# OCARINA OF TIME: A Masterclass In Subtext

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Sorrow is no stranger to Zelda stories.

Casting shadows over all of the exploration, puzzle solving, monster battles and rescue missions, loom big clouds of sadness that over the course of the series has been the Zelda ingredient the writers have been slowly directing our attention to the most.

Sorrow is being written like a disease - a virus infecting the happiness of each story world and Link, the hero of these stories, assumes the role of the **healer** - burdened with flushing out the virus and restoring healthy emotional balances to each one.

More often than not, it's the supporting characters that carry this **sorrow disease** and their dialogue is constantly connecting these 2 themes of **healing** and **sadness** together, asking Link to **heal their sorrows** and **ease their Regrets**.

Titles like Majora's Mask and Twilight Princess go so far as to position these themes of **sadness and regret** into the opening dialogue, while Wind Waker and Breath Of The Wild throw Link into broken worlds already operating in the aftermath of destruction, **easing the regrets** of the characters as they awaken to fulfill their destiny.



Oracle of Ages and Seasons use flames of **Sorrow and Despair** as the villain's dominant threat upon the world, but what's important is that all of this sorrowful dialogue is unavoidable - necessary rites of passage for story progression and all Zelda stories carry that Zelda Sorrow Language like this.

## Except one.



(Mood shift)

While overflowing with sadness, the fifth entry in the series, Ocarina Of Time is often overlooked when it comes to discussing which Zelda story is the saddest and this might be because Ocarina director Shigeru Miyamoto and script director Toru Osawa don't use that the Zelda Sorrow Language like its successors. Those recurring themes of sorrow, regret, sadness, and even healing appear nowhere in any corner of the script. Instead, Osawa sprinkles throughout the character dialogue this kind of off-center cryptic poetic language.

#### Themes like:

- -The clear waters surface reflects growth
- -Melodies that draw you into infinite darkness
- -memories of younger days
- -the flow of time is always cruel
- -being consumed by greed
- -childish minds turn to noble ambition

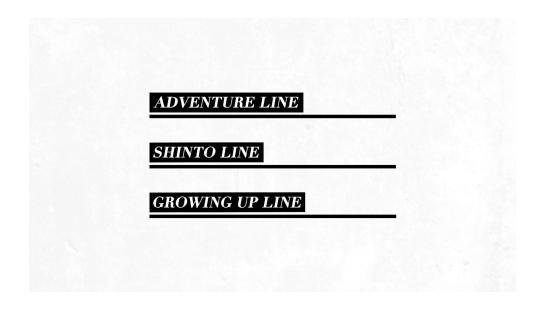
In the past, these themes have been discussed as standalone sentences, called upon in singular form to assist theories or arguments generated among the Zelda community.

But tracking this language back through Ocarina's entire script, begins to reveal a few continuous thematic threads that when isolated, actually form the skeletons of not only one but two narratively complete stories of sorrow.

With the bones of these 2 threads now in mind, small details that add to the muscle of these stories begin to pop out.

Miyamoto and Osawa have used everything in the Ocarina toolbox - dialogue locations, characters, nature, events, architecture, mechanics and sound design - to hide away subtle clues that all point back to these 2 sorrow threads.

Instead of casting obvious clouds of sadness above the adventure through such direct sorrowful dialogue, the creative team have buried sadness down in the subtext of the story and as we begin to uncover all of these hidden details, it becomes clear that Ocarina Of Time is without a doubt, the saddest Zelda story no one noticed.



In order to make sense of Miyamoto and Osawa's 2 sorrow threads, we first need to take a look at the beats that construct Ocarina Of Time's main adventure, and the story opens on The Great Deku Tree sending Navi the fairy to summon Link for a meeting.

Sword and shield in hand, Link is warned by The Deku Tree of an evil spreading across the land of Hyrule and is sent to gather the 3 spiritual stones before Ganondorf does. One inside the tree, one in a cave and one in the belly of a giant fish.

Using the 3 stones and the Ocarina Of Time given to him by Princess Zelda, Link accidently leads Ganondorf into the sacred realm and subsequently, to the triforce, granting him one evil wish - govern Hyrule.

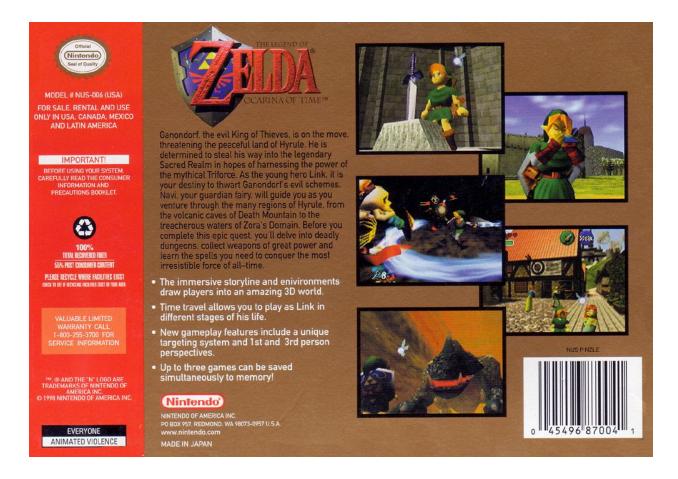


Link sleeps for 7 years and wakes as an adult to discover the once healthy Hyrule is now Dark Hyrule and is sent on a new quest to destroy the curses now skulking inside Hyrule's 5 temples.

Through tackling this evil, all 5 sages are awakened - Link's once childhood friends now transcended to the position of Guardian over each realm of Hyrule - forest, mountain, lake, underworld, desert.

With their help, Link takes down Ganondorf and saves Zelda and after succeeding, is sent back in time before Ganondorf hatches his plan.

This top adventure line is the face of Ocarina and is essentially the blurb on the back of the box, complete with deadly dungeons, weapons of great power, and time travel.



## (mood shift)

So where do these 2 sorrow threads come into play? Well, they Actually begin where the entire Ocarina narrative begins in that harrowing scene I showed in the prologue,

## (mood shift)

This scene with the Deku Tree's death is by far the most dense in its layered symbolism in that its meaning translates differently depending on which 1 of Osawa's 3 threads is being followed. On the adventure line, his death is used as the vehicle to establish Link's motivation - a curse spreads across Hyrule and Link witnesses the effects first hand in the Deku Tree's death. Off Link goes.

But the first sorrow thread though specifically requires attention paid not to why the Deku Tree died but how.

Emphasis is placed heavily on the importance of life and natural balance across Ocarina Of Time. Before his death, the Deku Tree recounts to Link Hyrule's creation story in detail. Three goddesses, each with their own divine spirit of power, wisdom and courage, cultivate the land, the law, and life to uphold that

law in Hyrule.

With this creation story embedded in the DNA of Ocarina's larger narrative, the land Of Hyrule is inaugurated not just as a blank world serving Link's exploration, but as a *living breathing organism* - almost sentient with different moods, weather conditions and sleeping patterns.

Following the creation story, the Deku Tree goes on to speak of a **wicked man of** the desert who was the one to cast the death curse on the tree and it's here in the tension of Hyrule's natural balance and the death curse that Osawa's 1st thread begins to take shape.

While the characters in other Zelda stories are the direct victims of the series' sorrow disease, in Ocarina it is **Hyrule's nature** that has been afflicted by Ganondorf's curse.

Link is restoring a natural order tipped off-balance and this quest for purification echoes the ethics found in the japanese home-grown religion of Shintoism.



That's Miyamoto at the Fushimi Inari Shrine in Southern Kyoto in Japan - Miyamoto and Osawa's childhood hometown. While the direct influence of this Shinto shrine can be found in Miyamoto's Starfox series, the broader spirit of the Shinto faith is embedded on a larger scale across his entire gameography, none more so than the Zelda series which are always stories reverberating off the needs and rhythm of nature.

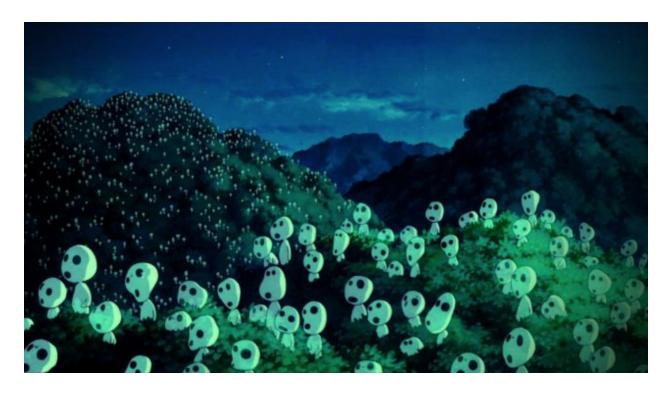
Yet, no Zelda story is quite as distilled in its use of Shintoist ethics than Ocarina Of Time and this is the first sorrow thread - The Shinto Line.

## SHINTO LINE

A great love and respect for nature is the defining foundation of the Shinto religion. The minutiae of a moral compass is replaced with harvesting a desire to remain in touch with Kami - the spiritual energy of a particular place or a member of nature.

The name Kami can be translated to 'Gods' or 'Nature Spirits' while the name Shinto literally translates to **The Way Of The Gods**. The fox Miyamoto addresses at the Fushimi Inari shrine is considered a messenger of the Inari god - 'Inari' being the name of the mountain the shrine sits at the base of - believed to host the god of rice, fertility and industry.

Purification is a key aspect of all ritual activity in Shinto and it exists to reestablish order and balance between nature, humans, and deities. Purification rituals counteract the threat of pollution, which is considered an obstruction to the flow of life and blessing from the kami.



The anthropomorphisation or physical representation of Kami spirits in fiction isn't uncommon and the best visual example might be from Studio Ghibli's Princess Mononoke - a film that borrows heavily from Shintoist artifacts. The biggest examples being the lives of the boars, wolves, the Kodama, who represent the spirits of individual trees, and The Forest Spirit, a symbol of harmony who embodies the larger Kami of the entire forest. In Mononoke, San and Ashitaka are seen as the saviors in a world that has forgot about Kami, rhythm, nature, and consequently, ultimate importance.

Miyamoto and Osawa's work in Ocarina Of Time also borrow from the same shintoist framework.

Different villages with their own unique races occupy different areas of Hyrule and each race is bound elementally to their own section of nature.

Gorons to mountain and fire, Zoras to water and Kokiri to forest. These rural kami-like races dedicate their worship towards the greater nature spirits - the Great Deku Tree, in which, similarly to the Forest Spirit in Mononoke, embodies the Kami of Kokiri Forest, and Lord Jabu Jabu, the patron deity of the Zora race, thought to embody the divine spirit and protector of the Zora ancestral lands, always sitting in some sort of altar.

Jabu only grants entry when presented with a fish offering and this concept of offering food like rice and fish is taken directly from Shintoist practices.



The beta version of this scene shows a pedestal with an Ocarina engraved on top, suggesting that **music** was originally required to open Jabu-Jabu's mouth and this references a Shintoist ritual practice called Kagura, aka 'god-entertainment', which is used during festivals to appease kami spirits.





In fact, music in Ocarina is the direct replacement for these Shintoist rituals. Saria explains that music can be used to speak to the spirits of the forest and moments exist when music and dance are used to bring happiness to those elementally-bound occupants across Hyrule.



In Ocarina, music calls down rain, splits waterfalls, summons the sun and moon, and calls a horse to Link's side - music here plays the role of connecting Link directly to the rhythm of Hyrule's nature.

But Osawa and Miyamoto also achieve this connection through other subtle design elements.

The 3 dungeons Link must explore first during his childhood phase are all environments crafted directly from the greater nature deities: Inside the Deku Tree, Inside Jabu-Jabu's belly, and inside Dodongo's cavern, which upon closer inspection is actually built from the remains of an old dinosaur with skulls and ribcages etc. Link then purifies each dungeon - ridding them of the infestations placed there by Ganondorf and is rewarded with one of the 3 spiritual stones - symbols of that section of nature he's purified - forest, mountain, water.



These elemental stones are then used to open the Door Of Time, and the sacred act of opening the sanctuary door during Shinto ceremonies is also recreated here - music once again used to replace the concept of **ritual** to open the door to the **sacred realm** and access to the gods.

(beat)

Link's childhood phase is dedicated predominately to connecting him with the idea of what a healthy Hyrule looks like and Osawa and Miyamoto place such a strong emphasis on this to allow for the tragedy of what happens next hit harder.

(mood shift)

Shintoism largely died in the post-World War 2 era.

In the aftermath of the war, most Japanese came to believe that the hubris of Empire had led to their downfall. Lust for territory blinded their leaders to the importance of their homeland.

We see this theme of territorial conquest playing out through both villains in Ocarina and Mononoke, Ganondorf and Lady Eboshi - whose objectives are on the domination of the world rather than seeking to establish harmony. Eboshi plans to kill the forest spirit in order to stop the spread of nature, making it easier for her town to conquer and prosper in the iron-rich grounds of the area.

Ganondorf, in his quest of greed to gain complete mastery of the world, places curses upon all of Hyrule's nature Deities and with Kami now disregarded, nature retaliates.

Kami spirits are of two minds. They can nurture and love when respected, or they can bring destruction and disharmony when disregarded.



And so while manifesting into only smaller monsters during Link's childhood phase with Parasitic spiders in the Deku Tree, dinosaur infestations in the cave and electric leech-like anemone's in Jabu Jabu's belly, when Link wakes after that 7 years, the effects of the curse now affect **Dark Hyrule** at large.

Lake Hylia has been drained, Death Mountain suffers from endless eruption, monsters cover the floor of Kokiri Forest, dark spirits are set loose in Kakariko Village and Ganondorf's minions gather in the desert. Shintoism also believes that upon death, souls with unsettled disputes in life become ghosts - and so the appearance of big Poe ghosts across Hyrule, spirits of concentrated hatred, are now an occurrence.

Instead of dungeons crafted from Hyrule's nature, The dungeons Link must purify as an adult now have **man-made** qualities to their architecture, echoing the sentiment that the world Link now occupies is built on the strength of man instead of natural balance.



At the lake bottom there is a Water Temple used to worship the water spirits

## (beat)

And so the **Shinto Line** is really a story about the battle over the nature of Hyrule and Link is the cure - purifying the world with his music and weapons of great power.

After destroying the manifestations of the curse in each temple, Hyrule physically begins a process of healing and the new awakened sages reward Link with elemental medallions: Light, forest, fire, water, shadow, and spirit.



With the forest now purified, a Deku Sprout shoots up to one day grow and become the new Deku Tree. The volcano is calmed, the ice melts in Zora's

domain, the lake refills with clear water, and the infinite darkness is destroyed in the underworld.

An element of the Shinto creation Myth is the existence of a land of the dead called **Yomi** - an *evil realm* where the dead reside. The spirits living in Yomi are malicious and lonely, and try to drag people down from the land of the living.



At the very end, Ganondorf's castle - the beacon of Hyrule's pollution - crumbles and the light sage calls upon the gods to open the sealed door and send Ganondorf into the void of Evil Realm. Ganondorf is sent to Yomi.

(beat)

Conclusion: (slower and more thoughtful pace i guess)

And so Miyamoto and Osawa's first sorrow thread is in essence, a message about nature and the importance of striking a harmony with it. Greed and hatred are a pollution to this natural balance and if we do not respect it, nature will surely retaliate.

Who knows what might happen to those who are consumed by greed?



(Mood shift)

Osawa's 3rd and final thread might be the most important and requires attention paid to these last pieces of poetic dialogue - newborn's life, growth, childish minds, memories of younger days etc.

These kinds of references to age and growth are nowhere to be found in other Zelda stories but Link's age is the focus of about 90% of all the characters in Ocarina Of Time.

Before Link enters the Sacred Realm to sleep for that 7 years, the supporting characters make sure Link knows exactly how little the world expects of him. Just a kid, just a little kid, fairy boy, forest boy, kid, kid, kid, sonny, kid, fairy boy, boy, lad, son, kid, boy, kid, kid, boy, forest boy, fairy boy, son, little kid, and kid.

Seeing Link for the child that he is is a relatively fair assessment and these references to his disposition would render unimportant if it weren't for the equally ferocious obsession the characters have with the idea of Manhood. Becoming a 'man' is an ideology the characters, including Link's childhood friends, seem to consider as the highest level of honour. There's talk of being a real man, not being a real man without a fairy, Darunia wanting Link to prove he is a real man, Princess Ruto telling Link he has been a terrible man to keep her waiting, and Nabooru wishing she had kept her promise all those years ago after seeing how handsome Link had become as a man.

The third thread for Link is an inward journey. It is Osawa's exploration of the transition from childhood to adulthood and just like the real world, it is both awkward and tragic.

It's the growing up line.

## **GROWING UP LINE**

If threads one and two are about **why** and **how** the Deku Tree died, then finding a foothold in the Growing Up Line requires an examination into **who** the Deku Tree is.

The children of Kokiri Forest describe The Deku Tree as not only the guardian of the entire forest, but also their Father - claiming that he was the one to give life to the Kokiri race as well as everything in the forest.

The name KOKIRI, when translated from japanese Kanji to English, echoes this sentiment with **Ko meaning kid or child and Ki meaning tree**.

So here we have 'children of the tree' which not only aligns with themes explored on the Shinto Line, but gives the entire Forest a childlike attitude. The layout of the forest is a playground with ladders, ramps, treehouses, secret crawling holes and mazes. Similar to Neverland from the Peter Pan

stories, Kokiri Forest exists as this insular magical realm separate from the real world. Children never grow up here and each child is allied with a fairy companion - the mark of a true Kokiri - and the story begins with the Deku Tree sending Link his very first fairy companion, Navi.



And so Kokiri Forest is the physical representation of Link's childhood and THIS is the foothold for the growing up line.

Though as carefree as it appears, Kokiri Forest isn't without sadness. Humans name Kokiri Forest the Forbidden Forest and some children explain that those who enter from the outside without a fairy transform into Stalfos - those skeleton monsters Link faces in future temples. We see this happen later when a man enters the forest and falls asleep against this stump only to vanish later - leaving a Kokiri girl to explain that he's now lost to the woods. Everybody, Stalfos.

That guy isn't here anymore.

Anybody who comes into the forest will be lost.

Everybody will become a Stalfos.

Everybody, Stalfos.

So, he's not here anymore.

Only his saw is left. Hee hee.

But children cannot leave either.

The Great Deku Tree said that if a Kokiri leaves the woods, he or she will die.

You're not allowed to leave the forest!

The Great Deku Tree said that if a Kokiri leaves the woods, he or she will die! And so with no one entering as an outsider and no one leaving as a child of the tree, we have this **protective bubble** around what stands to be childhood and some of The Deku Tree's dialogue aligns with this idea stating that as the source of life, Kokiri Forest stands as a barrier - deterring outsiders and maintaining order of the world - there is a purity and innocence being protected here.



But this protective bubble begins to collapse when the father is killed. In the wake of the Deku Tree's death, Link is forced to exit Kokiri Forest - prematurely thrust into a world of adult responsibility. Ganondorf's greed has ripped childhood out from underneath Link.

The Deku Sprout reveals later that Link is actually an outsider, brought by his mother to the Deku Tree years ago seeking protection during the great war. So Link is an outsider with a Kokiri fairy and with this dual citizenship, can travel to and fro between childhood and the adult world, yet not belonging to either one.

Even on the outside, Link still sees the world through the eyes of a child and Miyamoto and Osawa keep the design playful during this entire childhood phase. The castle market is full of life with dancing couples, dogs and playing children.

The dungeons are full of magic and mystery, Link is peeking through windows, climbing vines and playing hide and seek with castle guards.

But things turn grim after Link passes through the appropriately named **Door Of**Time and plucks the Master Sword from the pedestal.



Now in an adult body in an adult world, the bleakness of adulthood and responsibility comes at Link with everything it has - the first reveal, the old marketplace, once bustling with colour, now cold and desolate, and its in this moment that Osawa establishes Link and Ganondorf, who on the adventure line represent the opposing forces of **good and evil** and **nature vs man** on the shinto line, into their designed role of **childhood vs adulthood**.

Ganondorf represents everything Link isn't and Osawa uses this storytelling device to attack the only thing Link is holding onto: his relationships.

As Link gains back ground from Ganondorf in his purification quest on the Shinto Line, on the growing up line a slow subtraction begins to take place. The more Hyrule gains, the more Link loses.

Saria, Darunia, Ruto, Impa and Nabooru, all friends from Link's past eventually leave him behind.

A clip of Miyamoto and Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma mention in an interview the importance of Link leaving the 4 girls from his childhood behind. Link must lose everything to save the world.

This plays heavily on the "everything has to come from somewhere" natural balance of Shintoism. You don't just get wood, you have to chop down a tree. You can wash away corruption but it has to go somewhere. In this case, the corruption is lifted off the nature of Hyrule and onto Link himself. This is his designed role in nature.

## But we're not done yet!

While each sage's relevance stems from their race and elemental essence on the Shinto Line, on the Growing Up line, Osawa has infused these characters with characteristics and dialogue symbolic of milestones one must navigate during adolescence - friendship, family, romance, loyalty, and sex.

Saria's dialogue dedicated predominately to friendship, Darunia to sworn brotherhood and family after Link saves the starving goron race, Ruto's character obsessed with love and marriage, Princess Zelda's loyal bodyguard, Impa, solely focused on Zelda's safety, asks Link to protect Zelda in her stead, and Nabooru, whose dialogue suggests sexual activity and comments on how handsome Link has become as a man. And so those medallions Link collects are also emblems of Link's adult achievements and Link's childhood guide, the Owl, closes this chapter off congratulating Link on fully maturing as an adult.

## Childish minds turn to noble ambition.



But at this point, Link has lost everything and everyone except now as officially a man and with his childhood essence still attached to his back, can now enter Ganondorf's castle to kick off the final chapter and the final fight - childhood vs adulthood.



Ocarina Of Time's code disables the ability to defeat Ganondorf with any weapon other than the Master Sword. The growing up line requires a poetic close to this final chapter and so it must be the master sword, aka the essence of childhood, which delivers the final blow to adulthood.

After defeating Ganondorf and ultimately, avenging the Deku Tree and the Forest, Zelda sends Link back in time to his childhood version.

But the greatest tragedy is yet to come

With the master sword back in the pedestal, the essence of childhood now falls to Link's fairy companion, Navi, who remains Link's key back into Kokiri Forest where he can live out the rest of his childhood.

But with no explanation, Osawa writes Navi out of the story and the very last shot is Navi leaving Link behind.

Link's last connection to his childhood is severed and if he was to return, would become a Stalfos like the man against the stump. He is forever banished from his childhood.

This Stalfos character from Twilight Princess, aka the Hero's Shade who speaks of easing his regrets is confirmed by the creators to be the this Link from Ocarina Of Time.

## LINK, THE DESCENDENT OF THE HERO OF TIME

When Link steps into the Twilight, the crest of the Triforce of Courage on the back of his hand begins to glow, and he is transformed into a beast. When he regains his human form, he finds himself wearing the green garb of the Hero.

The spirit of Link's ancestor, the Hero of Time, teaches him his secrets. Ever since returning to the Child Era, the swordsman has lamented the fact that he was not remembered as a hero. This is the reason he passes down the proof of his courage and his secret techniques to the Link of this era, addressing him as "son."



And so Miyamoto and Osawa's 3rd thread of sorrow is one that comes full circle. The Growing Up Line is a losing story and though the purified world of Hyrule lives on, Link pays the ultimate price and falls victim to what he's really been fighting against from the beginning: the cruel flow of Time.

Time is the true villain of the story and this kind of message about losing childhood mirrors Miyamoto's personal ethos when it comes to designing his games:

I think that inside every adult is the heart of a child. We just gradually convince ourselves that we have to act more like adults.

Ultimately, Ocarina Of Time is a story about **transformation** and the inevitable sorrow that comes attached with it.

While other Zelda stories allow the audience to consider sorrow and despair through more direct means, Ocarina creates an indirect sorrowful atmosphere by establishing, but then removing a world of happiness.

On each line, Link loses something in the death of The Great Deku tree: a mentor, a protector, and a father, and this gives way to 3 types of transformation: transformation of Link as a person, transformation of the people around him, and transformation of the world he inhabits.

But its actually in Ganondorf that we find Miyamoto and Osawa's greatest storytelling weapon. Appropriately named King Of Theives, each line explores the 3 things Ganondorf has stolen - The triforce, the health of Hyrule's nature, and what what might be the his greatest crime of all time, Link's childhood.

While that **Zelda Sorrow Language** may not appear in Ocarina Of Time's script, Link is healing sorrows and easing regrets on scales far larger than its successors.

In the end, Link is changed forever - a saviour banished from his childhood destined to roam alone in a world that doesn't remember him - and all of this buried down in the subtext beneath the heroic adventures of the main story.

Ocarina Of Time is the saddest Zelda story no one noticed.

END