

When a token changes its meaning mid-stream

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20051206-10

December 6, 2005



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The project leader for the initial version of Internet Explorer was well-known for wearing Hawaiian shirts. I'm told that the team managers decided to take one of those shirts and use it as an award to the team member who fixed the most bugs or some similar thing. What the team managers failed to take into account that nobody actually liked having a Hawaiian shirt hanging in their office, especially not one that was worn by somebody else. If you happened to be the person who fixed the most bugs, you sort of reluctantly accepted the shirt even though you really didn't want it.

And then a wonderful thing happened: The meaning of the shirt flipped.

I don't know the details. I suspect at one point, somebody who "won" the shirt just left it in somebody else's office as a way of getting rid of it. This simple gesture was the turning point. The shirt became a symbol of disapproval. I believe the unofficial rule was that in order to get rid of the shirt, you had to find somebody who messed up at least as bad as whatever you did to earn the shirt in the first place.

It took a while before the team managers even realized what happened to their "award".



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