Tangible Media Proposal
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Introduction:
Overview of the Keeper's Role and Summary of my Project Goals

Tabletop Role-Playing Games like Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, and Monster of the Week are fantastic ways to encourage co-operative role-play and creativity, and it's fun and rewarding to participate in the creation of a unique and compelling story with a group of friends. Each player controls a character that is an integral part of a storyline, and that story plays out based on the choices that the characters make. This type of gameplay is consistent across most TTRPGs, and most even have a special role in common for one player in the group. The name of this role varies from game to game, but at its core, this role serves the same purpose: to describe a situation to the other players, which they will then react to, guiding them as they build a story together. This role is much more demanding than the one of the other players. It is their job to come up with a starting point for the story, prompt the players into action, inventing and populating the imagined setting of the game, and creating threats for the players to deal with that are both fun and challenging. In Monster of the Week, a tabletop game created by Michael Sands using the Powered by the Apocalypse framework, this role is called the "Keeper". The role of the Keeper is less complex than the leadership roles in other games, like the Dungeon Master in Dungeons & Dragons, but there is still a lot that the Keeper must juggle to keep the game moving smoothly.

For my project, I would like to make a device that the Keeper can use to help run a game of Monster of the Week. The Keeper's Assistant would have functions that fall into one of two categories: "Assist" and "Enrich". Assist functions would help the Keeper keep track of various aspects of the game, while Enrich functions would enhance the gameplay experience for the players in a way that could not be accomplished without the help of a device.

In terms of visuals, the Keeper's Assistant would likely ressemble a "DM Screen", a non-electronic device used by Dungeon Masters while playing Dungeons & Dragons. DM Screens are essentially a foldable set of flat panels that put a physical barrier between the players and the Dungeon Master. The side facing the Dungeon Master generally contains reference pages for various character classes, descriptions for gameplay mechanics and rules, and somewhere to take story notes. The Keeper's Assistant would also ideally incorporate some sort of barrier between the players and the Keeper, but there would be parts of it that would be visible to the players, as some of its functions are built for the players rather than for the Keeper.

The Keeper's Assistant:
Assist Functions and Enrich Functions

As previously mentioned, the functions of the Keeper's Assistant can be categorized as "Assist" functions or "Enrich" functions. In this early conceptual stage, I have brainstormed three ideas for each function, though as a general disclaimer, my lack of experience in electronics may result in these functions changing or being omitted later on.

The first Assist function is a built-in dice-roller. Of course, it is infinitely more fun and engaging to roll physical dice than it is to use a dice-roller, but when players (or the Keeper!) forget their dice, it is better to have an easily-accessible alternative than no solution at all. A push of a button would let either the players or the Keeper simulate the rolling of two six-sided dice. Ideally, the numbers rolled would be added automatically, and then the result would then be displayed for both the players and the Keeper to see.

The next Assist function would be a Bystander Generator. In Monster of the Week, human characters that are not controlled by the player are invented and played by the Keeper. They are referred to as "Bystanders", and have significant mechanical value to the game. They come in various archetypes, each with their own purposes, like a concerned citizen helping the players find clues, or a nosy gossip that actively impedes the progress of the players (Sands, 2015, p.142). Bystanders are generally created prior to the start of the game, but sometimes (oftentimes), the players move the game in a direction that the Keeper did not anticipate. For instance, the Keeper may intend for the players to investigate the village's old haunted house, but the players decide that their characters will stop for donuts at the local coffee shop first. Now the Keeper is left scrambling to come up with names and archetypes for the shopkeepers and patrons. This can slow the momentum of the game, sometimes to a halt, depending on how experienced the Keeper is at thinking on their feet. At the push of a button, the Bystander Generator function would be able to quickly generate a name, archetype, and one personality trait for an impromptu NPC, keeping the game flowing smoothly.

The third Assist function would be a Player Health Tracker. Monster of the Week stands out in that its player characters are usually squishy fragile humans with only 7 points of health. Once that seven drops to three, the character is considered "unstable", and their condition will continue to deteriorate unless the other players do something to help (Sands, 2015, p.110). The Player Health Tracker is a function for the benefit of both the Keeper and the players. A set of seven LED lights could represent the health of each player, and could be easily switched off one at a time to mirror the dwindling of a player's health. Once a player's health reaches "unstable", the remaining LEDs could switch to red, and even start blinking to reflect the idea that their character's life is hanging in the balance. This function both helps the Keeper keep track of the players' health, and also subtly manipulates the players into feeling a sense of urgency when their character is endangered.

The "Enrich" functions exist to facilitate the players' immersion into the story of the game. They are used by the Keeper to pique the players' interest and give them a fleshed-out, exciting game experience.

The first Enrich function would be the inclusion of a soundboard that allows the Keeper to play various sound effects at their discretion. Examples could include the roar of a monster, the chatter of a crowded shop, or the impact of a player's weapon on their monstrous target.

The Soundboard would let the Keeper control and enhance the ambiance of the game, making it a more memorable and engaging experience for everyone.

The second Enrich function would be the inclusion of some kind of voice filter that would let the Keeper alter the sound of their voice as they speak. Even the most experienced and creative Keepers can only make so many distinct NPC voices. Having a voice filter function would let the Keeper increase the variety of character voices, which would in turn prevent the players from mixing up two NPCs who sound similar to one another. The filters are fun for both the Keeper and the Player, adding another layer of immersion to the game.

One of the many important game mechanics in Monster of the Week is the countdown, which informs the severity of the scenario that the players find their characters in. As the countdown progresses, the situation grows more and more dangerous: NPC lives are put in danger, foes grow stronger and stronger, and the odds of victory begin to decline. It is important to note that the term "countdown" is somewhat of a misnomer. There's no real-life temporal aspect involved; the "countdown" is actually the passage of time in the game's universe (Sands, 2015, p.146). A visual or sound-based representation of an in-game countdown would let the Keeper manipulate the tension of the corresponding scene in the game. For example, a creature could become more and more powerful as the sunlight fades, which could be illustrated with a colour-changing LED that reflects the colour of the sky as the sun sets. Another example could be that the players are tasked with stopping the assassination of an NPC before midnight. This time, a chime of a clocktower could be played at the Keeper's discretion to indicate to the players that their time is running out. Similar to the Player Health Tracker Assist function, the Countdown function would evoke a sense of panic or urgency in the players, further immersing them in the game.

Research Questions:

1) **Think of a context and an environment where you would like to intervene. Where will you present your project? Who is it made for?**

My seven players are gathered around me in the gymnasium of the school I work for. It's Monday morning, bright and early, just barely 8AM. But the players are ready, dice and character sheets in hand, waiting for the Keeper to pick up from where they left off on Friday. A quick recap of the last session is given, refreshing the players' memories. Then it's time to play.

The session goes well at first, though as more kids file into the gymnasium, it gets louder, making it tougher for the players to hear what I'm saying. NPC voices start to meld together, and one player isn't sure which one is talking. Another player has somehow flung his dice across the gym and they've seemingly vanished into the ether. A third has forgotten to mark her character's health on her character sheet and isn't even sure if her character is still alive. A fourth watches a hoola hoop roll across the gym, effectively distracting her from the current game scenario.

Although no session can run perfectly, it certainly could go better. This is where the Keeper's Assistant would shine, its various functions making the game run more smoothly and keep players more engaged. The Keeper's Assistant is both eye-catching and helpful, with the purpose of assisting with on-the-fly decisions that the Keeper makes, as well as commanding the attention of the players and redirecting it to the Keeper when necessary. In the hands of new and seasoned Keepers alike, the Keeper's Assistant would be a valuable tool in the preparation and execution of a fun and exciting session of Monster of the Week.

2) **Think about the kind of relationship you wish to foster among and between your users and the artifact or installation. What will your project afford users and how would the experience make them reflect on themselves, their environment, society and your intentions?**

Even a Keeper with limited experience understands how much work goes into the preparation of a Monster of the Week session. No device could take the place of pages upon pages of story notes, or predict the actions of the players, but it would definitely be useful to have something to rely on for quick, spur-of-the-moment decisions, or helpful functions that streamline gameplay.

Ideally, the Keeper's Assistant serves as an extension of the Keeper that enhances the quality of the game session for both the Keeper and the players. Anyone who has played a game knows that immersion is key, which is what gives the Keeper's Assistant so much potential. Sure, the Keeper and players may all have vivid imaginations, but a visual aid with the power to help control the ambiance and boost the impact of the Keeper's words would no doubt make for a memorable session. Even a noisy gymnasium fades into the background of a gripping narrative that the listeners are able to participate in.

The Keeper's Assistant and the game experience that it contributes to create hopes to entertain and inspire players, maybe even beyond the scope of any singular session. Perhaps a player will find themselves replaying their favorite parts of the game in their minds over and over throughout their day. Maybe they'll tell their friends outside of the game about what a fun

session they had, leading to new players joining the game. Or maybe a player will even feel empowered to start their own Monster of the Week game, this time taking on the role of the Keeper themselves, with their own set of friends as players. It's all in the name of fun, and the Keeper's Assistant strives to make a Monster of the Week session as fun as it can possibly be!

3) **Think about the notion of empowerment. Is your artifact really helping or challenging users or is it just another psychological prosthesis?**

The Keeper's Assistant isn't meant to take over for the Keeper, and it's unlikely that its unique contributions will have any power on their own to make a meaningful impact. Its purpose is to help the Keeper run a more fun and memorable session, so in that sense, yes, it can be considered a prosthetic for the Keeper. Even so, its functions, particularly the Assist functions, are at the very least genuinely helpful to the Keepers and the players.

When it comes to challenging the users, that depends on the Keeper's actions and words. Let's revisit the Countdown Enrich function. The sense of urgency fostered by the Keeper as the players' foe grows in strength as the sun sets depends partially on the Keeper's ability to spin a compelling narrative. The colour-changing LEDs would add extra flavor to the game, but aren't essential to its development. However, the visual aspect of the Countdown that the Keeper's Assistant creates could increase tension between the players and their characters' situation just enough to spur the players into action. Perhaps the choices made by the players, influenced by the atmosphere that the Keeper's Assistant enhanced, would be much different than they would have been had the ambiance of the game not been so powerful.

The Keeper's Assistant certainly has the potential at the very least to empower the Keeper, if not the players themselves. Its functions exist to give the Keeper finer control over the gameplay experience, helping the Keeper add flavor and detail to the world of the game.

4) **Think about how to successfully communicate your intentions - what Interaction Design Strategies will you employ? What are you trying to tell us?**

First and foremost, it is important to establish what my intentions are vis-a-vis the Keeper's Assistant. As previously mentioned, it is meant to be a tool used to enhance a game of Monster of the Week, and as such, *my intentions* are simply for the intentions of the Keeper to be communicated. There is some responsibility for this that will lie with the Keeper as they run their session. However, as the Keeper's Assistant's designer, it is my job to provide the framework that will give a Keeper a powerful boost to their ability to control the atmosphere of the game in a way that will engage, entertain, and empower the players.

The Keeper's Assistant will have to be refined through trial-and-error and multiple iterations. But first, the initial prototype has to be built. To do so, I have decided to create Insight Statements, which will help me figure out what the top priorities are for the Keeper's Assistant, and how I might be able to figure out how to implement them (The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design, 2015, p.81). Following this step, I will borrow the "How Might We" method from the *Field Guide to Human-Centered Design*, which will change the aforementioned Insight Statements into questions that can be answered in a variety of ways that inspire design possibilities ((The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design, 2015, p.85). These ideas can then be passed through a "Gut Check" method, which will whittle down the number of possible

solutions to the "How Might We" questions ((The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design, 2015, p.110). The remaining ideas will then be tested out, though I am unsure if it would be better to do so during an actual game of Monster of the Week, or in a mock game made for the purpose of testing the Keeper's Assistant. I lean toward the former, as I have many opportunities to run sessions of Monster of the Week at my workplace. There, I would follow the *Field Guide to Human-Centered Design*'s steps on "Live Prototyping", and adapt and modify the Keeper's Assistant day-by-day as I test it with actual players, of course taking their feedback*** into account as well.

       With regards to the actual iteration process, ideally I would like to test several functions at once, but this might be difficult as some may be more difficult to implement than others. Some functions may advance faster than others, while others may not work at all, causing them to be omitted, or for new functions to take their place.

       *** **Side-note:** For ethical reasons and because my players are children, I will ***not*** be taking photos, audio, video, or written statements that include direct quotations or any other information that could identify the children.

Non-Technical Evaluation of Sensors
What Sensors does the Keeper's Assistant Require?

       The Keeper is the one in control of the Keeper's Assistant, and, as such, it doesn't require sensors outside of a microphone for the voice filter.

       Sensors not included, the Keeper's Assistant requires a fair amount of components. LEDs are needed for the player health tracker and countdown, and buttons for the dice roller, health tracker, sound board, bystander generator, and countdown. Speakers are required for the voice filter and soundboard, a number display for the dice roller, and a small screen for the bystander generator. Other components are the usual wires, resistors, microcontroller, etc.

       The lack of sensors should not affect the desired outcome of the Keeper's Assistant. As explained earlier, the Keeper is the one reacting to the actions of the players and manipulating the Keeper's Assistant accordingly. As the basic groundwork is laid for the simpler functions of the Keeper's Assistant, it is possible that this will change.
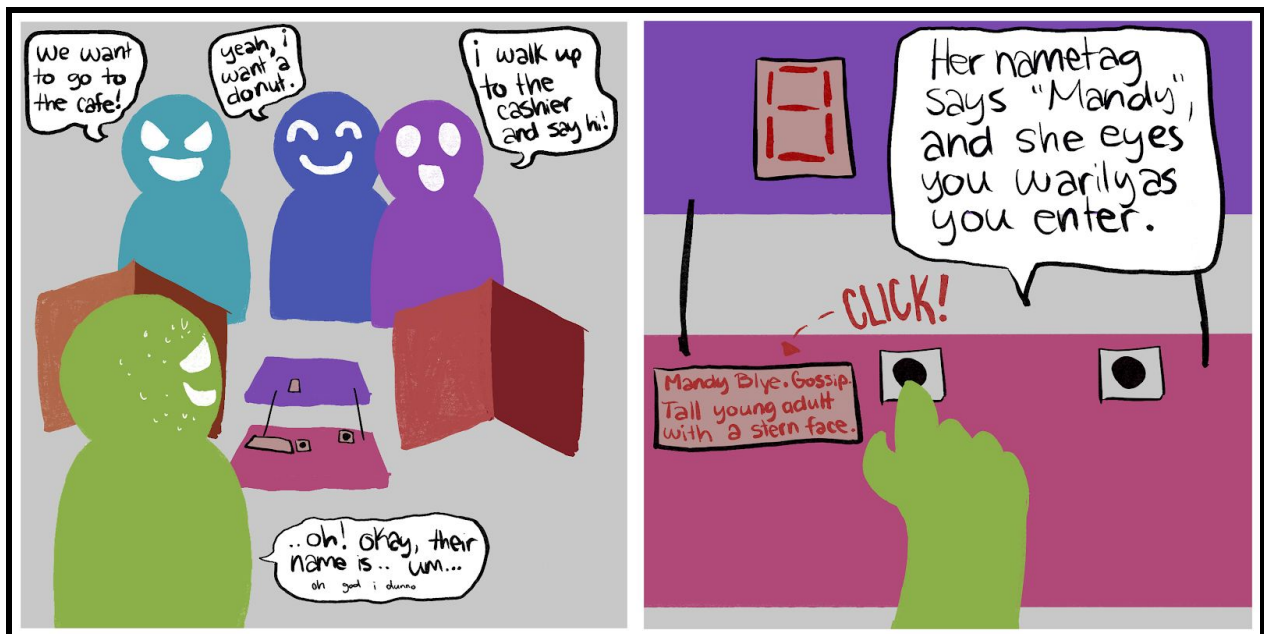
Storyboard
Dice roller
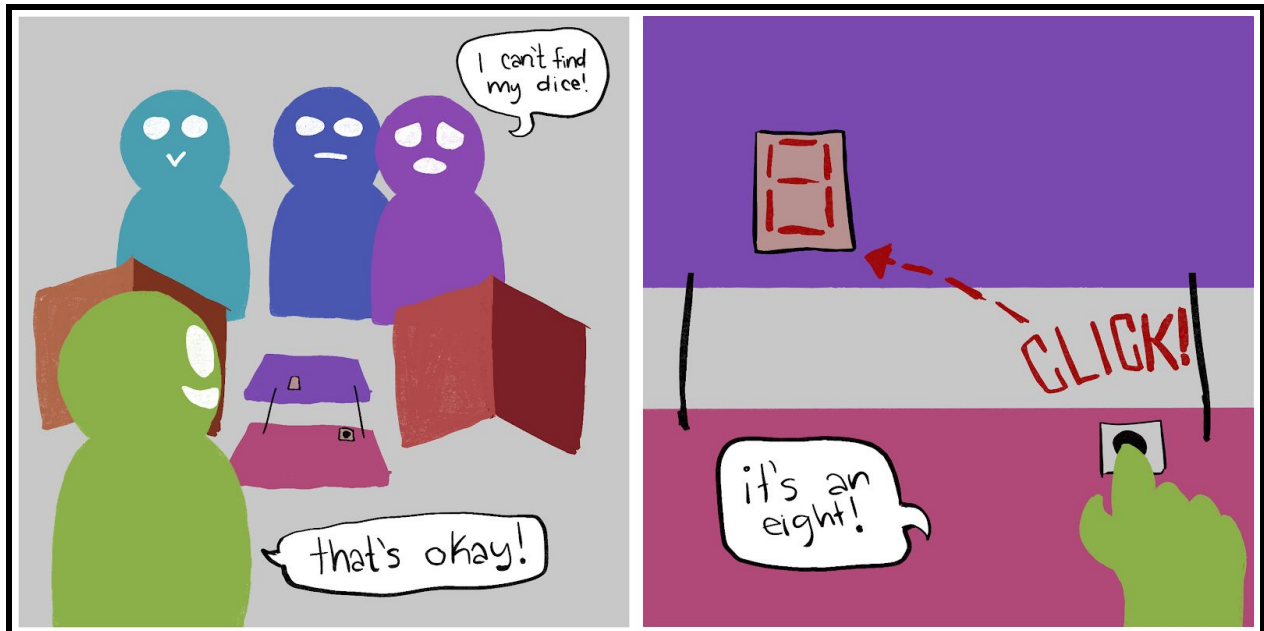
A player has misplaced their dice. The Keeper reassures them, then presses a button on the Keeper breadboard. The button triggers the simulation of a dice roll, and that result appears on the players' breadboard on the small number screen.

Bystander generator

The players suddenly decide to visit a location that the Keeper hadn't expected them to go. The Keeper sweats profusely upon realizing that they have nothing prepared for this next encounter. Thankfully, the Bystander Generator provides them with enough information to quickly come up with a character for the players to interact with.

Player health tracker
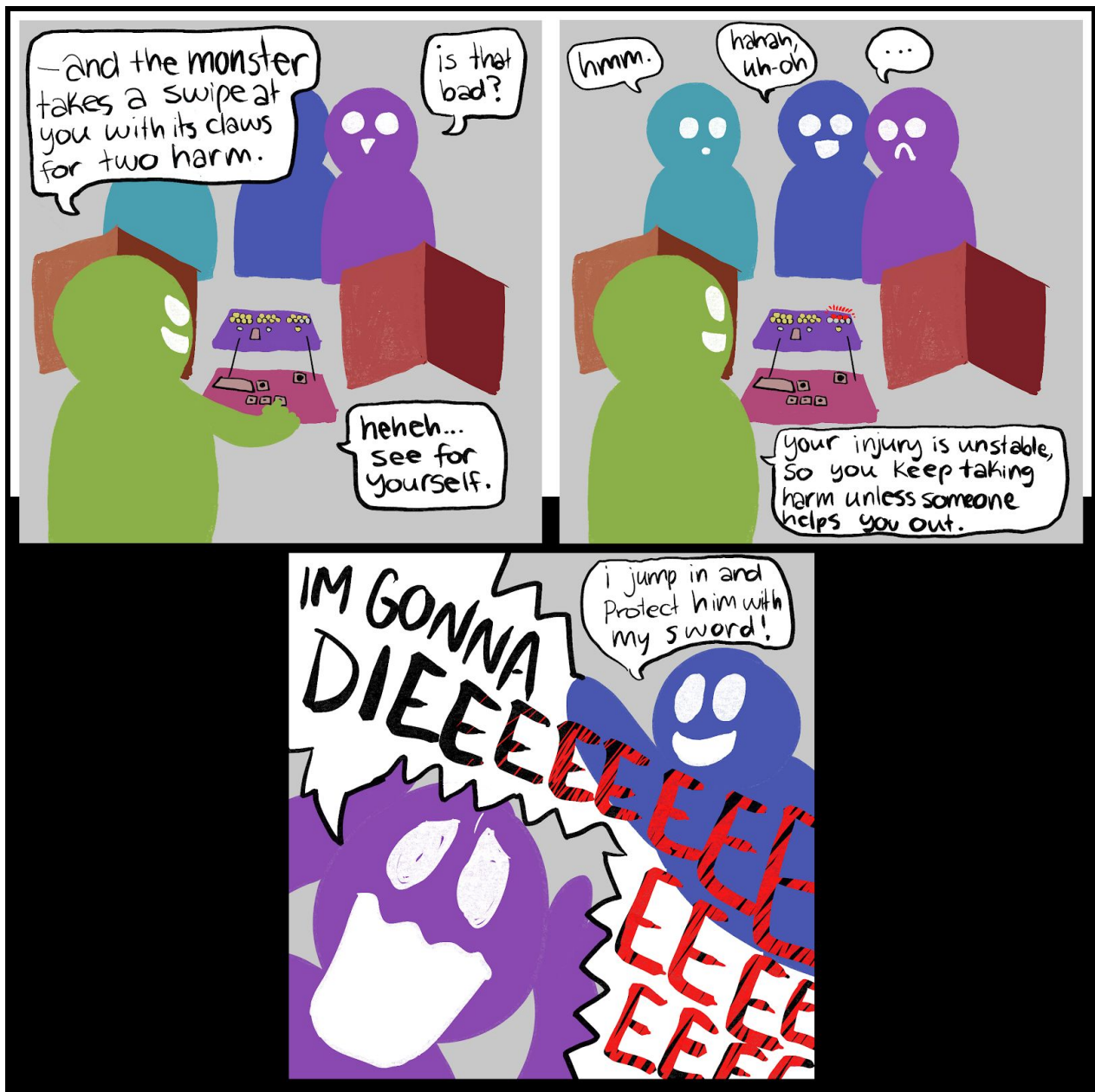
The Keeper uses the LEDs to display each player's health, and can control it. Once a player's health hits 3 or less, the remaining LEDs blink red, informing the players of the severity of the situation. Spurred on by the urgency suggested by the blinking lights, another player makes the decision to have their own character help their friend's character.
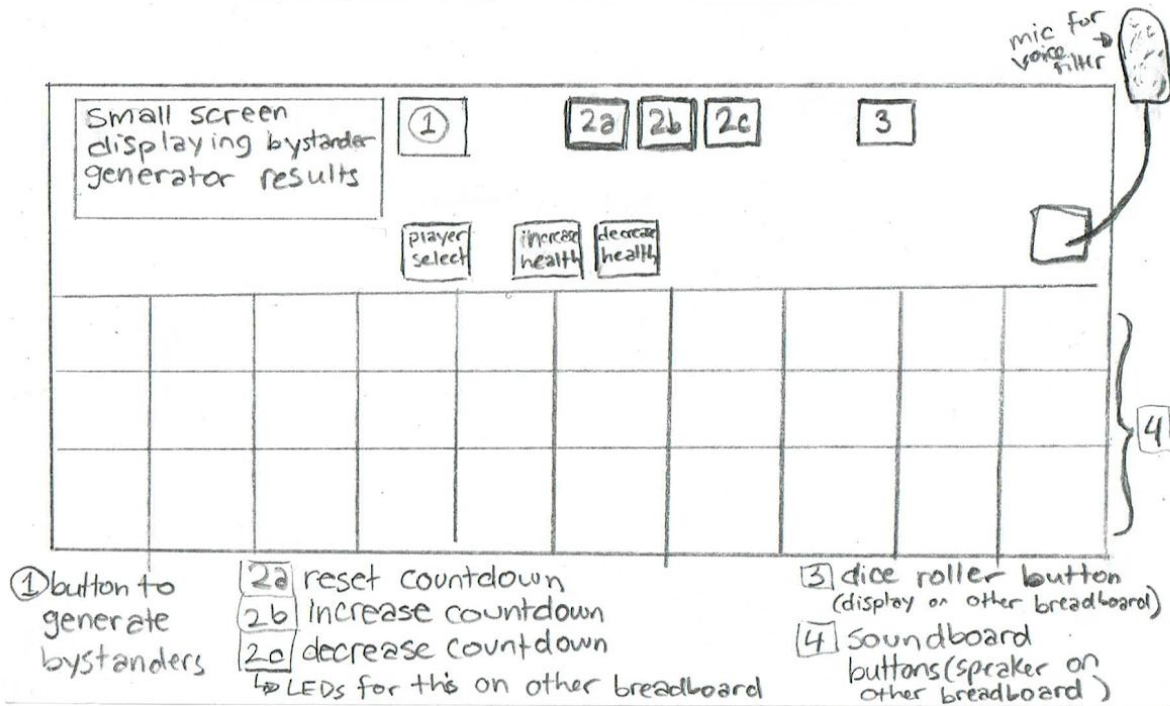
Voice Filter
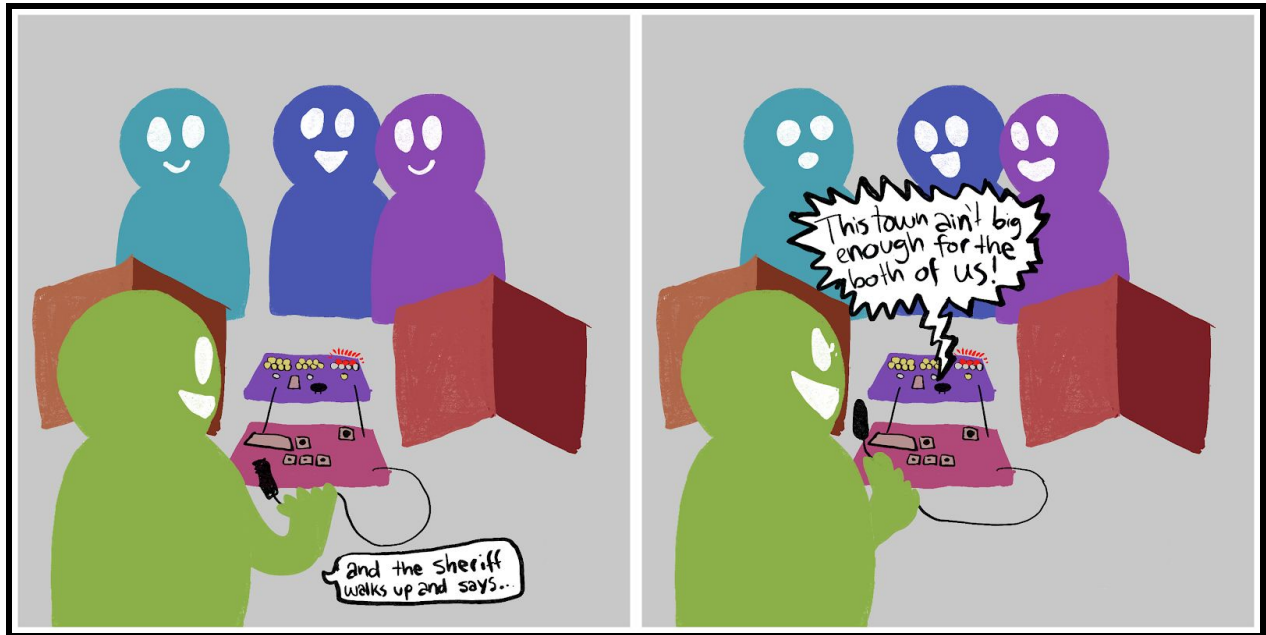
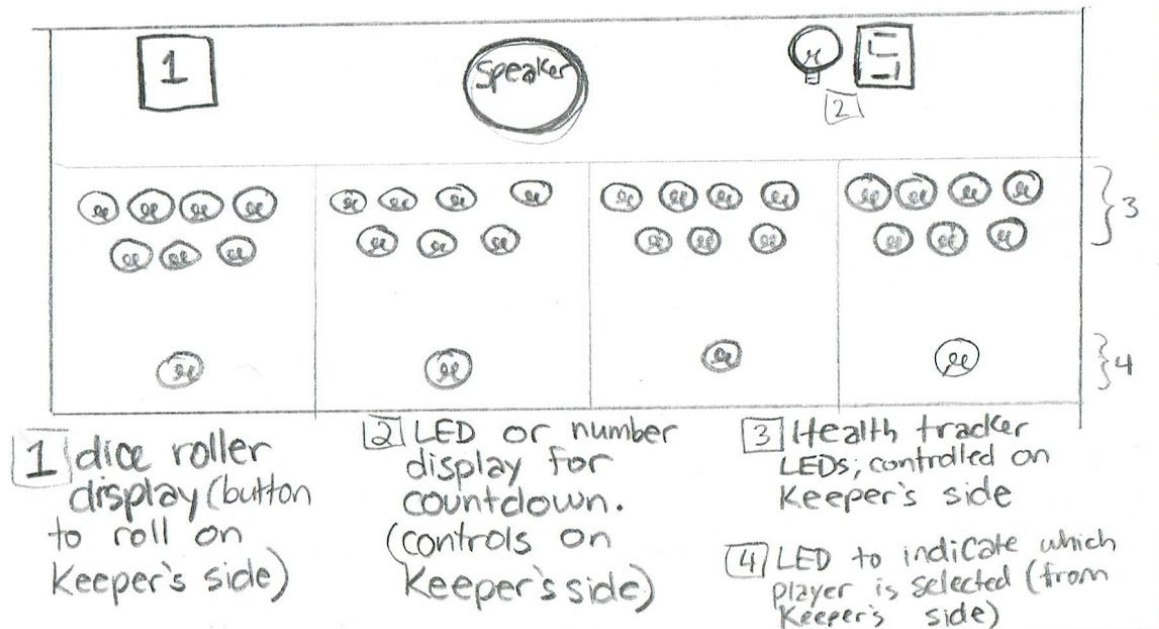The Keeper speaks into the microphone and it filters their voice into something much different than their normal voice, and that voice comes out of the speakers on the players' side breadboard.

Note: The remaining two functions are not storyboarded because they show very similar interactions to some of the pictures above. Instead, here are rough drafts of the layouts of the Keeper and player breadboards.

Keeper Side Breadboard (rough idea)

mic for voice filter →

| Small screen displaying bystander generator results | ① | 2a 2b 2c | 3 |

player select   increase health   decrease health

}④

① button to generate bystanders

2a reset countdown
2b increase countdown
2c decrease countdown
↳ LEDs for this on other breadboard

3 dice roller button
(display on other breadboard)

④ Soundboard buttons (speaker on other breadboard)

Player Side Breadboard (rough idea)
(maybe mounted onto Keeper screen panels, facing player?)

| 1 | Speaker | ② |

}3

}4

1 dice roller display (button to roll on Keeper's side)

2 LED or number display for countdown. (controls on Keeper's side)

3 Health tracker LEDs; controlled on Keeper's side

4 LED to indicate which player is selected (from Keeper's side)

Similar Projects
Technologies that Enhance TTRPGs

1) Fantasy Grounds

Fantasy Grounds is an application that assists Game Masters (such as the Keeper, the Dungeon Master, and other equivalent roles) in managing campaigns, calculating complex dice roles, creating battle maps, generating random encounters, NPCs, and player rewards, and create and modify character sheets, among many other features (Fantasy Grounds, 2020). It is an entirely digital application that has built-in resources for many Tabletop RPGs, though Monster of the Week is not one of them. One of the most challenging aspects of being any sort of Game Master is having pertinent information on-hand and ready at any given moment. Juggling this with constructing a narrative and managing non-player characters can be very overwhelming, so a tool as robust as this is wildly helpful for any GM.

However, it is all screen-based, and most interaction is on the GM's end. The map-building feature, though very powerful, is confined to the GM's screen, and could only be shown to the players through their own personal screens, or some kind of setup where the screen is laid out on the table in the middle of all of the players, or projected onto a nearby wall. Even though building a map in Fantasy Grounds is easier and, depending on the Game Master, potentially more visually pleasing, it is not able to replicate the engaging feeling of the players moving their characters' miniature models around on a battle map laid out in front of them. Fantasy Grounds offers players very little interaction other than visual, but nonetheless, it is no doubt extremely useful for enhancing and streamlining gameplay.

2) Monster of the Week Bystander Creator on Perchance.org

Perchance.org is a "platform for creating and sharing random text generators" (Perchance). Generators made on Perchance allow users to categorize text into customizable fields, which are then used to generate text following a template created by the user. One of such generators is a Bystander creator that adheres to the rules of Monster of the Week.

The Monster of the Week Bystander Creator has several fields that are populated with relevant text every time the "randomize" button is clicked. The first six fields are always populated, with a seventh being filled randomly. The fields include a name, a Bystander Archetype defined by the Monster of the Week rulebook, a body type, hair length, colour, and texture, a few adjectives describing their face, and one or two that either provide a personality trait or a physical feature of their appearance that hints at a personality trait (such as a scar, a tattoo, clothing, etc).

It's a very simple generator, and though it can be useful in a pinch, repeatedly clicking the randomize button reveals a lot of repetition. This generator clearly wasn't meant to be used to decide every Bystander in a campaign, only existing to provide prompts for a Keeper stuck in the planning stage, or to provide a quick new Bystander for a Keeper mid-game. Even though it isn't particularly advanced or sophisticated, it can still help to maintain the momentum of a session without denying the players the creative freedom of exploring and contributing to the Keeper's imagined environment.

3) Syrinscape

Syrinscape is an app that lets Game Masters enhance their Tabletop RPG session through music and sound effects. Its main feature is its ability to let the user create custom sets of music and sound effects. It has a large library of user-made soundscapes that can be freely used by other users (Syrinscape, 2020).

Full control over the soundscape is given to the user: it lets them add multiple music tracks and sound effects to a collection called a "soundset" that can be adjusted based on the needs of the user. Soundsets also include a "reverb" feature, which is a drop-down menu of locations, like a plain, hangar, or sewer, that would affect the quality of the sound. Soundsets can also have various "moods", which are saved presets created by the user that can be switched into to reflect what's occurring in-game (Syrinscape, 2020).

For example, a soundscape titled "The Sewers" could have several different music tracks, monster sound effects, battle sound effects, and other ambient noises. A mood based on "The Sewers" soundset could be something called "Sewer Exploration", which would use a slow music track with soft ambient noises and calm footsteps. Another mood could be "Sewer Combat", which would use a more intense music track, monster sound effects, and more frantic and heavy footsteps. Moods can be adjusted during gameplay, or can be created by the Game Master beforehand. The mood feature allows the Game Master to fine-tune the ambiance of the game with extreme precision without having to stop one track to play another.

Conclusion
What Sets the Keeper's Assistant Apart

There are many tools and resources out there for Game Masters, though the bulk of them are for Dungeons & Dragons. Some applications, like Syrinscape, can easily fit any TTRPG, but the Keeper in Monster of the Week will still have to juggle the use of an application like that along with keeping track of character health, creating Bystanders on the fly, and keeping players engaged. Having to rapidly switch between apps to manage all of these things is overwhelming, and can disrupt the flow of the game. It would be much easier if all of those functions were integrated into one object, with all of its features laid out in front of the Keeper for easy, instant access.

This is where the Keeper's Assistant would shine. It would have a simple layout that gives the Keeper seamless control over the ambiance of the game while also being eye-catching to the players, keeping them immersed in the game. Like a Dungeon Master's DM Screen, the Keeper's more important notes could be shielded from view, away from the players, while still having a visual component present to benefit the players. Functions like the Player Health Tracker and Audio/Visual Countdown simultaneously help the Keeper track important information while providing the players with sensory information that enhances the mood of the session. Optimally, functions would be added as they're developed without being too disruptive to the other, already established functions. As a tangible object rather than words on a screen, the Keeper's Assistant would be more fun to use from both the players' and the Keeper's perspective.

Works Cited:

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- "Monster of the Week Bystander Creator." Create a Random Generator - Perchance.org, perchance.org/motw-bystander.
- "About Syrinscape." Syrinscape, www.syrinscape.com/about-syrinscape/.