounts of actual medieval German artwork and, less famously, ancient cave paintings. His connection to the natural world in many media and his ambiguous connection to children further aligns him with entities of popular myths and fairy tales.[28]

More generally, the place of the horror meme in digital folklore is particularly evident in the texts colloquially labelled "creepypasta", a label emerging from "copypasta", which describes widely disseminated and frequently reposted anecdotes and narratives, including urban legends and folklore that have been spread via the Internet. Stories deploying gothic and horror elements, when thus spread, become creepypasta.[29] Though the "copy paste" etymology suggests only written text, creepypasta also incorporates shared and replicated images. Several horror memes, including those used as examples in this chapter, originated as creepypasta; however, the label does not distinguish between levels of popularity, and artefacts that are memes within limited communities and those that achieve wider visibility may both receive it.

A number of digital spaces dedicated to creepypasta exist, including an eponymous website and a wiki database. These spaces are valuable to both fans and scholars, as they often rehost content long after the original site or post has been removed. Several forums and social media platforms also contain such spaces. For instance, the content aggregation platform Reddit hosts several forums (called subreddits) for the creation and dissemination of creepypasta media, including r/creepypasta, and r/nosleep, which hosts user-submitted stories of frightening experiences, and r/letsnotmeet, in which users post short narratives of encounters with dangerous people or entities.

Similarly to much traditional folklore and urban legends, many of these texts either explicitly or implicitly make claims of truthfulness. Language surrounding such artefacts is, at times, similar to that common in the dissemination of gothic

folklore.[30] No matter how fantastic the narrative becomes, the most basic conceit is that the story being related really happened, that the image being shared is an actual photograph. When such texts are posted on forums and social media, interactions with the original post are also meant to treat the narrative as nonfiction. Original sources remain anonymous but may, to promote a sense of their truthfulness, be associated with the person immediately transmitting the message. Commenters may offer advice or tales of similar experiences. If such interactions garner enough attention, the topic of the post may itself become a meme within the community.

Participants show a preference for narratives and images that claim truthfulness, a finding consistent with constructions of truthfulness in participatory fan cultures.[31] The Rake's co-creator Brian Somerville speculates that this is behind the Rake's success as a meme as it allows readers a means by which to relate to the narrative personally.[32] In addition, a performative sense of truthfulness invites others to share in the story's evolution and transmission. Anyone may repost such content or respond to others' content by claiming to have had the same experience. The participatory nature of creepypasta can even hinge upon stories of shared experiences among participants, as especially seen in narratives of "lost" media. The story of Candle Cove, for instance, is written in the style of a discussion forum and relates fictional adults' memories of a television show they enjoyed as children. Though aimed at children, the show becomes increasingly disturbing as forum participants recall seeing puppet-characters screaming and being attacked by a grotesque marionette called the Skin-Taker. The final post in the conversation reveals that while these children watched these events, they appeared to be staring at blank television screens. A similar tactic occurs in the story of a lost episode of the children's cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* that forum participants claim depicted the character Squidward committing suicide. Creepypasta fans can subsequently disseminate such stories with claims that they, too, have seen such media.

The participatory, multimodal nature of the Internet and its allowance for anonymity establish its value as a location of folklore's evolution.[33] Mirroring the Internet itself, many popular gothic memes defy temporal and geographic boundaries.[34] Slender Man's early mythology on the Something Awful forums placed him in a number of time periods and countries, leaving room for a wide variety of participants to deploy him for their own fictional purposes. A lack of clear textual boundaries within these stories allows participants flexibility in their uses of the media. Definitive origins may be established in paratexts, as in Somerville's comments on the Rake, but are not always incorporated into the larger mythos. Narratives of supernatural entities on the SCP Foundation website may describe first encounters with the entity, but its actual inception often remains a mystery to both the fictional agents and the real-life reader. Thus, participants are not confined to rigidly established narratives, nor are the memes themselves.

Slender Man has proven to be particularly exemplary of the mutable *and* multimodal nature of digital folklore and horror memes. While his appearance is now fairly static with his black suit and blank face, fans have made alterations when needed, adding tentacles or uncannily long fingers at times and at others

styling him to conform to specific locations or eras. Fans have debated and rewritten Slender Man's objectives according to their own needs. In some treatments, Slender Man is entirely a source of horror who brings destruction; in others, he wields a seductive power as he lures victims, usually children, to a mysterious otherworld or the release of death. As Slender Man media typically focus on the effects of being stalked by the entity, he may even have no apparent objective at all. The mutability of his purpose across narratives, when viewed in the collective sense, implies that the entity is ultimately incomprehensible to humans.

Slender Man media extends beyond other creepypasta-style narratives to include DIY horror video series, fanart, and even parodies. In the wake of the meme's initial popularity, many people outside of creepypasta-dedicated spaces borrowed the entity for their own work. Videos and blogs became popular creative outlets for participation in the mythos. The most successful of these has been the YouTube-based video series *Marble Hornets*, begun in 2009 and ultimately concluding in 2014. Over the course of 132 videos, the series primarily depicts a young man named Jay's investigation into the disappearance of his friend Alex. An aspiring filmmaker, Alex begins behaving erratically in the process of creating a student film and leaves behind several hours of footage, which Jay examines and presents to the viewer as he documents his search. The footage reveals that Alex was stalked by an entity who is nearly identical to Slender Man, who is later identified as The Operator. In keeping with the typical Slender Man narrative, once Jay has seen the footage he, too, is stalked—not only by The Operator but also by a masked man. His search is further complicated by the intrusion of another party, known by the YouTube username 'totheark', who posts short, unsettling videos in response to him.

Through The Operator, the video series introduces new artefacts to the Slender Man mythos, famously including the so-called "operator symbol", which appears as an encircled X. This itself has become a meme within the meme, and even Slender Man-related media that makes no other reference to the events of *Marble Hornets* employ the symbol. The series also further canonised the idea that contact with Slender Man, whether directly or through recordings of his presence, results in being stalked or haunted by him.

Two other video series gained a significant following in the manner of *Marble Hornets*. Like their predecessor, both *EverymanHYBRID*[sic] and *TribeTwelve* present themselves as real footage of their characters' encounters with Slender Man and similar entities over a prolonged period. *EverymanHYBRID* began in 2010 as a series of what appeared to be amateur fitness videos. Subtle visual references to Slender Man were, at first, treated as a joke within the narrative; however, the joke soon draws the attention of the real Slender Man. The series also narratively joined Slender Man and the Rake, the latter of whom begins appearing in videos as another creature stalking the group. In addition, an antagonist similar to 'totheark', identified as HABIT[sic], also stalks the characters and eventually interacts with fans of the series as the series takes on the concurrent role of an alternate reality game (ARG). ARGs form another part of gothic participatory culture and, indeed, a more clearly active one. While some corporate ARGs, such as film marketing campaigns, may have fully planned trajectories and outcomes, others evolve based on participants' progress.[35] ARGs thus further establish the

communal function of the creation and transmission of horror memes.[36] HABIT eventually allowed fans to compete in a tournament in which they completed tasks, such as burying a personal item, and posted evidence online, thus perpetuating the participatory nature of the video series. Intertexuality also occurs through a crossover between *EverymanHYBRID* and *TribeTwelve*.

In the wake of an onslaught of blogs and videos that, through the guise of truth, presented their own Slender Man narratives, sites that reviewed such media emerged. Reviewers were typically tipped off about the media's existence, either privately by the creators in an out-of-character message or on public forums. In the latter case, creators typically perpetuated the performance of truthfulness by claiming to be documenting their own experience with the entity or to have found another person doing so. This practice is predated in other memes, such as The Russian Sleep Experiment, whose apparent original posters claim to have been sent the media they are now publishing.

The multimodality of internet-based artefacts allows both their transmission and their encouragement of fans to participate in them as if they are not fictional.[37] Those wishing to actively participate who do not write may provide visual artefacts and vice versa. In keeping with the qualities of participatory culture, participants frequently collaborate to varying degrees, ranging from simply rehosting to aid in the spread of material from one space to another, or commenting on content, to creating lengthy video series such as *Marble Hornets*.

Participants in the creation and dissemination of such media do not seek commercial gain from their work.[38] Nor is ownership prioritised. The explicit or implied claims to truthfulness at the start of many memes' development discourage departures from the conceit that would require creators to claim ownership. Likewise, a creator discouraging others from borrowing, manipulating, and sharing their original text or image disrupts the participatory nature present in many early stages; indeed, Knudsen used one of his out-of-character posts in the original Something Awful thread to forego claims of ownership and to encourage others to keep adding to Slender Man. His position appears to be the popular one, as few creepypasta (co-)creators have claimed ownership of their work even after it has become a meme. Both Brian Somerville and S.S. Walrus have voiced pleasant surprise at how successful their work has been in fan communities, and both have also admitted to not initially realising how far their creations had spread.[39] The creator of the first Jeff the Killer narrative is a notable exception, as killerjeff continues to interact with other users to deny some user-added Jeff narratives and claiming authority of his own. In a 2017 Newgrounds comment, he described Jeff's catchphrases "Go to sleep" and "It's a joy" as "fanfiction" and discouraged acceptance of them as part of the character's mythos.[40]

Yet due to his popularity, Slender Man still invokes questions of ownership. Indeed, much debate surrounds his ownership within the internet subcultures that have contributed to his development.[41] Even when an individual person can be identified as the progenitor of an entity, meme, or narrative, as in the case of Eric Knudsen, that artefact's continued development is owed to any and all who participate in it.[42] Indeed, one of Knudsen's subsequent image posts allowed for Slender

Man to have a grotesque face, and it was other participants who canonised his featurelessness. Other parties, including corporations outside the cultural groups that typically transform and disseminate this media, may purchase the rights to particular characters, thus further complicating the notion of ownership. While Knudsen did indeed register a copyright for his character in 2010, copyrights are also held by major corporations such as the Fox Broadcasting Corporation and HBO.[43] Independent creators have faced legal sanctions for creating work using Slender Man, including one who had reportedly received permission to use the character from Knudsen himself.[44] The commercial publication of the Candle Cove creepypasta by its original author, Kris Straub, and its television adaptation as part of Syfy Channel's *Channel Zero* series resulted in the story's removal from the Creepypasta Wiki, which serves as a repository for such media.

A distinction exists between participatory culture, which involves fans' creations and transmissions within a community, and corporate contributions.[45] While there have been corporate attempts to deploy creepypasta and horror memes, none have garnered the same attention or success as the independent, DIY creations that occur in fan spaces. A number of films and video games based on Slender Man have been released, yet to date they have largely failed to generate the same level of enthusiasm as the creepypastas themselves. Following the announcement that a Slender Man film was in production for a 2018 release, some fan spaces expressed the belief that the film was far too late to be of worth. Thus, despite some corporate ownership, it is the fanmade Slender Man productions that have maintained favour.

Participants also frequently repurpose other pre-existing work as part of the lore. As previously discussed, images from Holbein's *Danse Macabre* came to form some of the early, transhistorical Slender Man mythos. The narratives of Jeff the Killer are based on images found elsewhere, which became synonymous with Jeff after being posted with the later text. Though originally posted without an image, SCP-173 is now associated with an unrelated artwork, "Untitled 2004", by sculptor Izumi Kato. A photograph of the statue by Keisuke Yamamoto was attached to the reposting of the original 4chan text in the early stages of its popularity and has, as with Jeff the Killer, become synonymous with the SCP. Similarly, SCP-610, labelled "The Flesh That Hates", uses sculptures from Mark Powell's "Dream Diorama" to embody the effects of a disease that gruesomely deforms and destroys its hosts. Furthermore, one meme may provide inspiration for the lore of those that come after. Knudsen, for instance, credits the Rake as an inspiration for Slender Man.

When pre-existing content is borrowed or appropriated into another text, tensions between the borrowed content's original purpose and its imposed one may arise. Izumi Kato has suggested some displeasure that his work was used on the SCP Foundation website without his prior permission being sought, but has allowed this usage with an agreement that it remains non-commercial and that a disclaimer be posted to confirm to readers that "Untitled 2004" is not actually related to SCP-173.[46] This disclaimer, which credits Kato and Yamamoto, now appears at the bottom of SCP-173's entry on the Foundation database in a rare, easily public-facing departure from the catalog's pretences at truthfulness. Yet due

to the creepypasta's greater popularity, the interpretive gloss of SCP-173 imposes the narrative upon the independent object. A viewer approaching Kato's work from prior familiarity with the SCP may thus struggle to interpret the sculpture as representing something other than a malevolent entity. Indeed, so linked is the image to the SCP that subsequent artwork, including humorous parodies, has used "Untitled 2004" as the visual basis for representing the creature.

The location of creepypasta and horror memes on digital spaces may actually make ownership more difficult, not easier, to determine. Despite common arguments as to the internet's permanence as written record, even popular memes may become lost over time. Resources such as *Know Your Meme* and the Creepypasta Wiki may enable tracing of a horror meme's origin and evolution, but only if significant points are adequately preserved. Unlike many forums 4chan does not archive all old posts; thus, doubt has been cast over some creepypasta's exact dates of origin, especially with consideration for early reposts. Content may also be lost due to expired availability, as is the case of many images hosted on and linked through image-sharing sites. The original Something Awful thread on which Slender Man was created, for instance, may still be accessed but most images are no longer visible. The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which periodically catalogs websites as they were on the recorded date, has preserved the original Something Awful thread *with* images, but successful utilisation of this tool requires one to know the URL of the desired page or the exact pathway to that URL and relies on preservation at key points. Inconsistent reliability of site storage thus adds to the legends of such media by making them easy to locate yet difficult to clearly trace.

Like traditional literary and cinematic monsters, the entities found in popular gothic digital media reflect greater cultural anxieties.[47] The entities of such memes exist at the intersection of fears of the cosmic (an unknowable, otherworldly creature, an intangible spirit) and the mundane (a man in a generic suit, a photograph). Stories of a seeming madness that reveals an innate truth, such as the Russian Sleep Experiment, similarly merge these fears, and in the Experiment's case, merge such concerns with larger geopolitical events, here, long-standing rumours of inhumane Cold War experimentation.

In some cases, digital horror entities utilise the Internet itself as a means of self-replicating transmission. The canine entity Smile.dog, for instance, charges its victims to "spread the word" by emailing the cursed image to others. The repetitive, self-replicating nature of many horror memes, such as haunted or "cursed" images, confounds temporality.[48] The anonymous, ahistorical, ageographical nature of the Internet imbues it with a sense of mystery and foreboding.[49]

Common elements of surveillance and madness have a particular place in contemporary anxieties with increasing concerns for the intrusion of digital technology into everyday life.[50] The Rake, Smile.jpg, and Slender Man lore all depict malevolent entities watching victims, often as they sleep and are thus powerless. Indeed, the discovery that one has been watched for some time prior to becoming aware of the entity is key to narratives of the Rake and Slender Man. Visual media of these entities casts the spectator as a surveilling agent alongside the

supernatural entity. In *Marble Hornets*, for instance, the audience is made privy to events around Jay and Alex through their cameras, witnessing even events of which the camera owners themselves are unaware (such as the masked man's appearances in their rooms as they sleep), and in *EverymanHYBRID*, the viewer similarly sees the Rake when the protagonists do not.

Creepypasta about cursed media reflects not only fears about the power of cultural objects but the gothic tradition itself, which often reflects and invokes the destructive power of *knowing*.[51] Furthermore, traditional gothic texts have also been accused of transmitting evil.[52] In the Western context as it manifests in horror memes, this may be owed to particular anxieties about the power of the image.[53] Cursed images such as Smile.jpg confront the reader/viewer with the double revelation that they cannot simply reject this new knowledge: once they have seen it, the damage is already done. Moreover, these media present the notion that the human desire to look and to know is irresistible, even if it incurs great psychological damage. Fictional participants' mental health is compromised by exposure and proximity to the entity. Of the exemplary memes discussed in this chapter, the Rake, Smile.jpg, certain SCPs, and Slender Man are said to cause anxiety, depression, psychosis, or insanity. Other physical and or neurological conditions may also be triggered by the contact. Indeed, in the cases of haunted media or media that, through exposure to the victim, brings the victim to an entity's attention, the nature of the entity or curse is primarily understood through the effect that such contact has on the victim.[54] Fears of the effects of consumption of and participation in horror media are incorporated into the media itself.

Beyond its narrative, a meme's creation may invoke ethical questions or their semblance and these concerns may become a secondary part of the meme itself. On 4chan, speculation arose that killerjeff's image was an edit of a photograph of a girl named Katy Robinson, who allegedly committed suicide after being bullied online. The image thus appears to mock a suicide victim. However, these rumours have been countered by claims that this, too, is a fictional story, and thus it may be a meta-myth.

Slender Man's mythos has been complicated in recent years following the attempted murder of Payton Leutner in Waukesha, Wisconsin in 2014 by two adolescent girls, Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser. Claiming a belief that killing someone would help them become proxies for Slender Man (a phenomenon in some Slender Man stories by which the entity acts through a human agent), Weier and Geyser isolated Leutner in a forest and stabbed her nineteen times. Both girls have been sentenced to psychiatric institutionalisation. A similar case occurred in 2017 when fourteen-year-old Donovan Nicholas murdered his father's girlfriend; in Nicholas's confession, he claimed that Jeff the Killer had forced him to commit the murder.

Attempts to blame fictional entities, their creators, and their fans for contributing to such acts have not been quite as successful as similar attempts in historical precedents (as in, for instance, the blame placed upon violent media for the murder of James Bulger in 1993 and, respectively, the Columbine school shooting in 1999), suggesting a somewhat increased societal understanding of participatory gothic media.[55] However, this understanding is not yet ideal, as can be seen

through comparisons of how news outlets unrelated to participatory media cultures did regard Slender Man as a culpable, albeit, fictional party to the attack.[56] Cultural anxieties about such media do persist, particularly with regard to adolescents' consumption and participation in internet-based gothic myths.[57] Language used in discussions about memes' culpability in youth violence is similar to that deployed in moral panics.[58] Indeed, despite concerning new media, these concerns and their language are common to responses to gothic texts in general.[59] Scholars continue, however, to appropriately caution against explicitly linking these fictions to real-life violence. The disparity in the number of those who consume and participate in horror memes and those who invoke them in violent and antisocial acts is far too great to indicate culpability.

Whether they manifest as images, videos, texts, or simply discussions, horror memes are a significant addition to the larger gothic and horror genres. They merge the more traditional media of literature and film with the capabilities and concerns of contemporary digital culture. While they have not gained the same prestige as literature and certain films of the same genre, these memes and similar media exemplify the ways in which contemporary technology democratises some media production with special regard for unsettling and frightening subject matter. Their role in digital folklore further invites consideration of the myths and archetypes that make an impression in the twenty-first century. They are contradictory, both easy to trace and all-but-impossible to definitively and comprehensively locate in all their manifestations. They are, in short, modern technological translations of classic gothic concerns.

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