Detweiler: Okay, so I’ll give a countdown from three and then I’ll clap.

Boyle: Okay. [electronic sound]

D: Okay, so I’ll give a countdown from three and then I’ll clap.

B: Okay.

D. Three . . . two . . . one . . . [electronic sound, reverberating]

[Rhetoricity theme song plays with electronic garbling]

D: Well [audio repeats] well well. Listen to what we’ve got here: another episode of Rhetoricity. I’m Eric Detweiler, and this time I’m bringing you an interview with Casey Boyle, an assistant professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at The University of Texas at Austin. [in the episode’s introduction, all instances of “Casey Boyle” are overdubbed from the preceding sentence] Casey Boyle’s work has appeared in such anthologies as Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities and Thinking with Bruno Latour in Rhetoric and Composition. He’s also been published in the journal Computers and Composition and has forthcoming articles in both College English and Technical Communication Quarterly. He serves as managing editor for Enculturation: A Journal of Writing, Rhetoric, and Culture, and teaches courses on writing with sound, digital rhetoric, and network theory. His current book project is called Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice.

Our interview opens with a conversation about an article of Casey Boyle’s that appeared in the March 2015 issue of Computers and Composition. That article is entitled “The Rhetorical Question Concerning” . . . [electronic glitch sounds] Sorry . . . sorry . . . “Concerning Glitch.” In it, Casey Boyle explores points of resonances . . . [electronic glitch sounds] In it, Casey Boyle explores . . . In it, Casey Boyle explores points of resonance between rhetoric and glitch art. We discuss some examples of glitch art in the . . . We discuss . . . In it, Casey Boyle explores points of resonance between rhetoric and glitch art.

We discuss some examples of glitch art in the interview, but if you’re interested in engaging some examples for yourself, you can check out these websites: First, satromizer.com—that’s s-a-t-r-o-m-i-z-e-r-dot-com—which is home to a glitched-out operating system called the Satromizer. Second, the website of artist and theorist Rosa Menkman. The URL for her site is [spelling out URL] rosa-menkman.blogspot.com.

In addition to drawing connections between rhetoric and glitch art, Casey Boyle’s article troubles the boundaries between theory and practice, as well as so-called “creative” and “critical” scholarship. We discuss these boundaries before turning to another of his current undertakings, a series of interviews with humanities scholars about their failed projects.
Let me note that, in the spirit of glitch, I’ve tried a few different ways of interrupting and bending this audio file. I have opened and edited it in a text editor, added in layered ambient sounds and music, and remixed a few of the noises that emerged from the mouths of both myself and Casey Boyle. The result is not necessarily glitch art, but I hope it will at least, to . . . [electronic glitch sounds] but I hope it will at least, to steal a phrase from Casey Boyle . . . [audio loops, repeating Boyle’s name] Casey Boyle . . . Casey Boyle . . . foreground this interview’s means of mediation.

[music plays: three versions of Radiohead’s “The Tourist” layered over each other, growing increasingly dissonant and disjointed]

D: Alright, [audio loops twice more] alright, alright, I’m talking here via Skype with Casey Boyle from The University of Texas at Austin. Thanks so much for taking the time for this interview today, Casey.

B: Thanks for having me, Eric.

D: [each instance of “glitch” in this paragraph is accompanied by a electronic static] So I wanted to start off asking you a little bit about your Computers and Composition article “The Rhetorical Question Concerning Glitch.” Before we get into the meat of that article, I wanted to ask about the origin of the work that you do with glitches and glitch art, specifically in the context of that Computers and Composition article. So first, for the sake of our listeners, could you talk a little bit about what exactly glitch art is, and second, how it found its way into your work on rhetoric?

B: Yeah. Glitch art, broadly speaking—it’s a sort of emergent kind of media art that looks to foreground the means of mediation. [electronic static play in background] It does so by playing with the capacities of a particular digital tool, be it an application [altered version of login sound effect for Skype] or an actual hardware device, like a Speak & Spell, for instance.

Voice of Speak & Spell: A, B, C, D, E, F—

B: Usually what happens here is that the artist will—they typically describe it as circuit bending [glitched version of Speak & Spell voice plays] and so they could either play with the software of a particular file or play literally with the circuits in the hardware and try to rewire a device differently. [incomprehensibly glitched Speak & Spell sound] And what this usually does is it tries to appropriate the device or the application to do some things that it didn’t quite normally do.

[Boyle’s statement “rewire a device differently” is looped three times over glitched Speak & Spell audio, creating a rhythmic effect. Boyle’s distorted voice echoes occasionally throughout the following paragraph.]

B: For instance, the SOS: the Satrom Operating System, Satromizer. [distorted Boyle echo] And it was where glitch artists John Satrom and Ben Syverson took one of those first-gen iPads and basically created an entirely new operating system on it. And so the entire experience of working with that iPad was a glitched experience.

D: Mmhmm.
B: You hit an icon, you might get something else, or it might just automatically drop you or whatever. Working against the sort of slick, packaged product that Apple and other tech companies do, those glitch artists were able to kind of foreground the device itself by creating glitches. So “It just works?” Well, “it just glitches” was perhaps what they were going for.

D: [laughs]


B: So that’s one version of glitch art. Another version of glitch art is something that we’re all pretty much used to. Looking at—we watch a TV show, for instance, and the visual pixelates and kind of breaks down a little bit for a moment. And that’s probably where glitch art got its beginnings: the ongoing noticings of those kinds of breakdowns. Not necessarily as breakdowns but as, perhaps, features of that particular device or program or whatever. [distorted Apple startup sound] Some artists actually collect those. I’m thinking here of Antonio Roberts’s Glitch Safari, where they collect screenshots or take a photo of a electronic billboard, for instance, that has glitched out, and collect those as a sort of compilation of those kinds of moments.

D: So that moment where your TV signal gets interrupted—not getting frustrated and throwing a shoe at it, but thinking about it as an interesting sort of interruption that has its own kind of logic and own kinds of possibilities.

B: Yeah, absolutely, and I think for glitch artists, they became quickly attuned to the possibilities of that interruption, but as something that’s a feature of that particular device. How I got involved with it was—it was right after I was finishing my dissertation and I was kind of tired of the project I was working on. Or actually, I was finishing it, and this was the spring of—gosh, this will tell you how long an article takes to get done.

D: [laughs]

B: This was the spring of 2011. I had just taken a job and I was finishing the dissertation. It was March or something and I had to fill out this proposal for a conference I was going to be doing the next year. My last chapter of my dissertation had to do with breakdown infrastructure, and what I kept seeing was folks like—particularly folks in Chicago, who might be called Dirty New Media artists. [laughs] Folks like Jon Satrom, Ben Syverson and related folks like Rosa Menkman, and a number of other folks who—they have a glitch sort of fest, a glitch convention, every year there.

So, while I was working on that last chapter of my dissertation, I saw this great quote-unquote “object” out there that didn’t fit the dissertation, but I was like, “Well, I want to pursue the questions I’m thinking about in this dissertation over here.” And so it was just a good opportunity for me to just kind of say, “Okay, this is what I want to look at because it’s going to be a fun object to look at, it’s going to be interesting, and it’s not going to be the same usual thing I’ve been looking at for the last couple of years.”
D: Right.

B: Basically, it started with the conference proposal. “This is where—I want to deal with this.” The next year rolls around, I present the conference proposal, and it was really good feedback because it was folks who had never seen this kind of thing before. Thinking about, for instance, for writing studies and rhetoric scholars, error—not as something you go away from, but something you actually embrace and try to generate, is a pretty productive turn of events.

D: In your article, you present glitch as a model for considering “rhetorical practice as knowledge we do, as a cooperative rhetorical doing involving both humans and nonhumans.” So there’s some serious troubling of the distinction between, on the one hand, rhetorical theory, and, on the other, rhetoric as a practice that’s happening, in that quote and in your article more broadly. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you’re trying to resituate the relationship between theory and practice here, and feel free to respond in terms of glitch or otherwise.

B: That’s a good question, and actually, since then, the glitch article has become the heart of the book, really. And you’re really getting at the question that I’m pursuing in the book, which is the relationship between theory [series of four notes played on a Hammond organ: A-C-F-C] and practice [a second four-note series: Bb-Db-F-G], and I think in rhetoric, anyways, its long history of not having an object to work against. It’s folded into that as well. Rhetorical practice as knowledge we do, and how it involves humans and nonhumans, I think, is something that glitch gives us a particularly good model for thinking through: rhetoric as an ongoing exercise or practice. [Bb-Db-F-G] And that includes rhetorical theory. [A-C-F-C] Rhetorical theory itself—what makes it different from other kinds of theory, I think, is the fact that it can never not question its situation. It’s always kind of practical. [Bb-Db-F-G] It’s always emergent, it’s always contingent on a particular kind of event. A lot of us who work in rhetorical theory [A-C-F-C] say those kinds of things, but then the next step comes: okay, well, what does that mean? And for me, pursuing glitch and glitch art—and also the wider project itself, for which the glitch is only one sort of model—is to rethink theory and practice not as separate [A-C-F-C, followed by a pause, then Bb-Db-F-G] but as a continuous motion. [two four-note themes played together: A-C-F-C-Bb-Db-F-G] Deleuze has this really great line in this interview with Michel Foucault, where Deleuze says, “We’re in a new relationship between theory and practice.” He looks at them not so much as oppositions [two four-notes themes played over top of one other, dissonantly] but as relay points. It’s where theory and practice work together back and forth to perpetuate a different kind of motion.

[Two four-note sequences played as a continuous melody, accompanied by organ chords and an electronic drum kit. Music reveals itself as the instrumental opening to Radiohead’s “No Surprises,” and continues to play in the background during the following exchange.]

B: So rather than thinking back and trying to situate theory as something that happens away from a material situation, it’s much more the case where theory is just a kind of relationship within—always going to be within—and situated within a material condition, a milieu. So the larger project itself tries to rethink theory and practice through—and I’m pulling this from Gilbert
Simondon, a technology theorist from a few decades ago—what he would call a transductive operation. A transductive operation—basically what that means is where a signal of some sort travels from one milieu to another milieu. And that could be theory-practice, it could be different kinds of practices. The idea there is to rethink practice, less as something distinct from theory, but as something that theory also is. Theory is a practice. It’s the practice of theory. And it takes practice to do theory, right?

D: Yeah.

B: And so looking at them as being distinct or separate, I think, undermines both.

[Music fades back into foreground, then ends.]

D: In addition to the theory-practice distinction, your piece also plays a little with the boundaries of what we typically think of as rhetoric. Instead of a speech, or a classroom practice, or a piece of writing, you focus on a kind of art. And even more than that, you seem to try and use glitch art as a sort of creative springboard rather than just an artifact that you’re critiquing or analyzing through some sort of rhetorical lens. What is going on there in terms of your positioning of art as rhetorical, as well as the ways you might be questioning the lines that separate so-called “creative” and “critical” work?

B: Yeah, that’s a pretty good question too. One way I would approach this is rhetoric’s wrestling with a sort of prior form-content divide. And where we’re thinking about creative work, we might think of form, and it’s kind of odd in that rhetoric’s always been kind of on the side of creative work, actually. It’s all form; it’s no substance. Whereas we might say critical work is something that is real. Its content is responding to something that is needed in the world. Now, I think contemporary rhetoric is synonymous with critical work. We do “rhetoric of”s.” Just type into Google “rhetoric of” and you’ll get about a billion hits.

Electronic female voice: Rhetoric of the image, rhetoric of science, rhetoric of fiction, of Barack Obama, of cool, of death, of economics, of food, rhetoric of gourmet coffee, humor, irony, law, motive—[voice fades out]

B: So it’s all about the rhetoric of this particular substance or this particular content. And it’s become less about the creative, less about the formal aspects, less about what might be considered or construed as “mere rhetoric,” just style. What I want to do, and what I hope that the glitch article does but also the larger project for which glitch is one moment, is to fold those two things back together and think about form and content not as two separate things but as one continuous thing.

I think what media art gives us is an opportunity to rethink that divide, to rethink the divide between form and content, or between creative and noncreative or critical work. Again, I turn back to Gilbert Simondon, whose own project is about rethinking the hylomorphic in philosophy. Typically, hylomorphism is linked back to Aristotle—there’s some debate about this—but it’s a division between form and content. It’s a division between form and substance. And for rhetoric, I think, interrogating that division and questioning it is especially important. For me, anyways, it becomes even more important when we’re thinking about rhetoric in an age of information.
way I’m thinking about this and the way that it’s framed within the book is to think through rhetoric as existing under a new paradigm. It may once have been associated with persuasion—

[clip from Tommy James and the Shondells’ song “Crystal Blue Persuasion”]

Tommy James [singing]: A new day is coming / People are changing / Ain’t it beautiful / Crystal blue persuasion

[clip fades out]

B: —people persuading one another. I think most recently it’s been sort of under the paradigm of identification, which is very much based around human subjects: realizing connections with and against people.

[clip from the film *Spartacus*]

Man’s voice: I’m Spartacus!

Second man: I’m Spartacus!

Third man: I’m Spartacus!

Crowd of men yelling over each other: I’m Spartacus!

[end clip]

B: But I think now what we have to wrestle with as rhetorical theorists and digital rhetoricians is rhetoric as information—

[clip from a 1993 episode of the television program *The Computer Chronicles*]

Woman’s voice: The internet can be a pretty intimidating place for the new user, so we’re going to go in and subscribe to some newsgroups. You’re going to see that there are thousands of newsgroups available, and with thousands of newsgroups, there’s probably something for everyone.

[end clip]

B: —and information being something that is larger than the data that gets transmitted between devices but that the devices themselves are informing and becoming informed through. As I was saying earlier, the transductive process, the transductive practice.

Steve Jobs [repeated clip from earlier in episode]: It works seamlessly.

B: I think it’s something that glitch shows us: human agents working with a device who—they don’t know quite what that result’s going to be. That really interrogates and undermines traditional notions of instrumentality, utility. Because if you’re working on, let’s say, something as simple as glitching an image

Electronic female voice: Or perhaps an MP3. You know, a music file.

[glitched instrumental music begins playing in background]
B: or you’re opening up an image file in a non-image program and messing with the data, closing it, and then reopening it up in the image file and you have a different result. You don’t know what result you’re going to get.

[Music fades into foreground: a glitched-out mashup of Iggy and the Stooges “Search and Destroy” and Peaches’ cover of the same song. The mashup was created by combining and manipulating the song files in a text editor.]

Peaches [singing]: Look out honey ’cause I’m using technology—

Iggy Pop [singing]: My soul—

Iggy Pop: Destroy—

Peaches: Ain’t got time to make no apologies—

Iggy Pop: Destroy—

[music fades out]

B: That quite literally is working with, and between, and among [chuckles] the devices and their own capacities rather than using that device as an instrument for your own end.

D: It reminds me of the SOS—the operating system you were talking about earlier—where that would seem to call attention to the ways in which an iPad or any other kind of platform is going to structure the way that you engage with a piece of content in a way that is kind of inextricable from that content: the difference between watching a movie on your phone through headphones on a bus ride to work [clip from Return of the Jedi plays, tinny and heavily compressed with Admiral Ackbar shouting “It’s a trap!”] versus watching it on a—I don’t know how big TVs are these days—like a 56-inch TV screen in your house or something like that. [Return of the Jedi clip plays again, this time without tinniness or obvious compression]

B: Right, and I think that speaks to a larger movement, or a larger process of information—informing—that happens. So the information that might come up on the SOS is glitched out or whatever, and we can localize it and say, “Okay, only the data that is happening in there is information.” But I think it’s larger than that. I think it includes the circuits; I think it includes the human body; I think it includes the entire production line that produced that Apple device. And so what does rhetoric look like in an age of information where information is encompassing, informing process? That’s what I’m asking.

D: Yeah. Well, turning now toward a different but I think slightly related project, I wanted to give you a chance to talk a little bit about the failure project that you’re currently working on.

B: The failure project. Basically what this is, is I’m doing a bunch of interviews with established rhetoric and composition scholars, but I’m also kind of branching out to media scholars and scholars of affect theory, and basically generally established humanities scholars all across the spectrum.
I’m just curious as to, what does failure look like in a humanities project? I’m very interested in, what does failure look like for a theory project? Obviously, we know to a certain extent: it didn’t get published. But failure is typically personalized. It’s segmented, and it’s made personal rather than infrastructural or institutional or whatever. So I’m collecting as many stories of failure as possible. And what I’ve found so far is the stories range really far. It could go, on one end, it’s, “Oh, I couldn’t get this particular source in this article that I really wanted, and I really still think it’s about that particular source,” be it a figure that they were working with or whatever. But through peer review, through editing, through whatever, at some point that source got dropped. And they think of that as a failure. All the way to, “This book project failed. I didn’t get it published. I didn’t get it written.”

So right now I’m at the data-gathering stage, where I’m interviewing folks, I’m doing audio interviews, and eventually what I want to do is kind of, working through those interviews, piece together an understanding of failure that’s not necessarily “failure” in the traditional sense. I’m interested in interrogating failure just like in the glitch stuff. Failure not so much a loss of a destination as something that’s being re-formed differently or informed differently than one might have thought.

Right now I’m just doing interviews and having a lot of fun with it. And one thing that really shocked me was how many people responded to my initial CFP or call for participants. As soon as I posted it—I shared it on Twitter and Facebook, and I posted it on my own blog, and I had dozens of people write me instantly: “I have a story for you. I will share my story.” But it touched a nerve, and I think everybody has that kind of story of a failure.

So one thing, I hope, that comes out of here is people feel a little bit more free to talk about those things. The other thing is—obviously I’m interested in the theory stories, the theoretical projects that failed for some reason, but I’m also interested in the ones that fail institutionally, or technologically or infrastructurally. What made something fail? Maybe one of the things I’m looking for here is the agency of failure. Not someone to blame for our failure, but who participated in informing the situation differently? Or what did? Or what set of processes unfolded that made something work away from an intended end? I’m interested in those things.

D: I wanted next to pose a question to you that’s maybe slightly similar to the ones that you’ve been posing to others, which is, what is the most frustrating glitch that you’ve ever encountered in your own scholarship?

B: That’s a fun question. For me, it’s an ongoing one—it’s not just one occasion. It’s language. [digitally garbled repetition of Boyle saying “language”] I’m a horrible typer, and I’m also a horrible speller, and I think it’s frustrating sometimes when you’re on a thought and you’re pursuing a thread and you’re typing it and you look up and you just see red lines or green lines or—I think I invent new lines for Microsoft Word to alert me to.

D: [laughs] 

B: And of course that’s a kind of glitch—language, and spelling a word wrong, a typo. I’m just horrible at all of those things. For me, though—what’s helped out with me is, having a typo or
misspelling a word kind of brings attention to the seams of words. [distorted Boyle voice repeats “language”] It brings attention to the etymology of a certain kind of word. You might write a word and you have a typo in there and you’re forced to look at it.

You’re forced to look at the word, not as a black box, a sort of unit that’s indestructible, but as itself—pieces that have been put together. [distorted voice repeats “language”] When you have some sort of infelicitous language issue, it forces you to have to repiece it together, and repiecing it together could be very inventive. I’m recalling now when I first encountered Victor Vitanza’s work.

[2-pop sound effect]

Victor Vitanza [clip from previous Rhetoricity episode]: You know, this may be a misfiring in my brain, but when I look at words I see other words. I see other words within them.

B: Now I’m not going to say that he’s a horrible speller or anything like that, but I could see where looking at what he does with the seams of words, and making words seam differently, is very much like the kind of effect that happens when I badly type something.

[2-pop sound effect]

Vitanza: And I love typos. I turn off my spell checker in Microsoft Word because I want those typos there. And then they get published.

B: I’m forced to see that word differently and see the seams, and it’s seaming differently.

D: The words are not what they seem.

B: The words are not what they seem, and they’re not what they seam. [distorted voice repeats “language”] And I think, for me anyways, this is one of the big reasons why I cited Victor in that glitch article was that I wouldn’t necessarily call what he does glitch, but he’s doing the same thing. He’s bringing attention to the mediation of a particular idea, of a thought, through language. Just like Jon Satrom glitched the iOS, Victor is glitching an academic article. He’s forcing you to see the seams of those words—

Vitanza [distorted]: When I look at words, I see other words.

B: —and see the seams of that technology, because writing is also a technology. There’s a reason why I bring in Victor in that article. Even though it’s brief, he’s definitely in there, because he might as well be one of those first glitch artists as well.

D: Are there any particular words that you have an especially difficult time with?

B: There’s so many. Seriously, you should look at a working doc for me. Heck, just look at a published article, even. There’s going to be typos there too.

D: [laughs]

B: I can’t pick one out immediately, but the fact that it’s there forces me to look at the etymology of a word. Then I go back to looking at the dictionary and looking up the etymology and tracing
that rabbit hole. Writing, for me, takes so long because I’m looking up etymologies of everything.

D: Alright. Well, we’ll turn now to the final bit of this interview, which is, I’m going to pose a question that was asked by the last person that I interviewed without knowing who it was going to go to, and then you’ll get a chance to pose a question for the next person that I interview. Your question comes from Shyam Sharma from Stony Brook University, and his question was this:

Sharma [clip from previous episode]: How do you define the word translingualism?

D: It’s a prefix we’ve already heard over the course of this interview.

B: Speaking of seams of words. I think the traditional definition is something along the lines of, “translingual” is some sort of item that might exist across different languages. But it also means someone who has the capacity to move across different languages. If the question is what does that mean to me, for me that’s a sort of opening question. Someone who can move across different languages and the ways in which different languages might crosspollinate one another.

But for me, I want to broaden it even further towards that transductive notion. The idea of moving across different milieux, be it theoretical or practical, and the ways in which elements or features from one milieu might crosspollinate with another milieu. So I think there’s a lot of work between “translingual” there and “transduction.” I think here, for instance, of Jay Jordan’s College English article from I think last year or so, where he’s talking about multilingualism and translingualism and a whole branch of composition scholarship that could be really well informed with material rhetorics, and what Thomas Rickert might call ambient rhetoric. So I think there’s a lot of crossing that is going on there that’s really interesting to me. That’s how I would refer to it.

D: Well thanks! Now you get your chance to pose a question for the next person that I interview—again, without knowing who it’s going to go to.

B: Here’s my question to whomever comes next: What project do you think the field of rhetoric and composition needs right now, but for whatever reason, be it time or expertise, that you cannot do yourself? What project does the field need that you can’t do for whatever reason? Give a grad student a project to work on.


B: An act of generosity, yes. Be generous. Give up a project that you have thought about that you need in the field, that the field needs in the field, but you can’t do.

D: Alright. Well, I will look forward to passing this call for a project on to the next person I speak to for this podcast.

B: Excellent.

D: Well Casey, thanks again so much for taking the time for this interview.
B: Thanks a lot. It was great being interviewed, I guess. No—I don’t want to say that. [electronic glitch noise]

D: [laughing] It was horrible being interviewed.

B: [laughing] Thanks for having me, Eric.

D: Alright.

[distorted Rhetoricity theme plays in background]

D: And it seems that’s all the time we’ve got for this episode of Rhetoricity. I’ll be back next time to bring you an interview with Drs. Jim Brown and Annette Vee. We discuss Rhetoric’s Algorithms, a workshop they facilitated at the 2015 Rhetoric Society of America Institute in Madison, Wisconsin. Special thanks to Casey Human—[electronic glitch sound] Special thanks to Casey Boyle and to all you humans, nonhumans, and parahumans out there who helped make this episode possible. In addition to the publications mentioned at the top of this episode, keep an eye out for Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things, an anthology that Casey Boyle is coediting with Indiana University’s Scot Barnett. That volume consists of fifteen essays that “persuasively overturn the stubborn assumption that objects are passive tools in the hands of human agents.” It’ll be arriving from the University of Alabama Press in the spring of 2016. Till next time, look out for language’s seams, and don’t forget that language is perhaps not what it seems. This is the recorded voice of a previous iteration of a creature called Eric Detweiler, glitching out.

[distorted outro plays]

B: Yeah, take it and chop it up as much as you want.

D: That—I always do.