Image courtesy Cachét Whitman: http://pirate-cashoo.deviantart.com

The Slenderman

Tracing the birth and evolution of a modern monster

by *Ian 'Cat' Vincent*

We don't often get to see the birth of a monster. Just over two years ago, a new monster was born. Because it was born on the internet, we can see the exact moment of its conception. We can follow its growth from a pair of photographs into a full-fledged mythology. We can see the point where it crossed over from a merely imaginal creature into something that haunts the minds of many. And we can see exactly when it became a creature of true occult significance. Its path is clear and distinct. Its legacy is undeniable.

The monster's name is Slenderman. And its influence continues to grow.

Something Awful

Slenderman's birth-date is June 10th, 2009. Its father is a Photoshop artist who goes by the name Victor Surge. Its birth-place was a forum thread of the popular site somethingawful.com, noted for its many Photoshop competitions. The remit for this particular competition was, simply: "Create Paranormal Images". The resulting forum thread ran for two days before Surge posted his pair of pictures – at which point, the thread pretty much became solely about Surge's creation.

Both of Victor Surge's original Slenderman pictures are simple, evocative black and white images of children. In the first, a group of kids are walking away from, or possibly fleeing…something. In the second (see opposite page), other children are playing in a park, where a similar figure lurks nearly invisibly behind the slide and trees.

The monster in their midst appears to be an unusually tall, possibly bald, pale man in a black suit and tie, whose face cannot be discerned. In the second picture, there is a hint that the figure's bizarrely long arms are transforming into tentacles. In both images, the figure is barely visible, almost blurring into the background.
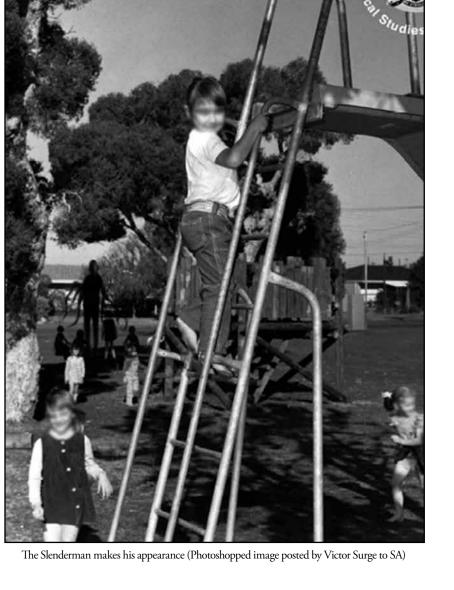
Under each image is a quote from the alleged original archivist. The first reads:

> "…we didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but it's persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time…"

> – 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.

The second quote gives the monster its name:

> "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

The Slenderman makes his appearance (Photoshopped image posted by Victor Surge to SA)

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.

The very next user comment, from 'slidebite', is prescient: "You just know a couple of the good ones are going to eventually make it to paranormal websites and be used as genuine." Even at this early juncture, there appears a tendency to blur the line between fact and fantasy. Surge's next comment, in response to a post hoping for more Slenderman pictures, reads: "Maybe I'll do some more research. I've heard there may be a couple more legit 'Slender Man' photographs out there. I'll post them if I find them."

Over the next five days, Surge posted several more pictures of the creature, whose name shifted from "Slender Man" to "Slenderman". Several other users were thoroughly hooked by the idea, contributing a variety of additions to the burgeoning mythology – from other 'Photoshopped' pictures to short prose pieces. Some contributors expanded on the background history – a tendency which soon became a popular past-time among aficionados. The earliest of these, from user 'Thoreau-Up' (15 June 2009, 0103hrs), tied Slenderman into German medieval folk tales:

> I've been following the signs for quite some time. 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' then goes on to provide the following "chilling account from an old journal, dating around 1702 (translated from German, some words may be inaccurate)":

> My child, my Lars… He is gone. Taken, from his bed. The only thing that we found was a scrap of black clothing. It feels like cotton, but it is softer…thicker. Lars came into my bedroom yesterday, screaming at the top of his lungs that "The angel is outside!", I asked him what he was talking about, and he told me some nonsense fairy story about *Der Großmann*. He said he went into the groves by our village and found one of my cows dead, hanging from a tree. I thought nothing of it at first… But now, he is gone. We must find Lars, and my family must leave before we are killed. I am sorry my son… I should have listened. May God forgive me.

He finishes by remarking that there is "more evidence of the slender man, but this is one of the oldest translatable accounts. Anyone else in the thread found anything like this?"

A couple of hours after this post came the earliest hint that Slenderman's nature was moving beyond merely a collaborative fiction into an altogether more sinister realm. From a user simply named 'I' came this chilling post:

> The Slender Man. He exists because you thought of him. Now try and not think of him.

By the end of June 15, there was a notable growth spurt – several stories of Slenderman, set in time periods from 5000BCE to the Middle Ages to the 1950s to the present, appeared within a few hours. And, ominously, several members of the forum posted that they were having nightmares about Slenderman…

The next day, user 'LeechCode5' made a post which would perhaps go on to inspire the next stage of Slenderman's development:

I'm suddenly imagining a Slender Man "documentary," done in a style similar to *The Last Broadcast* or that old Alien Abduction tv special. Interviews with witnesses of various encounters through the years, investigation into the different events brought up in this thread, and specialists analyzing photographs, intercut around home video footage taken by a missing family, showing them being picked off by the Slender Man. As we get further into the film, we also start to see behind the scenes footage of the making of the 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.

The first of many such videos – *Marble Hornets* – appeared within days and became an enormous success on YouTube, inspiring a huge expansion of Slenderman's fan-base. But more of that later…

Although there were still some postings of new Photoshop art around the original "Create Paranormal Photo" theme, the majority of the somethingawful.com (SA) thread now revolved around Slenderman. Many of the fiction contributions took the form of transcripts from interviews with victims of Slenderman, often set in either police or psychiatric interrogation contexts. Some of these were rapidly adapted into short sound pieces, as a kind of minimalist modern radio play.

The outpouring of creativity around those initial pair of images was remarkable, even for a high-traffic site noted for its intensely creative and enthusiastic members. Debate ranged widely about the nature of Slenderman – trying to establish whether or not there was a single entity or several Slendermen, and what precisely its background and nature were. An apt comment from 'JossiRossi', (16 June 2009, 1927hrs) : "I think it should be said that the closer you think you are to understanding the Slender Man, the more incorrect you really are."

The metafictional aspect of Slenderman dominated from the start. One contribution from 'BooDoug187' (same day, 2228hrs) told the tale of Go Waita, a Japanese manga writer whose work had been directly influenced by Slenderman's entry into his personal life:

Koga: Well, I guess my first question is about your most famed creation, Suited Demon…
Waita: I didn't create him.
Koga: Oh… well who did? A friend?
Waita: He's real.
Koga: Real? A creature like that is real? Rapeing (sic) school girls…
Waita: The sex and surprise sex in my stories aren't my idea. That's something the editors and others wanted…the demon is real.
Koga: How do you know this?
Waita: I've seen it…it killed my sister.
Koga: You seen it kill?

Waita just looks at me. He then stands up, walks to his bookcase and pulls out a large, old sketch book. He opens it and shows me drawings of the Suited Demon carrying a young child into the woods. As I flip through the pages the story that plays out is like one that plays out in many of Waita's books, except no graphic sex.

Waita: The girl in those pictures is my sister. She was seven years old when the demon took her.
Koga: How did you see this happen?
Waita: I followed her and the demon into the woods. I was eleven at the time. I thought that the demon was a man…a child molester trying to harm my sister. I followed them into the woods…that's when I watch it happen.
Koga: You didn't try to help?
Waita: I couldn't I was stunned in terror when I saw it's true form… when I saw it tear into her… It didn't see me…or if it did it didn't

care. I must have sat there for several hours because my father was the one who found me the next morning. I tried to tell the police what I saw but they said that I must have been in shock. That I must have been forced to watch some killer murder my sister.

Koga: I see… I'm sorry to bring it up…but if this haunts you… why base so many of your stories on it? Almost all your books are on this demon.

Waita: You don't get it…it's all I can draw…

This level of intense, terrified obsession as expressed by the fictional Go Waita underlies the entire thread. For several more days, the stories grew – as did the reports of nightmares. This example, from user 'LemoOHnade' (17 June 2009, 0720hrs), is pretty typical: "The Slender Man came to me in a dream and told me that he existed between 'everything' and 'nothing' and that time and matter are like toys(???), then he broke into tiny 'jellyfish' like things that swam away into my radiator."

One story offshoot of the original mythology involved a Black Ops branch of US intelligence known as 'Optic Nerve', who have had knowledge of Slenderman for decades, possibly centuries. Within this part of the story comes the first time one of Slenderman's key characteristics is expressed – that it is unkillable…

I have read the notes, looked through the files. There is no way on God's green Earth we will be able to do anything to stop this thing. In all my years with working cases for Optic Nerve I have seen things and proven many times before that supposed "Gods" can be killed.

But this…Slender Man… There is nothing in any records of anything thing even remotely hurting it. Reports ranging from small arms fire, artillery fire (the report from that Nazi Artillery team… that's what made me think about this) even full scale forest fires doesn't do anything!

This is a complete and total waste of time and man power. There is nothing you can say to me, or anyone in this branch that will make us change our minds. In a sick sad way the only thing we can do is keep a record of this thing.

We can't kill it No way in hell we can capture it.
(user 'BooDoug187', 17 June 2009, 0819hrs)

A day later, the previously briefly-suggested idea of Slenderman becoming the basis of an Alternate Reality Game (or ARG, of which more below) is proposed in detail. By now, the SA thread had received wider publicity, notably from that infamous source of many an internet meme, 4-Chan. A Wikipedia page had appeared. It was suggested in the SA forum that a series of fake websites be set up to subtly introduce the Slenderman mythos into the internet datastream, leaving its fictional origins aside and seeing who would end up believing it – for, as they say on 4-Chan, "the lulz". It was pretty much too late for this to be completely successful – anyone could track their way back to the original thread and find its origins. Instead, the narrative takes on a blurry, liminal quality – truth and fancy overlapping almost indistinguishably.

Not long after this point, the Slenderman story acquired two major developments. The first was the initial appearance of *Marble Hornet*s. The second development, one which moved the Slenderman mythos even further from the realm of pure fiction into that of the truly paranormal, was the first use of a particular word to describe Slenderman: tulpa.

Marble Hornets, Alternate Reality

The first mention of *Marble Hornets* comes on June 18th, 2009. User 'ce gars' posted to the SA thread regarding a student film

he had collaborated on with a film school friend named Alex two years previously:

> It was called Marble Hornets and I think it was about a twenty something returning to his childhood home and recalling events that happened there. It was pretty pretentious film student fare, but I helped out for a few days before my summer classes started, and a few rare occasions after that. Everyone on the set seemed pretty excited to be making it, especially Alex. The set itself was about half a mile away from Alex's house, roughly a thirty minute drive away from where I lived at the time. It was a pretty heavily wooded area, I guess to give it a sparsely populated small town feel. Most of the movie took place outside.

> After about two months of off and on shooting, Alex dropped his pet project completely. It was really sudden when he let me know about it. When I asked him why, he told me it was because of the "unworkable conditions" of where he had picked to shoot. Which struck me as very odd since he had been living around that area since he was eight, and never seemed to have a problem with it. What's even stranger is that he acted incredibly distant when telling me this news. Soon after, he started avoiding me and from what I hear, everyone else. All he did was sit around his house.

User 'ce gars' (aka Jay) contacted Alex to see how he was:

> Something about him was worse than I'd originally thought. He had lost a good bit of weight, and looked pretty sickly. I pretended like I didn't notice and we just hung out for awhile. Right before I left, I asked him about Marble Hornets and what he was planning on doing with all of his tapes of raw footage. With almost no hesitation, he simply said "burn them".

This caught me off guard. When I asked why he didn't just archive them for B-roll in future projects, he just said he never wanted to work with the footage again. He was completely serious about this. I couldn't understand why he'd just want to get rid of it completely. Surely it wasn't all that useless. So I asked if I could take a look at them.

> He agreed, but only under the circumstance that I never bring them back to him, and never discuss what was on them with him. He also highly discouraged me from showing any if it to anyone else. I laughed at this, and said that he must have accidentally made *The Ring* or something with the way he was talking. He didn't acknowledge this and brought me up to his attic, where he was storing the pile of tapes.

> There were tons of them…

Alex gave Jay the bag of tapes and unceremoniously threw him out of the house, saying, "I'm not kidding, don't ever bring this up around me again." Jay filed the tapes, and was only drawn to take another look at them when the Slenderman thread at SA nudged his memory.

> I've decided to begin going through the tapes later tonight. If I don't do it now, I probably never will. I'm hoping all I find is an unfinished student film and nothing else. That would sure put me at ease now that I'm thinking about it again. If there's interest, I'll post anything that I find on here.

The first clip was posted to YouTube on June 20th, 2009, and linked to on the SA thread. Further postings followed, continuing to this day.

Marble Hornets is, if nothing else, an exemplary example of the found-footage horror genre. The breakthrough film of this type – *The Blair Witch Project* – sums up the basic idea nicely; footage from

a lost or vanished film crew is reconstructed and edited so as to tell the story of their disappearance. The lifelike *Cinéma vérité* elements, combined with the ability to make such films very cheaply indeed, have contributed to their popularity – even resulting in relatively high-budgeted Hollywood assays into the field, such as *Paranormal Activity*, *The Last Exorcist* and *Apollo 18*.

Even for such a fruitful genre, *Marble Hornets* is an exceptional piece of work. Made for an initial budget of around $300 by student film-makers Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage, each episode slowly builds dramatic tension to a series of genuinely shocking moments. Certain scenes, frankly, scared the shit out of me – and I'm a lifelong horror fan who's done more than my fair share of intensely spooky field paranormal work.

Marble Hornets (hereafter referred to as *MH*) brings a series of disturbing new aspects to the mythos, which have been carried over into later works. Principle among these are:

- Slenderman is shown to have a powerful physical effect on those who he has chosen (or, perhaps, who have chosen to pursue him) – victims are prone to violent coughing fits, often accompanied with blood. They black out, losing periods of time from a few hours to three months. During these periods of lost time, they often perform activities very different from their conscious behaviour – including murder.

- Some victims take on sinister new personalities during these episodes; donning masks, scrawling bizarre messages. A key image in these scribblings is the so-called Operator Symbol – a circle with a cross through it, written in text as (x). This clearly relates to Slenderman in some way (the film-makers have referred to their version of Slenderman as 'The Operator' several times) but whether the Operator Symbol is used to represent, summon or protect one from Slenderman is unknown.

- The presence of Slenderman is shown to have an effect on audio-visual recording equipment – strange noises creep into the soundtrack when Slenderman (or those he is influencing) move into shot. The image itself distorts, flares, sometimes breaks down into static or apparently-random geometric figures.

- Slenderman seems to have an affinity with, and possibly control of, doorways and other passageways. He is seen to creep from the doorways of rooms previously shown to be empty, or to lure people through doors into places which by all rights should not be accessible through that door. In many ways, Slenderman is an avatar of liminality itself.

The *MH* story builds on this continually. 'Jay' (played by Wagner), the original uploader of the YouTube clips, soon finds himself haunted by Slenderman in the precise way that 'Alex' (the director of the original footage, played by DeLage) is shown to be within those clips. And then (some nine episodes into *MH's* initial run) somebody else, using the name 'totheark', began posting clips in response/commentary to Jay's posts – some of which show footage of Jay himself. Sometimes, postings by 'totheark' came from Jay's own YouTube account…

The 'totheark' postings are, of course, also part of the story Wagner and DeLage are telling. The clips attributed to 'totheark' not only counterpoint the initial Jay posts, but contain hidden clues to the nature of Slenderman concealed within them, using various forms of visual and auditory steganography (encoding messages within the content of another message). This aspect of the storytelling puts *Marble Hornets* firmly within another powerful internet-born motif, the Alternate Reality Game, or ARG. ARGs have been around since 1996, although there are many precursors and influences to the concept in fiction, such as the deeply odd British 1990s TV show *The One Game* and the David Fincher film *The Game*. A FAQ on the subject defines them as an experience "that encourages players (you!) to interact with a fictional world using the real world to do it."

Players of an ARG are asked to look for clues to further the game's storyline in a variety of media – websites, film clips, even co-opted advertising – and often take part in exchanges of email and other communication with those running the game. The ARG acts as a kind of filter through which the 'real' world can be seen, usually exposing a complex conspiracy within the context of the game. The more you participate, the more you learn. Players usually communicate on a variety of message boards set up either by the game creators or the players themselves (a very good, slightly fictionalized take on how ARGs work can be found in Walter Jon Williams' novel *This Is Not A Game*).

Often ARGs are a secondary form of advertising for a media product – one of the first ARGs was used to publicise the Spielberg film *AI*, and one of the most popular, "I Love Bees", was part of the ad campaign for the game *Halo 2.* Sometimes though, an ARG happens simply because a large and enthusiastic enough group of internet users decide to create one.

The first mention of ARGs in relation to Slenderman can be found in the Something Awful thread on 15th June 2009, 0223 – user 'MooseyFate' posted:

Example of image modification to incorporate Slenderman mythos – modified version by SA poster 'GyverMac' on the left, original on right.

I LOVE this type of thing. Something just feels satisfying about causing mass hysteria. I think we could roll with this slender man thing. Maybe if we make enough images and maybe if some talents can make fake videos, it could grow to ARG proportions (minus the advertising).

Most, if not all, of the subsequent Slenderman material could be seen as facets of a single, massive ARG. The premiere website for followers and participants of ARGs is unfiction.com – and unsurprisingly, there is a great amount of material about Slenderman, and *MH* in particular, there. And by a great amount, I mean: the original *MH* thread alone was locked after 323 pages…and there are dozens of other *MH*-related threads.

Although *MH* was the first, it was far from the only video-based work to feature Slenderman. There are now dozens of such series, most of them posted in instalments to YouTube in the same manner as *MH*. They vary in quality – and degree of viewer involvement expected – greatly. One of the strongest contenders for the most popular Slenderman video series, EverymanHYBRID, takes the commonly-used elements of steganography much further: viewers are encouraged to join in with the storyline in various email-and-Twitter-based competitions, including trying to find the locations of a series of geo-cached boxes containing further clues to the story's deeper background.

All of these different but parallel stories feed into each other, with ideas from one moving to others almost as if by osmosis. This recently culminated in a series of crossover videos where characters from *Marble Hornets*, *EverymanHYBRID* and another popular series, *DarkHarvest00*, appeared in the same YouTube releases.

All of the various series, however, occupy the same mythological space, whether or not each story is considered canon within another series. For example, EverymanHYBRID actually refers to Slenderman as an internet meme within the episodes – the videos begin as a supposed DIY keep-fit show, where the creators

had inserted a Slenderman background appearance as a joke… only for this to backfire drastically when their actions attract the unwanted attention of the 'real' Slenderman. As I mentioned earlier, metatextual elements are an integral part of the Slenderman mythos.

That mythos, as it has grown, has taken on more and more aspects which bring its fictional status across into a form of occult potentiality. Much of this revolves around a particular concept of the previously-fictional manifesting across into quotidian reality. This concept is best put in a single word of Tibetan - *Tulpa*.

'Thought-form'

The concept of Tulpas, the word itself, derives from ancient Tibetan magical and mystical praxis. The usual translation of the word is 'thought-form'.

The Tibetan mystical system is a complex patchwork – a syncretic mix of aspects of Buddhism, Taoism and the native pre-Buddhist Bön shamanic tradition. This mix is uneven at best – some areas of the Himalayan region spurned the majority of the Bön practices, while others barely paid lip service to the formal Buddhist arrangements which overlay their culture – not unlike a Voudon practitioner making a point of showing up to their local Catholic church every Sunday while maintaining a shrine to the Loas in their Christian disguises. As a result, some practices were more commonly available in particular areas. Most Buddhists would reject the tulpa idea as base superstition…but the idea remained entrenched in the native folklore.

The earliest report of the tulpa concept in the West came from a book written in the 1940s by the explorer and early Buddhist convert, Alexandra David-Neel. David-Neel was a remarkable woman. A determined explorer of both land and culture, she travelled extensively in the Far East (often with her son in tow!), eventually living in the Nepal-Tibet area, training formally in the Tibetan form of Buddhism and attaining the rank of Lama – one of the few women, certainly the only Western woman, ever to do so. In her book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, she describes her own experience with the tulpa concept – and her successful attempt to construct one:

> However interested we may feel in the other strange accomplishments with which Tibetan adepts of the secret lore are credited, the creation of thought forms seems by far the most puzzling.

> As I have said, some apparitions are created on purpose either by a lengthy process …or, in the case of proficient adepts, instantaneously or almost instantaneously. In other cases, apparently the author of the phenomenon generates it unconsciously, and is not even in the least aware of the apparition being seen by others.

> However, the practice is considered as fraught with danger for every one who has not reached a high mental and spiritual degree of enlightenment and is not fully aware of the nature of the psychic forces at work in the process.

> Once the tulpa is endowed with enough vitality to be capable of playing the part of a real being, it tends to free itself from its maker's control. This, say Tibetan occultists, happens nearly mechanically, just as the child, when his body is completed and able to live apart, leaves its mother's womb. Sometimes the phantom becomes a rebellious son and one hears of uncanny struggles that have taken place between magicians and their creatures, the former being severely hurt or even killed by the latter.

> Tibetan magicians also relate cases in which the tulpa is sent to fulfil a mission, but does not come back and pursues its peregrinations as a half-conscious, dangerously mischievous puppet. The same thing, it

is said, may happen when the maker of the tulpa dies before having dissolved it. Yet as a rule the phantom either disappears suddenly at the death of the magician or gradually vanishes like a body that perishes for want of food. On the other hand, some tulpas are expressly intended to survive their creator and are specially formed for that purpose.

Fascinated by this concept, David-Neel decided to experiment with creating a tulpa herself. To avoid the Lamaist influence (as, I suspect, a form of control on the experiment) she decided to base her tulpa on quite another set of imagery – a plump, jolly Christian monk, not unlike Friar Tuck of the Robin Hood legends:

> I shut myself in tsams (meditative seclusion) and proceeded to perform the prescribed concentration of thought and other rites. After a few months the phantom Monk was formed. His form grew gradually fixed and lifelike looking. He became a kind of guest, living in my apartment. I then broke my seclusion and started for a tour, with my servants and tents.
>
> The Monk included himself in the party. Though I lived in the open, riding on horseback for miles each day, the illusion persisted. I saw the fat tulpa; now and then it was not necessary for me to think of him to make him appear. The phantom performed various actions of the kind that are natural to travellers and that I had not commanded. For instance, he walked, stopped, looked around him. The illusion was mostly visual, but sometimes I felt as if a robe was lightly rubbing against me, and once a hand seemed to touch my shoulder.
>
> The features which I had imagined, when building my phantom, gradually underwent a change. The fat, chubby-cheeked fellow grew leaner, his face assumed a vaguely mocking, sly, malignant look. He became more troublesome and bold. In brief, he escaped my control. Once, a herdsman who brought me a present of butter saw the tulpa in my tent and took it for a living lama.

> I ought to have let the phenomenon follow its course, but the presence of that unwanted companion began to prove trying to my nerves; it turned into a "day-nightmare". Moreover, I was beginning to plan my journey to Lhasa and needed a quiet brain devoid of other preoccupations, so I decided to dissolve the phantom. I succeeded, but only after six months of hard struggle. *My mind-creature was tenacious of life.* (Emphasis mine.)
>
> There is nothing strange in the fact that I may have created my own hallucination. The interesting point is that in these cases of materialization, others see the thought-forms that have been created.

The tulpa has been absorbed into modern magical theory via the Chaos Magic school – the inveterate pack-rat nature of Chaos practitioners means that few if any of the world's occult and mystical concepts have gone untapped…and the possibility of making imagination manifest in such a direct form meshes nicely with their concepts of Servitor and Egregore, and with the memetic transmission of occult ideas and powers. So, the possibility of constructing a tulpa is relatively well-known in modern magical praxis – which may or may not have influenced its appearance as an integral part of the Slenderman mythos.

The first hint within Slenderman canon that 'Slendy' was perhaps a form of tulpa appeared early on in the original somethingawful.com thread. As noted above, it was in the post from 'I' saying "He exists because you thought of him. Now try and not think of him."

The first direct reference to Tulpas, however, came on 20th July 2009 – the day after the first *Marble Hornets* video and only ten days from Victor Surge's initial post. Here is how user 'Soakie' put it:

> Has anyone thought about the possibility that we are creating a tulpa? It's a thought form that is realized through the efforts of a group of people. We might be creating the Slender Man, making him real. The Toronto Society for Psychical Research did this with an entity called

"Philip" in the mid-1970s. There was a book written about it, called *Conjuring Up Philip*. "He" was a fictional person, knowingly created by the group. It was all fun and games until "Philip" started to take on a mind of his own. "Philip" became real, as far as any paranormal thing could be said to be real. So take all this with a big grain of salt.

How long until there is agreement about what the Slender Man looks like? When will he have a specific MO? Can the hidden superstitious heart of the SA Goons give Slenderman an independent existence? Think about it, a few hundred or maybe even a thousand Goons, all looking at the pictures and creating the stories. I find myself looking at the shadows, imagining how they might fall together to show a lurking Slenderman. 'Slendy' pulls so many primal strings: his wrongness to our eyes, the hair on the back of the neck rising, the subconscious "Nonononono" that bursts across the imagination. He drags the monsters out of the back of our modern minds. He is a satisfactory boogie-man, pressing all the right buttons. Even if we don't really believe in the supernatural, even if our rational minds laugh at such an absurdity…we are cutting him out and sewing him together. We're stuffing him with nightmares and unspoken fears.And what happens when the pictures are no longer Photoshop creations…?

From this point on, Slenderman-as-tulpa became effectively canon. This raises an interesting, perhaps worrying, possibility: Even if Slenderman started out purely as an invented creature, has it stayed that way? Has naming it as a tulpa, in effect, given it the power to be created as one?

The problem with answering this decisively is an essential part of the nature of the beast. Although those involved in ARGs are (indeed, have to be) scrupulous in their discussions of what is and is not OOG (Out-Of-Game – i.e. actual comments regarding the creation and playing of the game rather than the story elements themselves), there is some inevitable bleed-through between the two. So, when (for example) the popular Fortean radio talk show 'Coast

To Coast' gets several callers describing their Slenderman encounters, can we – should we – take those stories to be true? Does it matter?

The Slenderman meme is spreading rapidly across the internet. At this point there are dozens of video series, dozens more first-person blogs telling serialized stories within the mythos. Hundreds, maybe thousands of enthusiastic creators, yet more following the phenomenon avidly. News articles about the phenomenon are starting to appear. Other media are beginning to pay attention to the Slenderman story. (The popular game Minecraft, for instance, added a character called Enderman – explicitly based on Slenderman – in a recent game update.) Popular bloggers and Twitter users often refer to Slenderman in their posts. Slenderman is going, as they say, viral. And as the virus spreads, so do the symptoms…

On the internet, nobody knows if you're a dog. Or a tulpa. And if enough people describe something as a thought-form…could this collective imagining actually make that form manifest?

And, if that form does manifest – this powerful, terrifying, unkillable thing called Slenderman – how can we fight it?

Ian 'Cat' Vincent was born on Imbolc-Groundhog Day in Gravesend, England, 1964. He is a lifelong student of the occult, and a former professional combat magician, curse-breaker and exorcist. In recent years, he has focused on exploring the utility of the 'hyper-real' (fiction-inspired) belief systems. His writing on Forteana and magic, especially on the personal magical style he terms 'Guttershaman', can be found at http://catvincent.com. He is also a staff writer at http://weaponizer.co.uk and http://modernmythology.net and co-curates the consciousness news/discussion group http://fuckyeahconsciousness.tumblr.com. He lives in England with his partner, the artist/writer Kirsty Hall. He is often found on Twitter as @catvincent.

He knows how to kill a Slenderman. Honest.