(15 pts 30-45 minutes) Discuss how your project—not your interface—did well using, thinking about, or managing two topics from class. Then discuss how your project could have better used another topic from class. Avoid ideas we’ve used a lot in HFS (“our interface has great feedback” = not what we’re looking for).

**Good:**

My group made best use of two main concepts from class: Heuristic Evaluation and Prototyping. The heuristic evaluation was vital in identifying a few key areas for improvement that, in the end, our users all noted as strong points in our design. When we each individually evaluated our design, there were a few clear points of consensus. The first, and largest, was the lack of documentation. While we had toiled significantly over layout, different screens, and the various buttons needed to navigate between them, we had largely ignored the need for our system to guide the user. The ‘Help and Documentation’ heuristic made this clear, as each member of our group noted this weakness in some form. This problem was high frequency, high impact, and very persistent, so it rated as a severe issue (Severity Ratings for Usability Problems). As a result, we developed the tooltips, which appear on hovering. And though there were some initial issues with the size and length of the tooltips, the results, our users agreed, made the system far more usable.

The ‘User Control and Freedom’ heuristic pointed out a second flaw that was more focused but just as big an issue. We had aimed to create a system that could give context to files without requiring significant effort from the user. But this focus lead us to create a system that left the user with too little organizational power. When we heuristically evaluated our design, we noticed that we had not provided a good way for users to add or remove topics from files. This lead to a long discussion of how we intended to provide such functionality. It took several iterations, but our end result allowed users to add or remove files from topics through an ‘X’ button in the topics list. Our users expressed that this was an important element, as even though they did not want to have to organize their files themselves, they did want to have the option.

While our group did make use of prototyping tools that made our interface much more tangible, in my mind our most productive use of prototyping was our sketches during our group meetings. From the very start, we were not shy to sketch out different ideas. Putting our work down on paper or a white board made it far easier to communicate our thoughts as well as visualize potential issues. The sketches also allowed us to keep from forgetting about one aspect of the design when talking about another. While Nick presented how search results would be aggregated in relation to the details pane, I was able to identify ambiguities regarding where off screen file results were, and how the user would be scrolling to them.

Sketching out different ideas for the same issue made it far easier to compare them. We struggled in multiple meetings with the differences between browsing files and searching for files. We had originally thought to have separate layouts for each task, and we had sketched them both out on a white board and discussed their various elements. But once we had finished this task, it was painfully clear that the two layouts were too similar: they both had a left pane with a list/grid of files, and the only difference in the right pane was that the search screen had a list of filters/topics present in the search, and the browse screen had a list of constraints narrowing the set of files displayed. Side by side, it was clear that the two were essentially the same screen, and in the end we merged them into a single searching window.

**Room for improvement:**

Our user testing provided us with important information that informed our design, but our data gathering methods could have been better. Because we needed specific users that we could return to, we went to friends and family and talked to people we knew were not computer savvy. But because of this, our user tests ended up being rather non-formal. I would have liked to have planned out scripts and “explicitly defined tasks” for our users to complete and have stuck rigidly too them, but in the end we often deviated from our planned tests and have less formal ad-hoc conversations with our users regarding our designs. We experienced first hand that “few designers can moderate a [user testing] session with sufficient neutrality,” (About Face 3).

I would have also liked to follow through with more surveys to pair with our specific user tests, but we did not find a suitable method of distribution that reached the computer illiterate. We failed to recognize the inherent flaw of online survey taking: it only reaches people who both hear about it and take it electronically. Most people who are less skilled with computers will probably resist taking online surveys about their computer skills.