# Scott gives me an assignment

Where the capitalist class sees education as a means to an end, the vectoralist[[1]](#footnote-2) class sees it as an end in itself. It sees opportunities to make education a profitable industry in its own right, based on the securing of intellectual property as a form of private property. To the vectoralists, education, like culture, is just 'content' for commodification.

— McKenzie Wark, A Hacker’s Manifesto

One day last year, I was sitting on a comfortable office chair in Scott’s studio, looking out the window after twenty minutes of staring at a screen. The clouds over the tower cranes looked creamy; their image absorbed my slippery thoughts. I was supposed to regain my focus, prepare my ears for the assignment Scott was about to give me. Shifting my gaze towards the tower cranes helped—their image reminded me that, at this point in civilization, I will not live to see the day that these clouds *aren’t* accompanied by cranes.

Some sort of ‘private’ social media platform was being built for the students of a renowned academy overseas. The purpose of the platform was to connect these students by allowing them to set up personal goals on their accounts, follow classes, events, or other students, and to share relevant media objects and references in their shared ‘baskets’. To connect them even more, an option for the students to set up a specific time zone was built. All data and information bits extracted from these interactions were to be used solely for educational purposes.

As most of these functions were already built and working, the project had reached a crucial phase in its development, which focused on user participation and connection—a phase I call the ‘psychological touch’.

Scott was busy coding the invisible functions for online *what-if* situations. The code’s logic behind most of the what-if situations is to make something happen (clicking) in order to extract bits. The question behind a what-if situation can be answered with at least three solutions. For example:

What if the user doesn’t have friends?

1. Remind them.
2. Propose to connect their friends’ list from another platform.
3. Suggest a friend.

What if the user doesn’t go to an event?

1. Perhaps they could be interested in updates about said event?
2. You don’t have to go but you can follow the event, which is part of a series, so maybe you can go next time.
3. Are you sure?

What if the user doesn’t react to the picture of a cat?

1. Here is a cuter cat.
2. How about a reduced amount of cat content?
3. But all your friends like it!

What if the user doesn’t move the cursor?

1. Wait for seven seconds, then show a video of a cursor on steroids. The longer the hovering, the bigger the cursor will grow.
2. Wait for seven seconds, then make the menu bounce.
3. Just let the ad appear with a big X button.

By answering these questions, the web developer’s forever-aim is to make the user *do* something and populate the website with information that represents activity and traffic. Because most platforms are slightly alienating at first, these situations usually occur at the beginning of a platform’s life—before the platform gets populated with the users’ digital traces.

When the website gets busy due to the compliance of its users, the responsibility of the what-if codes passes onto the users, who then become the new psychological trigger for continuous user traffic. When users see some of their friends liking a post, they will probably like it too. In this case, the what-if code doesn’t need to remind them that they have the digital superpowers to like a post.

These are general examples from the worldwide web. Some streams are relevant and some are absolutely irrelevant to the user who, by now, is embedded on the platform enough to be able to sense the information’s relevance, and who feels alarmed when information lacks the promise of relevance’s continuity. In the case of an educational platform, things get a bit trickier. Why would students *not* want to participate in online activities their educator provides? I see this as an argument Scott can easily win, for students want to score in the eyes of the institution that supplies their online educational activities.

Winning this argument gives Scott eligibility to control how connected he wants the users to be. ‘Good’ web developers are expected to reduce the duration of user alienation by making the users generate bits as soon as they land on a platform. These class-A developers are deeply aware of the detours the users can potentially follow on a platform, and can guide these users into walking a ‘straight line’ by coding their behavior in advance.

Before giving me the assignment, Scott expressed how he wanted me to code the actual functions for the platform, but also added, with a smile, how I’m *just not there yet*. Until I gain eligibility (during my free time after work, that is) let’s just work with what we have, shall we? Let’s give this website a tone, for the English language is the one understood by all.

Unsure whether I sensed his pride, or simply guilt for giving me work he would rather not do himself, I directly followed Scott’s instructions. My task was to write sentences that point out the user’s inactivity and ~~trigger the user to generate data~~  motivate the user to share references, go to events, connect, and contribute to the overall knowledge production.

As a reaction to my excitement, Scott preached how user motivation could only be achieved through a language that *avoids* literally describing what the user isn’t doing, but rather describing the consequences of their inactivity on the platform.

I *roger’ed* that. I used it as a mantra throughout the whole working day, which I spent writing a presentable version of the following list:

There are no upcoming courses you’re a follower of. (FACT)

You are not following any upcoming courses. (FACT)

Courses that you follow will be listed below. (SUGGESTIVE)

To see the courses below, you must first follow them. (TOO SUGGESTIVE)

There are no events scheduled this week.

There are no events scheduled for next week.

There are no events scheduled for the selected week.

You are not attending any events this week.

You are not attending any events next week.

You are not attending any events in that particular week.

Events which you are attending will appear below. (SUGGESTIVE)

Students, faculty, staff from the same time zone and of similar interests you follow will appear below/here. (SUGGESTIVE)

Activity baskets related to the courses you’re following will appear below/here. (SUGGESTIVE)

There are no people from the courses you followed.

There are no baskets you’re part of related to this course.

This person doesn’t follow any courses.

You don’t follow mutual courses with this person.

This person has no mutual courses with other people yet.

This person has not contributed to baskets with other people yet.

This person doesn’t own any baskets yet.

This person doesn’t contribute to any baskets yet.

You are not following any course related to this basket yet.

You are not a part of any basket related to any courses.

You are not.

It took a rather long time because I hated it, for similar reasons as I hate Wordle.[[2]](#footnote-3) While re-reading my written suggestions what bothered me most was the impersonal tone behind them. Somehow, I couldn’t make them sound as if they were written by Scott’s guts, or crafted by his brain. Polite is hard—I screamed long and hard inside my assigned, linguistic trap, and I felt like a loser for not having a *natural* sense for it.

But let’s get one thing clear: within the web development scene, it doesn’t matter if politeness is a manner exercised in a web developer’s daily life. It’s a globally recognized strategy for building a platform. If he doesn’t make his product speak politely to the user, in order to get the so desired bits, the product is at risk of sounding either too feminine or too authoritative—the two tones that, by 2022’s default, carry the risk of the user’s flight mode. Let’s deconstruct these web trends.

Feminine-sounding software doesn’t shy away from using their technical weak points as a digital marketing tool. Here’s an example of how they intentionally sound vulnerable:

Whoops 😅. Please keep on patiently clicking the button until it works!

At the other end of the spectrum, we see an authoritative tone in some software that triggers fantasies of digital suicides, but never their commitment:

It’s someone’s birthday. Help them have a blast!

or

Are you aware that [user name]’s post was liked over 10 times already?

One user, confronted with his inability to opt-out, texted me: Fuck Insta, but I’m still on it. Fuck smartphones, but I still own one.

The neutral, polite tone of software protects it from sounding different— sounding like too much of something. The factual tone of politeness targets devotion of a user (who, if you recall, I’ve introduced before) and who needs to be promised that, as a respected client on the platform, their needs are constantly taken into account. Even if they’re in fact not always met.

I need a small detour for a moment. In her book *All About Love*, bell hooks writes about respect (through a dysfunctional, yet loving family) in a way that resonates with my own reflections about how respect is gained within any kind of relationship. As we know from life’s lessons, there are two possible intentions behind giving respect: the first one is established through the genuine love and/or care for the other, and the second one is constructed towards the demand for a specific amount of reciprocal respect.

The first one, as hooks sees it, is given in the context of an intimate, ongoing relationship between two parties—a parent, a friend, a friend with benefits, a lover, spouse, collaborator. Their roles or titles are established over time. In the case of the latter—respect in return for respect—two parties don’t necessarily *need* to get deeply involved or spend any time with each other for them to *want* the desired benefit from one another. Their roles or titles are set by default. They stay together because of a mutual need for the bits, thus proving the professionalization of their role/title: a web developer, a user, seller, buyer. Quantification makes them stronger.

If I were to apply these same lessons regarding respect to web development, I’d find it difficult to conclude that the web developer’s intention behind welcoming the user on their platform comes out of pure *generosity* towards the user whose image, in the developer’s eyes, is shaped by the statistics generated from their compliance.

Please read:

There are no baskets you’re part of related to this course.

The sentence suggests that the reason why I’m here (following the courses I want, in order to be a good student) is inherently linked to these baskets I know nothing about, but about which I apparently *should* find out, such as why I need to carry them everywhere I go. Wait: let me ask one of my few friends on this platform real quick. Until I find out, let me just speculate. When I think of real-life baskets, I think about what’s in them… It might be that the digital ones related to my courses are still empty? It might be that they’re filled with a surprise, by default? Let me check. But, actually, if the surprise is really in there, I might not even want it. I’d rather have my friend drop one in there, but they haven’t replied yet. Maybe they’re following a lecture I wasn’t updated about. Where are the events? Let me see…

This is how a platform gets populated and becomes a common user reality.[[3]](#footnote-4) Quickly. Seamlessly. Almost invisibly. Assuming that a listening ear means being able to register everything that the user opinionates about, and that this user needs to see the information bits in order to feel heard, we see how ‘polite’ software entitles itself to collect the user data and activity it needs in order to increase user dependency. And because users build up important archives while generating traffic, they soon become dependent on platforms that store and organize their data for them. Naughty baskets!

This is not really news, so let’s not dwell on these findings for too long. What I’m more interested in is looking at the impact of this user dependency on polite software and the fashion of our conversations in real life. (And in stating ‘our’, I am in fact stating that we’re *all* users, including web developers.)

There are no baskets. There is one basket. There are two baskets. There are three baskets. There are four baskets. There are five baskets. There are six baskets. There are seven baskets.

(I think we get the point.)

While rating a product or confessing about romantic endeavors in a chatroom here or there or everywhere, polite software awards the user with facts that inform the user about what they just did:

You just left the group,

Thank you for your feedback,

OK,

Thanks,

OK, OK, thanks, thanks. OK, thanks, thanks.

Rate?

It’s exactly 21:00 PM.

It’s your bed time.

It’s a fact that you just left the group.

It’s true that you just left the group.

The user is continuously fed facts, and will pass these on to others (be it software or a friend). Facts are known to compile together the system of truth.[[4]](#footnote-5) When polite software collects the extracts of truth—all the things the user talks about, rates, and reacts to wherever the user is told to react—the logic behind its code becomes stronger and kills any potential to behave against it. You cannot just *not* rate a product, but you can give it less stars. Are you sure you want to close the tab without sending that e-mail? This is what I call an extremely organized user experience, a linear story. Like waking up, going to work, and going to sleep. Everything works perfectly.

Understood as such, polite software becomes a product of not just controlled language, but of the imagination that stretches this vocabulary. A language that should be in continuous transformation, molded by those who speak it, moving towards understanding each other, is a language that is now a standard: one that says whatshould be understood between the speakers, and how deep a discussion can really go.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Moving along with such a user experience can be compared to our behaviours within urban landscapes. Isn’t the point of going outside to get from point A to point B? In Amsterdam more than in Mexico City, or Sarajevo, for sure. Although I’m totally fine with not having a goal while walking, I’ve seen a lot of my peers struggling to say yes to the idea of an aimless stroll. Just like them, I feel users suffer from feeling lost on platforms that *don’t* extract bits from their interactions. They simply don’t how to move about without being part of both the urban and software organization.

As for Scott and myself: I do not know what Scott wanted me to learn that day. What I *did* learn is that politeness is not only a design choice, but the rule by which a web developer chooses to live. When isolated from the product and placed next to the hands that crafted it, politeness becomes a shield that protects the acquired years-old knowledge from intertwining with the emotional impulses (passion, anger, desire...) that have the potential to cause its shattering. Because most of the time is invested in maintaining a stable structure of knowledge, these impulses are rushed, postponed, or even completely neglected. This is the core behavior that builds up the stoic man: the logic of the world robbing him of his boner.[[6]](#footnote-7)

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‘The object of information, never a subject in communication’ — Sadie Plant, Zeros and Ones

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1. The ascendant power over both labor and capital is the vectoralist class. It does not control land or industry anymore, just information. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Its software design feels fun, at first. Guessing the word of the day right every single day of one’s life can make one excited about waking up. But it can also overwhelm one’s experience of daily life as it consumes good chunks of one’s morning time or, depending what kind of a player one is, the whole day. Don’t play Wordle. It’s an attention sucking platform that makes you forget about the things you’d rather do throughout the day and prioritize attaining the joy of beating your pals who scored just as good as you did. The worst part of it is that cheating feels terribly wrong. And that I still sometimes play it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ‘The scaling of the economy of gender features most prominently across discussions surrounding “big data.’ For example, every forty-eight hours online we as a global community generate as much information as was generated in written history from the beginning of civilization until 2003.1) This data we generate triggers monumental questions about mass surveillance and how the information tied to our digital selves can be used to track our every movement. Our Internet search histories, social media habits, and modes of online communication—what sociologist David Lyon calls ‘actual fragments’—expose our innermost thoughts, anxieties, plans, desires, and goals. 2) Gender binary is a part of this engine: a body read online as male/female, masculine/feminine fulfills a target demographic for advertising and marketing. Google Ads explains gleefully to its users how ‘with demographic targeting in Google Ads, you can reach a specific set of potential customers who are likely to be within a particular age range, gender, parental status, or household income. For instance, if you run a fitness studio exclusively for women, demographic targeting could help you avoid showing your ads to men.’ — Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. ‘The way to flourish in a media space biased toward nonfiction is to tell the truth. This means having a truth to tell.’ — Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or be Programmed* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. ‘Information, like land or capital, becomes a form of property monopolised by a class of vec- toralists, so named because they control the vectors along which information is abstracted, just as capitalists control the material means with which goods are produced, and pastoralists the land with which food is produced. Information circulated within working class culture as a social property belonging to all. But when information in turn becomes a form of private property, workers are dispossessed of it, and must buy their own culture back from its owners, the vectoralist class. The whole of time, time itself, becomes a commodified experience.’ — McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker’s Manifesto* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ariana Reines, *A Sand Book*, poem: ‘Hegeling before the glass’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)