Thesis Concept/Project Description
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Concept Diagram - see attached

Overview/Thesis Statement:

Brief "Elevator Pitch" Description of your thesis project. What is your focus? Your direction? What's new/unique about your project?

This is the basic pitch I developed for the Stern Business Plan version of my thesis, but my idea for my ITP thesis has changed a bit in the last few days and am still trying to solidify how I communicate it. SokoSquare is about creating a common open source protocol for facilitating online connections for peer to peer barter of goods and services.

Purpose
SokoSquare is an online service that offers an innovative "matching" solution for people to barter professional services and physical goods by connecting them to others with complementary skills and needs.

Background
According to *Monocle* magazine, barter "accounts for 30 percent of the world's total business" [1]. With the recent economic downturn and credit crisis, barter is on the rise and becoming more mainstream. Craigslist, an important barter site for many communities, reports a more than 100 percent increase in barter postings between 2008 and 2009 [2]. The IRS reports that the "Internet has provided a medium for new growth in the bartering exchange industry" [3].

Problem and Competition
While Craigslist and other classified sites provide a way for users to publish their barter preferences, browsing and searching through hundreds of postings is often a time consuming process that does not guarantee satisfactory results. There is also the issue of trust when dealing anonymously with strangers over the internet. SokoSquare's matching algorithm is designed to streamline the process of introducing people interested in barter with others having complementary interests. SokoSquare's integration with existing social networking platforms adds an additional identity layer and provides social context for potential barter transactions.
Existing online barter exchanges like Dibspace usually rely on a "trade currency" systems pegged to the US dollar for assigning value to the goods and services being swapped, and are thus more like micro-currency systems than true barter. SokoSquare is a true peer-to-peer barter system where users are empowered to decide for themselves how to value their own offerings. Another competitor, BarterQuest, offers a matching system similar to SokoSquare's but lacks social networking integration as a way of amplifying the reach of users' barter postings and of providing a social context for transactions.

Our Product Solution
SokoSquare offers a simple web interface that allows users to enter a list of their barter wants and needs. The SokoSquare software algorithm then matches users with othermembers of the SokoSquare community with complementary wants and needs. We take the "matching" paradigm of online dating sites and apply it to barter. SokoSquare will offer integration with existing social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn as ways of tapping into existing social connections to expand the user base of the site as well as to provide a simple way of offering an "identity layer" of social context to foster a sense of connection and trust among users.
SokoSquare's competitive advantage lies in our team's intimate understanding of the target demographic, our integration with existing social networking services, our experience growing active online communities, and our ability to deliver a simple and streamlined user experience.

Target Market
SokoSquare's initial target market consists of young urban professionals (ages 22-35) in the creative, technological, and service industries. This group tends to be well-educated, highly-skilled, but sometimes under-employed and cash poor. Barter provides a way for them to acquire the goods and services they need using the skills they possess, without having to spend cash. Furthermore, this group tends to be comfortable with online social networking and other internet-mediated social and business transactions, making them potential early adopters of the service. We conducted an extensive survey of over 100 potential users. This research showed that most are interested in barter as a way of saving money, but many were also interested in barter as a form of community engagement.
There is also growth potential in additional markets. For example, retired people have huge expertise and often have more time to spare than those who are working.

Business Model
The top priority for SokoSquare is to acquire as many users as possible. SokoSquare will start by targeting young urban professionals in the New York City metropolitan area, and then embark on an aggressive PR and advertising campaign to attract users across the country and the world. The marketing strategy will take an integrated approach combining paid and earned media, social media word of mouth, and sponsorship of offline events and temporary "pop-up" store fronts attracting the target demographic.
As with many other online services, SokoSquare will initially offer a free trial period as a way of building a critical mass of users. After the trial period is up, users would be offered a five-dollar a month subscription for continued access to the SokoSquare community. Additional revenue could come from online advertising. Using extensive data about our users collected from our social network integration, we will be able to offer advertisers the ability to run highly-targeted campaigns.

Rationale:

Why is your project important? Interesting? Relevant? Why now? Try to personalize.

I'm interested in barter as a social practice, as an alternative to complement the monetary economy that runs most human transactions. In the course of my research, I discovered an article about indigenous people and local economic development by Jannie Lasimbang of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, who described the role that barter plays in many indigenous economies, where "barter trading is integrated with social interaction." While money as a technology and tool as played an important role in economic development, we have also lost something in terms of social interaction and individual negotiation of value in monetary economies. I am interested in creating technological tools to help make barter scale more, since traditional barter economies rely on social context but are limited by what economists call the double coincidence of wants.

Goals: *(Goals can be creative, technical, business-oriented, social, etc.)*

What problem are you trying to solve? What issue are you exploring? What are you trying to find out or achieve? What do you want people to get out of using/experiencing your project?

The ultimate goal is to become more than just a tool/service for facilitating barter, but to use the tool as a way of forming and organizing a social movement around barter as alternative and complementary economic/social practice.

Audience & Location

Who are you creating your project for? What are their unique characteristics that will inform your design (interests, age range, language, geographical location, culture, etc.)?
Will it be used/experienced alone? In groups? With guides, teachers, signage?
Where will your project be used/experienced (homes, galleries, public spaces, outdoor areas, theaters, offices, schools, etc.) Is it a repeatable or a one-time experience?

The initial target audience is early adopters, people like me who have an above-average interest/proficiency in technology who are interested and willing to experiment with technologically-mediated social and economic exchanges.

Description of Core Features and Functionality:

What do you plan to build?
Describe the structure and components of your project.
What is the content? Is there a theme?

SokoSquare has several deliverables: a business plan for the Stern Business Plan Competition, a prototype proof of concept, and a movement plan for how to develop a social movement around barter and an open source community around computer-mediated barter matching. The prototype will allow users to enter their personal profile

information, and a rudimentary proof-of-concept of a matching algorithm to match users with complementary wants and needs.

The general themes are openness, accessibility/user-friendliness, decentralized autonomy, community engagement, and fun.

What will people do when using it? Describe the functionality of the piece.

People will be using an interface to enter their barter preferences (Wants and Needs, as well as personal profile information, location, availability, etc.).

What is the intended nature of the user's experience?
What is the intended effect?

The intended effect it to make it a lot easier for users to find others in their community with reciprocal barter interests.

What is the attitude? Will it have a point of view?

The attitude is inclusiveness and openness. Peer-to-peer barter should by definition be as decentralized as possible, but as a social movement share some basic common principles. As for point of view, one might choose to barter for the sake of saving money, being "green" (giving old goods new life), and/or a way of engaging with others in the community, but one need not necessarily subscribe to any particular one of these view in order to use the service.

How will it work technically? What kind of technology will be used?

The tech prototype will be based on PHP/MySQL, maybe some JavaScript for the UI. The machine-readable barter badge profiles will be some sort of XML markup.

What will it look like? What kind of materials? What kind of media?
What is the look and feel? Describe the user interface.

It's a website, that will hopefully look simple, clean and pretty.
The UI is a essentially a series of forms where users enter their barter wants and needs and other profile information like availability. The matching algorithm will then match users to others with complementary needs and wants.

Success Measures/Future Plans:

How will you know your project is complete? What will be the success measure(s)? (ex. It works, people like it, it's easy to use, people find it insightful, it's useful, it's controversial, it's inspirational, it's fun, people learn something, etc.) How will you measure this (user testing, technical testing, etc.). What are your future project plans?

For the sake of the thesis, I will know when it is complete when there is a finished business plan and a movement plan for how to grow the community. The prototype should be enough to serve as a proof of concept. Measures of success: if the idea inspires people enough to create their own profiles/barter badges and inspires people to want to participating in some way, either by contributing to the open source software project around SokoSquare, or to fund the project/movement. The basic unit measure is the number of members and "active members" who actually engage in barter transactions with each other.

The future plans are to see if this can exist in the real world outside of an academic context. The test is to see if SokoSquare is actually viable as a for-profit business, or if it is something that could be funded as a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting barter as a social practice and providing technological tools to facilitate it.

SOURCES
[1] Monocle. Issue 29, Volume 3, December 2009/January 2010. Pg. 116.
[2] Craigslist Blog. http://blog.craigslist.org/2009/04/barter-economy/
[3] IRS.gov. http://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc420.html