

Horror 2.0: A Web 2.0 Case Study of the  
YouTube Horror Series *Marble Hornets*

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The Internet has changed everything – the way we communicate, share experiences, create art, make movies, and even the way we listen to music. It is the age of user-generated content (UGC). “This surge of online participation is changing the way people communicate using technology. The culture that has been cultivated online has made it necessary for society to rethink its definition of technological interaction,” (Spears, 2014). In the same vein, Web 2.0 has changed the way we communicate and share narratives. Stories once told around a campfire with a flashlight have migrated around a “digital campfire,” onto YouTube, Reddit, Imgur, and Creepypasta.com (Chess & Newsom, 2014). What was once passed down through generations by voice and on paper has now, because of the Internet, been able to be passed on more easily and reach a larger readership much more quickly. Now, “the relationship between author, text, and audience is becoming more fluid and dynamic,” (Nesom, 2013). Digital storytelling then mirrors oral storytelling in a way, but is also a mix of tradition and novelty. “So anybody can go online and tell stories,” (Spears, 2014).

This ability has created quite a stir in the niched community of horror fans. With the introduction of the found footage genre, YouTube, especially, has had a profound effect on the genre. Horror 2.0 is being readily and widely embraced by not only the average user, but also by professionals. This can be noted in the recently released horror flick *Unfriended* (Acro Collective, 2015). Professionals are actually seeing and understanding the benefits of embracing this platform in order to increase profits and craft better scares, thus disproving Andrew Keen’s argument in *The Cult of the Amateur*, which states that user-generated content, at best, “will provide the monkeys with peanuts and beer” (Keen, 2007, p. 32). Indeed, many filmmakers have been taking advantage of Web 2.0 in order to find success. This amateur content has not decreased the quality of content, but Keen states, “the moral fabric of our society is being

unraveled by Web 2.0” (Keen, 2007, p. 163). In fact, just the opposite seems to be true. The wildly popular YouTube horror series *Marble Hornets* is one of those UGC series that found great success by utilizing Web 2.0 tactics: the collective, found footage style (embracing the amateur), and multiple platforms for interaction.

### **The Origins of the Slender Man**

The Slender Man originated on the SomethingAwful Internet forum on June 10, 2009 (Surge, 2009). The thread was called “Create Paranormal Images” and was created by a user named Gerogerigegege (Keller, 2013). It was a thread meant for Photoshop gurus to create fake paranormal images for fun, creating their own back-stories for the photographs. The aim was to pass them off as genuine photographs that hadn’t been edited or messed with. User Victor Surge – whose real name is Eric Knudsen – contributed two photos, both of them showing a tall, faceless man in a black suit, and captioned them as follows:

Photograph A: “[W]e 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”

Photograph B: ““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 13<sup>th</sup>, 1986.”

The Slender Man is shown as a thin, tall, faceless man in a black business suit. He is often shown with tendrils, or tentacles, coming out of his back. Other users on the SomethingAwful forum contributed to the story, lending information to back story that ended up going all the way back to 5000 BC (Biggs, 2014). In an interview with fan site slenderman235, the original creator of the meme, Eric Knudsen, explained, “I didn’t expect it to move beyon[d] the SA forums. And when it did, I found it interesting to watch as sort of an accelerated version of an urban legend. It differs from the prior concept of the urban legend in that it is on the Internet, and this both helps and harms the status of the Slender Man as one. In my personal opinion, an urban legend requires an audience ignorant of the origin of the legend. It needs unverifiable third and fourth hand (or more) accounts to perpetuate the myth. On the Internet, anyone is privy to its origins as evidenced by the very public Something Awful thread. But what is funny is that despite this, it still spread,” (Slenderman 235, 2011). The monster quickly became the most popular creation within the thread. One user, nicknamed Nurse Fanny, spoke of the Slender Man as being “the star of this thread” (Keller, 2013, p. 2).

Contributors, of course, kept with the rule of pretending all stories and photographs were real and undoctored. User 21<sup>st</sup> Century suggested that the Slender Man be turned into the basis for a horror novel like *House of Leaves*, saying that whoever penned the book should make it “a collection of witness statements newspaper clippings, pictures, drawings, articles discussing evidence for an against the slender man and, to tie it all neatly together, a few stories of people who want to track the slender man, unravel the mystery. And the kicker would be the last 20 or so pages would be missing, with only scraps of paper left, arranged as logically as possible, just excerpts, words, rips, ink stains, etc.” (21stCentury, 2009). What came out of the thread was a promise to create video content that “could grow to ARG proportions” in the future and would

show behind-the-scenes footage of the creation of a documentary, “with crew members not showing for work and not answering calls, various production problems... then finally ending with a note that the director disappeared immediately after completion of the film,” (MooseyFate, 2009). Even the idea for *Marble Hornets*, not just Slenderman, was born out of a collective idea as a group effort. From the original forum, Internet users from all over the world took upon themselves the building of Slenderman’s more detailed back-story and abilities. Blogs, social media, and various other online communities contributed to the folklore by creating their own Slenderman content, even using video to document so-called sightings of the creature (Wikia, 2015) (McAteer, 2015). The meme has become so popular that it has even inspired a 2013 film called *The Slender Man* (IMDB, 2013).

### **Multiple Platforms**

Marble Hornets made its first YouTube uploads, called “Introduction” and “Entry #1,” on June 20, 2009. The two videos have, respectively, 3,834,312 and 5,360,709 views (Wagner & DeLage, Marble Hornets, 2009). The series follows a group of young filmmakers working on a student film for their friend, Alex Kralie. The film is called *Marble Hornets*. Halfway through production, Alex cancels the movie altogether because of “unworkable conditions” (Wagner & DeLage, Marble Hornets, 2009). He plans to burn what has been already recorded on his tapes, but his friend Jay urges him not to, convincing the director to hand over the tapes. Alex agrees on one condition – that Jay never mentions the project to him ever again. The two lose touch over the years until Jay rediscovers the tapes in a closet and decides to watch them. As stated in the introductory video, Jay plans to chronicle his watching of the tapes online through YouTube and note any interesting content. “That’s all there is to the first episode of what might be the scariest thing in the history of the Internet. No monsters jump out from dark corners; no menacing strings

amp up the tension. There is only looming, existential dread,” (Sankin, 2014). Jay begins to notice strange phenomena in the tapes – weird audio in the background, Alex acting strangely, etc.

As the tapes continue, it is understood that Alex is being followed by the Slender Man and films his experiences “as a way to document his tormenter” (Sankin, 2014). What is discovered within the tapes is horrifying, and prompts Jay to start investigating what happened to his friend and tracking the Slender Man. Unfortunately, the horror that befalls Alex also befalls Jay, leaving him disoriented and confused. Often blacking out and waking up days later, unable to account for his actions, his videotapes serve as clues behind the mystery and more importantly proof that he really is being followed. What is shown on Jay’s tapes is just as horrifying as Alex’s originals – images of Jay being beaten to a pulp, doing things and saying things he can’t recall, and a tall, looming man in a black business suit, always following. This disconnect between reality and what is remembered mirrors the tapes. “His memory is distorted – just like how the image and sound on the camera distorts when in the presence of something supernatural. We like to complement our memories with recorded images, but *Marble Hornets* argues we can’t be sure of either – even when we use them in tandem,” (Sankin, 2014). In addition, the project implemented a Twitter page as well as a second YouTube channel, *TotheArk*, both of which were created in the summer of 2009, not long after the creation of the original *Marble Hornets* channel. All of these platforms “often compromise [Slenderman’s] fictionality. Levels of verisimilitude and realness, compounded by his appearance in a range of reputable-appearing sources, give the Slender Man an ‘edge’ of horror. If he can virally slip from a game to that story on Facebook about a disappeared friend-of-a-friend, can he slip into the real world?” (Later, 2014).

The series has found great success. In its first year and a half, *Marble Hornets* boasted 41,741 subscribers and 8,943,042 upload views (King, 2011). That number has now increased to 250,000+ subscribers and over 80,000,000 upload views. Their Twitter page currently has 56,300 followers. This series is arguably “the most successful – as well as formally and conceptually experimental – of all the Slender Man-inspired cultural artifacts. Its recent Kickstarter campaign launched to fund a DVD release of the third and final series met its \$8,000 goal in its first three hours, spiraling to \$40,000 at the end of its first week and showing little sign of slowing down at the time of writing,” (Heller-Nicholas, 2014). The series went on to create a website for purchasing merchandise related to the show (THAC, 2015). Their most recent upload, “Entry #87,” was on June 26, 2014.

### **Born Out of a Collective**

The horror genre is becoming much more interactive and user-oriented and the genre has Web 2.0 to thank for it. Control is being put into the hands of fans, creating highly popular horror content such as *The Haunting of Sunshine Girl* and *Marble Hornets*, which is based on the extremely popular Slenderman (also known as the Slender Man), which originated on the SomethingAwful Internet forum, where Victor Surge created it (Biggs, 2014). With the help of 4chan, Reddit, Deviant Art and other online social media websites, the online horror community birthed a tulpa, a being brought into existence from the collective thoughts of individuals. “As such he is truly a monster for the digital age as he reflects the many faces – positive and negative – of the increasingly ‘connected’ individual,” (Keller, 2013, p. iii). The idea of a tulpa originates from Tibetan mythology, which states that tulpas were actually real creatures brought into existence by collective consciousness (The Tulpa Effect). The Slender Man being fictional, the definition still stands. He is a “viral example of a crowd-sourced mythology, fruitful for many,

owned by none,” (Shackford, 2013). The character was brought into “existence” (within a cultural fictional sense), described, and fleshed out by the online horror community. He did not exist in folklore before his collective introduction and acceptance online, and is now a household name (Spears, 2014).

While those who have studied the monster have extensive knowledge of the history and story behind him, professor Eric Newsom – a so-called Slenderman expert- says that the “real experts are those contributing to the story online,” (Spears, 2014). Keep in mind that these writers are not professionals who signed on to this project; these are everyday people – amateurs. The mirroring of oral traditional storytelling can be seen here. The story of Slenderman is passed along, mutated, played with, and even sometimes believed. The *Marble Hornets* series took this digital folklore and created something called folk horror, “a subgenre of horror that is produced by online communities of everyday people – or folk – as opposed to professional crews working within the film industry. Works of folk horror address the questions and anxieties of our current, digital age by reflecting the changing roles and behaviors of the everyday person, who is becoming increasingly involved with the products of popular culture,” (Keller, 2013). Hence, the Slender Man is a web-2.0 creation born out of the collective mind of Internet users, or co-authors, from all over the world.

### **Found Footage Style**

The 1980s saw the introduction of a new sort of horror film – found footage. This style of horror utilized amateur film in order to give a more realistic, documentary-like feel. This new form allowed horror fans to get scares in a completely new way with “the possibility of seeing unbelievable things in a form that is completely bound to reality: if the ghost shows up, embodied, on camera, it’s harder to dispute. If the filmmakers achieve verisimilitude in their

film-making, they build credibility, so that when the audience sees something bizarre on their film, it seems more real,” (Acro Collective, 2015). And, horrifyingly, it can manifest itself as real, as it did with Slenderman. Two young girls who believed that the Slender Man was real ended up stabbing a classmate in the woods in order to supposedly “protect their families from Slender Man’s wrath,” (Tribune wire reporters, 2015). The Internet phenomenon has become so popular that even parents and small children have heard of Slenderman. This recent case has brought the Internet monster into the light even more so now.

### **Attribution Theory**

Originally proposed by Fritz Heider in 1958, attribution theory purports that people are like “amateur scientists, trying to understand other people’s behavior by piecing together information until they arrive at a reasonable explanation or cause” (Attribution Theory, n.d.). Heider proposed that people were at heart naïve individuals trying to make sense of the world around them (Heider, 1958). In other words, human beings are naturally curious, and this theory is concerned with not only how, but also why people explain events in the ways that they do. There are two main types of attributions, internal and external. Internal attributions blame a “factor, agent, or force within one’s control for causing an event,” while external attributions place the blame on an “outside factor as the cause of an event” (Grinnell, 2009). This theory can be applied to the recent Slenderman-related stabbing in that the girls responsible for nearly killing their classmate stated that Slenderman was at fault for the attack, not themselves. They were simply only trying to protect their loved ones from the monster’s wrath.

The attribution of the Slender Man on these two young girls changed the children’s behavior from that of innocent children to that of desperate attackers. The girls thought of themselves as Slenderman’s “acolytes,” stressing that the creature used other people to do his

bidding (Gabler, 2014). Thankfully, the stabbing did not end up killing the other little girl and she survived and was able to get help. However, it is important to note that the scapegoat was Slenderman, a fictional character that is being heralded as the new “devil made me do it” (Jeffries, 2014). The girls’ commitment to the authenticity of Slenderman was ironclad. One of the girls told police, “Many people do not believe Slenderman is real [and we] wanted to prove the skeptics wrong” (Lohr, 2014). While it isn’t unheard of for criminals to note that media inspired them, this is taking the phenomenon to a different level. Kids who murder others tend to already have mental illness, a history of abuse, or psychopathy (lacking in human empathy) (Jeffries, 2014). It is terrifying and compelling to realize that two little girls were “willing to kill for their conviction in the authenticity of Slenderman. They had, in effect, entered a chilling, alternate reality” (Gabler, 2014). While the stories were framed as real, CreepyPasta.com took no responsibility for the actions of the two girls, explaining that not only do they have an age requirement to get into the website, but also that a fictional story is not responsible for the stabbings. The post stresses that “SLENDERMAN IS NOT A REAL PERSON/ENTITY” and that fictional characters do not kill people; people kill people (Statement on the Wisconsin Stabbing, 2014). No matter the cause, this external attribution almost cost a young girl her life, proving that though “[w]e live in the age of the Internet ... you can die in the age of the Internet too – because it is so far larger than we are and possesses its own world” (Gabler, 2014).

### **Found Footage in its Infancy**

Directed by D. Ruggero Deodato, the Italian 1980s film *Cannibal Holocaust* was the first of its kind. It was essentially a mockumentary that followed a group of young American filmmakers venturing into the Amazon in search of a previous group of filmmakers who went missing while investigating an indigenous tribe of cannibals in the area. The movie is composed

of the footage the group supposedly left behind, hence the “found” footage (Rose, 2011). Said to be one of the most controversial films ever made, it was banned in several countries and the director was even arrested and brought to court; many believed that the violent acts within the film – which included leg amputation, a hut burning, cannibalism, a brutal torture scene where a woman is punished for adultery with a sharp wooden dildo, animal killings, a forced abortion, gang rape, male genital dismemberment, and more – were real (Dirks, 2015). That, in fact, is what makes the subgenre of found footage so successful. “The found-footage genre reaches its apex of success ... when it transports you so successfully into another life or world that you start to get a little panicky yourself. Like you are actually there ... and unsafe,” (Alexandra, 2014). However, the actors who were supposedly tortured and killed ended up on TV a few years later, thus proving Deodato’s innocence (Dirks, 2015). This film paved the way for a genre that would blossom with 1999’s *The Blair Witch Project*, 2008’s *Cloverfield*, 2007’s *[Rec]*, and the *Paranormal Activity* and *V/H/S* series. In fact, *Marble Hornets* has been referred to as YouTube’s *Blair Witch* (King, 2011).

The subgenre’s format plays “with the collision of truth and fiction” (Later, 2014). The aesthetics of the genre of found footage have “opened it up to a range of production budgets, effectively flooding the market” in the end (Alexandra, 2014). This Web 2.0-esque subgenre paved the way for amateurs to get more involved in the filmmaking process. It essentially leveled the playing field. No longer did filmmakers need networked high-up connections and insanely expensive video equipment to produce a quality film; a home video camera was more than enough. “Quantity has been transformed into quality: the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation,” (Ellis, p. 1). In addition, high-tech special effects were not necessary. This is a subgenre in which “fear is primarily created and sustained by the

power of suggestion,” (Acro Collective, 2015). The introduction of YouTube promoted this phenomenon greatly, as discussed within (Mitchell, Thue, & Fernández-Vara, 2014):

All of these types of producers can be found on YouTube, whose dedication to the creation and inclusion of user-generated content (UGC) is explicit in its slogan, ‘Broadcast yourself.’ The rise of YouTube cannot be underplayed in the development of contemporary found footage horror. Founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim, the video-streaming website was officially launched in November 2005. During 2006, it was one of the fastest growing websites online, with one account claiming that by July that year users were watching over 100 million videos a day. It was purchased by Google for \$1.65 billion dollars that same year, and Time Magazine’s annual ‘Person of the Year’ famously featured a mirror on its cover inside the familiar YouTube interface, celebrating 2006 as ‘a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before ... about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace.’ YouTube appeared at the right place at the right time ... it was flooded so quickly with all forms of amateur and noncommercial media production, many of which had been looking for a site for circulation and exhibition. Two thousand six was the year the stories we filmed, often clumsily on our phones, took over. Found footage horror responded with a dramatic spike that reflected this growth in the acceptance of amateur filmmaking.

Thus, the subgenre was easily accepted into the world of YouTube and other online video services. *Marble Hornets* quickly jumped onto the trend to produce a series that seemingly became popular overnight. The success of the series can be attributed to their selection of the found footage subgenre and its placement on YouTube, as “the accessibility of the series being

hosted on YouTube conceals an implicit threat that is made throughout the series: anyone linked to Jay's investigation inevitably falls victim to Slender Man and those under his control," (Mitchell, Thue, & Fernández-Vara, 2014). As mentioned previously by Alexandra (2014), the subgenre of found footage is most successful when it transports you into the world of the content so seamlessly that you start to get worried that you, too, are at risk or in danger. *Marble Hornets* accomplishes this goal. "The public nature of the YouTube posts and the constant threat of Slender Man's omniscience lend a sense for the audience that they, like the characters in the series, are at risk of attracting Slender Man's attention through their own participation," (Mitchell, Thue, & Fernández-Vara, 2014). The decision to utilize the subgenre of found footage not only further proved their commitment to Web 2.0 practices, but also their interest in the project's success.

### **Interactivity**

The *Marble Hornets* series is a combination of several different platforms in one: a Twitter page (Marble Hornets, 2009), the original YouTube page (Wagner & DeLage, Marble Hornets, 2009), and a supplementary YouTube page for a user called *TotheArk* (Wagner & DeLage, Totheark, 2009). *TotheArk* often responds to the videos posted on the *Marble Hornets* channel. The first video was posted to this channel on July 22, 2009. The videos posted here are often dark and disturbing and offer puzzles, mysteries, for viewers to solve (Gothic Web 2.0 story: Marble Hornets, 2010). What's more interesting is that while the *Marble Hornets* channel has disabled comments on their videos, *TotheArk* has not. This allowed viewers to directly interact with content on the channel. And interact they did, as numerous YouTube users commented on the videos supplied with their ideas and theories.

The *Marble Hornets* series is what can be referred to as an alternate reality game (ARG), an “obsession-inspiring genre that blends real-life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, video games and online community,” (Borland, 2005). These games fuse fantasy and the real world in order to invoke total immersion. This fits in with the creators’ decision to utilize found footage for the *Marble Hornets* series.

ARGs often utilize clues in actual newspaper advertisements, late night phone calls, emails from game characters, and more. This format “has proven irresistible to many ... it really is very immersive,” (Borland, 2005). The ARG began as a marketing campaign. Since people now generally ignore advertisements, companies “give them entertainment value first before we make any kind of pitch or ask them to hand over any kind of money. It builds good will” (Takahashi, 2007). Thousands of web pages and other online content were created for the sole purpose of marketing Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.* and Microsoft’s *Halo 2*, and encouraging users to interact with content (Borland, 2005). The marketing teams even somehow were able to make 50,000 pay phones ring at once during the ilovebees.com campaign (Takahashi, 2007). That interaction is what makes the ARG a Web 2.0 phenomenon.

*Marble Hornets*, being an ARG, utilized the aforementioned tactics to find success. “The most successful and commonly discussed ARGs have several things in common: all are based around the genres of science fiction and/or horror and most are based on pre-existing narrative properties, and as such function as a form of marketing for the film or television show of which it is a part” (Mitchell, Thue, & Fernández-Vara, 2014, p. 149). *Marble Hornets* fits the profile. It’s a horror series; it is based on a pre-existing narrative, that of the Slender Man; and, though it is not marketing for a larger project, it does serve as a sort of marketing for the Slender Man meme.

Since the original YouTube channel seems to have disabled user comments on the videos provided, the Twitter page and *TotheArk* offer places for users to directly communicate with characters in the series, like Jay and Alex (Hartley, 2014). Encouraging this two-way communication is a large aspect of Web 2.0 culture, as it involves “people communicating their text, image and video messages to a much wider audience and with much more feedback in more real-time. It also allows people from faraway places to collaborate,” (Manno & Shahrabi, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Though inactive since the summer of 2014, there has been no definite end to the *Marble Hornets* series. Whether or not there will be, the Internet will most likely not stop producing content about the Slender Man. As the developed world transitions from smartphones to smart watches, the way of presenting stories like the aforementioned will change. Google has already released Google Cardboard, their virtual reality headset for games on Android phones that promises “immersive experiences for everyone,” (Google). Google Cardboard’s goal is to develop “accessible virtual reality (VR) tools to allow everyone to enjoy VR in a simple, fun, and natural way. The Cardboard SDKs for Android and Unity enable you to quickly start creating VR apps or adapt your existing application for VR,” (Google). This supposedly easy-to-use interface promotes the creation of user-generated content (UGC) by amateurs. Also, with the ever-popular pastime of geocaching – “a real-world, outdoor treasure-hunting game using GPS enabled devices” – the possibilities regarding how ARGs can expand their reach to a large amount of participants in creative ways are endless (Geocaching 101, 2015). No matter how the horror genre expands and improves, *Marble Hornets* will have paved the way for such innovation in a Web 2.0 world.

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