COVETOUS: Building a Concept Art Portfolio

by

Sydney Carroll

ORCID ID: 0009-0005-6963-6255

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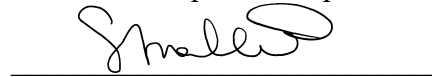California State University, Fullerton

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Approved by: Date

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Prof. Erik Carpenter, Department of Visual Arts

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Dr. Stacy Mallicoat, Director, University Honors Program

INTRODUCTION

Covetous is an ongoing portfolio project I built with the guidance and collaboration of my faculty mentor Erik Carpenter, the building blocks of which were laid on September 19, 2022. That day was my first meeting with Professor Carpenter, where I pitched to him a floating moodboard of sorts explaining my career goals, personal interests, and artistic influences. I wanted to create a concept art portfolio that visualized a fictional world that would, hypothetically, provide the baseline for a video game. However, this was something I had only ever attempted on a very small scale, through maybe four or five connected pieces but never enough for proper world building. I knew what I needed—characters, costumes, environments, politics, and history to set my story in—but I also knew it would be a challenge. Therefore, Professor Carpenter, who is quite literally a Game Art, Animation, and Immersive Media professor, was the perfect fit to help me reach my goals.

Just a few days later, on September 22nd, Professor Carpenter agreed to be my faculty mentor. And so, the development of Covetous began. Over the course of the next twenty months, save a few gaps for academic year breaks, Professor Carpenter and I met biweekly—sometimes weekly—in person or virtually to brainstorm, reflect on, and refine artwork and ideas regarding our project. I kept a journal documenting our meeting notes, as well as my individual triumphs and obstacles with regards to Covetous' creation—because there were definitely obstacles. I faced bouts of artblock or lack of inspiration at times, but far more prominent than that was the encouragement from Professor Carpenter, passion for all the artistic avenues I had yet to explore, and my determination to create work through Covetous that expanded my portfolio. This paper documents that development.

INSPIRATION

Before I knew what shape my project would take, I knew what kinds of tools I wanted to use to mold it. The project's influences came from four different sources—media, themes, artists, and personal life. The most prominent media influence I had was *The Last of Us* the video game, which was released in 2013 and is the game that I credit for my interest in pursuing concept art in the first place. The gritty, grounded realism sliced with the intriguing element of an infected world and poignant story beats exemplified everything I would want to be a part of in game development. *Life is Strange* and *Night in the Woods* are two other video games that influenced me, more-so in tone and subject matter than in art style. Both games tended to a common nostalgia we all have for youth and a bittersweetness we ache for in found family. These themes extended on to my TV and film influences, such as *Stranger Things* and *The Goonies*, both of which are about a group of kids embarking on journeys together bigger than themselves at the cusp of their maturity. Later, as the setting of Covetous began to take more shape, the social and power division between classes in *The Hunger Games* books and TV show *Arcane* carved a clearer influence in the project.

When it comes to concept art, my biggest influences are Hyoung Taek Nam, Ashley Swidowski, Igor Sid, Jens Claessens, and Alex Neonakis, the through-line between all of them being their work at AAA video game studios. AAA—said like Triple-A—fit within a classification used within the industry to refer to high-budget, high-profile games produced or distributed by a major publisher. These games tend to be (but not always are) hyper-realistic (think *Call of Duty*, *Assassin's Creed*, or *Grand Theft Auto*), and so in turn their concept artists tend to paint in very realistic ways. Hyoung Taek Nam and Ashley Swidowski both have very painterly styles, whereas Jens Claessens' and Igor Sid's work err more towards a sculptural,

tangible feel. Alex Neonakis on the other hand was less realistic and more illustrative, and to me

served as a reminder that I didn't have to aim for sharply rendered pieces all the time.
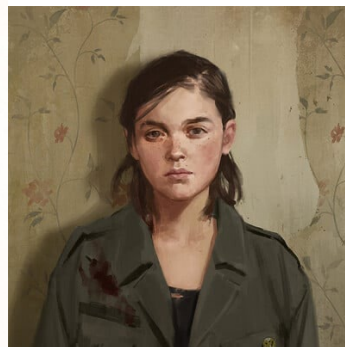

Igor Sid.

Hyoung Taek Nam

Jens Claessens

Alex Neonakis

Ashley Swidowski

The rest of my influences came from my personal life. I grew up criss-crossing the globe,

visiting nineteen countries and living in fifteen different places, four of which being different

countries and seven of which being different states. My dad is in the Navy, and his constant duty

stations and relocations were the reason for this travel. At the time, I really struggled with this

upbringing. My friendships lasted as long as my address did, I saw my extended family twice a

year—mom's side during the summers, dad's side during the winter—and more than anything, I

yearned for lifelong connection. I vividly remember during our four-year stay in Japan my parents asking me if I wanted our family to move to Florida or the tiny middle eastern country Bahrain next (in hindsight, I doubt my feelings were a factor in this decision, but I appreciated the ask nonetheless). I confidently said Japan, because *of course.* However, on the last day of our trip to see my extended family in New Mexico, I was horizontal, sobbing in the backseat. I didn't want to go to Bahrain. I didn't want to live overseas again. I was exhausted and drained of having to say hello and goodbye to family, and I was *especially* distraught to not only be absent in their lives, but for them to be absent in mine. Before, I had been mostly thrilled with moving all the time. Now, by about age 10, I was sure that I would trade it for stability and closeness in a heartbeat.

Fast forward seven years to the end of my K-12 education—and simultaneously the end of my overseas moves—and I looked back thinking the complete opposite, recognizing the privilege that it is to not only visit so many parts of the world, but be fully submerged in them. I had the uniquely defining experience of learning from and growing within cultures different from mine, from eastern Asia to western Europe. This is all to say that these experiences influenced Covetous in two ways—one, in its cultural references, and two, in its story.

WORLDBUILDING

My very first written brainstorms consisted of me analyzing what it was about my favorite media that moved me and what in my own life I could take inspiration in to make something out of. These notes referenced foiled friendships, dystopian or surreal scenarios, and familiar places like the military bases I grew up in or the Japanese and Spanish suburbs surrounding them. Despite what felt like endless inspiration, I had yet to find a real direction. The initial brainstorms of directions I wanted the project to go were the following:

Characters
- *Age difference; older and younger sibling.*
- *Contrast between two characters, not necessarily siblings. (One more serious, one more playful, etc.)*
- *A group of all different personalities/tropes (ex: Stranger Things or The Goonies group dynamics)*

Ideas
- *Dystopian or disaster scenarios (earthquakes, apocalypse, experimental accident, etc.)*
- *Coming of age stories*
- *Diverse population depicted.*
- *Adventure (military base?)*
- *Something surreal, maybe (real life with an unnatural twist like Stranger Things, Uncharted 1-3, Life is Strange)*

Clearly, these ideas reflect influences touched upon previously. I was clinging to the real world still, and picturing something taking place in the recognizable modern-day. However, I quickly realized that this felt limiting in my creativity and if I wanted to create something impressive and more uniquely, recognizably mine, I should broaden my scope. So, during discussions with Professor Carpenter, we began to develop a society divided into a lower class and a ruling class. With this structure, my design choices when it came to characters and their environments would be more clearly guided by their specific societal boundaries and provided an opportunity to make sure that those choices also contrasted each other. Hence, something called the Slums and Topside began to take shape.

The History

Several generations before the story takes place, a community of people came across an island when fleeing an oppressive force. Upon inhabiting the island, a brave majority of people ventured inside a cave on the island, which held bountiful resources like freshwater, fish and

other edible vertebrates and minerals. The population that would not venture inside were able to contribute to their society by focusing on less laborious tasks, like governing. Through the decades, they slowly divided into those who were producing and those who reaped the rewards. This resulted in a belief that those who were benefitting from the tail end of the labor of others were in a way superior. This propagated into unjust policymaking, rendering the people who would work and live inside the cave as unable to leave. These two factions are what ultimately came to be known as the Slums and Topside.

The Slums

Slums refer to densely populated impoverished residential areas characterized by weak build material, inadequate sanitation and clean water supply, and insecure residential status. They are found all over the world, and they served as an interesting starting point for me in terms of setting. The run-down nature of slums satisfied my personal interests in drawing more rugged, grounded, dystopian character designs and additionally gave opportunity for me to reference different cultures. The very first set of sketches for Covetous were me playing with the attire the Slumspeople would wear. I used the same lineart base of a person standing, and in 33 different thumbnails, explored a variety of costumes.

I further broke down these thumbnails by including images of actual clothing items and accessories that I was referencing. An environment that was more difficult or dangerous to navigate, with less resources and more competition for them, would undoubtedly steer the choices of what people would wear. For example, clothes are stitched together due to them being reused through generations, undergoing distressing and tearing. Some items are oversized, further connotating their hand-me-down nature. Pouches on belts, pockets in pants, and bags all served as storage for tools or essential belongings. Pants zip off into shorts for practicality, and

headwear provided both protection and anonymity. Whether the individual designs were more fit

for a nomadic, odd-job type of person, or someone working in a specialized trade, the goal was

for each individual to look like they all were from the same society.

Fig. 1: Slumspeople thumbnails

Next, I decided to bring the Slumspeople a bit more to life. Now, rather than focusing so

much on costuming, I decided to draw groups of people in more everyday poses, giving them a

stronger sense of personality through gesture and expression.

Fig. 2: Slumspeople exploration

Now that the Slumspeople were more vivid in my mind, their environment had to be

brought to life. To reflect the run-down, dreary aesthetic already imposed upon the people, I

decided to set their home inside a cave. Immediately, I pictured the cave as extremely tall and

vast—large enough to host an entire community inside. I wanted the architecture to be densely

crowded, inspired by Japanese city-streets, with residential quarter, retail, warehouses, and more

all stacked on top of each other and between each other. Additionally, I wanted to utilize arches

and decorative elements on the buildings to satisfy my own want to include Middle Eastern

architecture (and shoutout the region for my time having lived there), as well as to serve

functional purposes such as providing stable structure and storytelling through the decorative

elements. To liven the Slums up a bit, I went with neon lit lanterns and signs, evoking a busy

nightlife sense to the area.
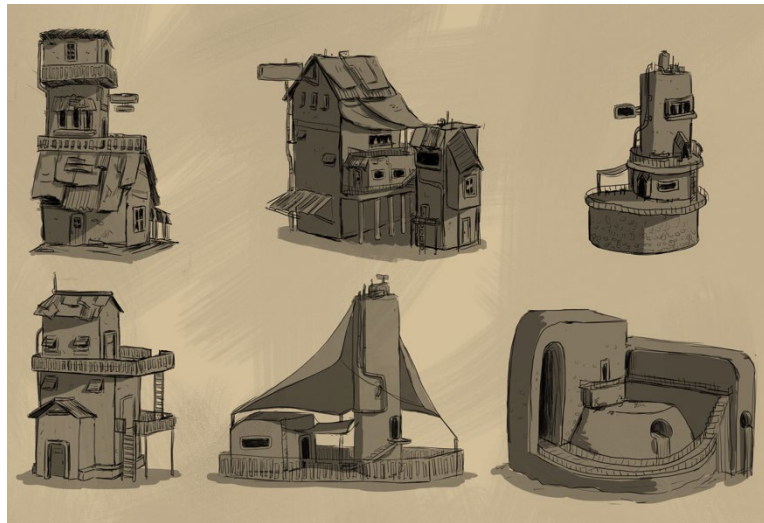
Fig. 3: Slums architecture exploration

Fig. 4: Slums environment pieces

I also envisioned water covering the cave floor, a dozen feet deep or more depending on the area. Because of this water, the Slums infrastructure would be built on top of large pillars and stilts, keeping the murky depths below out of reach. Water being in such proximity to these buildings gave me the idea to look at floating villages like those found in Thailand or the Philippines. This sparked even more inspiration to have water play a larger part of the Slumspeople's lives, rather than just have it be a feature of their environment. The initial thought was to have these waterways be utilized by fishermen, their catches sold at floating markets, as exists in our world across southeast Asia. However, where exactly were these people fishing from? Was it the waters that the Slums were built on top of? This seemed like a problem, because this water would undoubtedly be polluted to an extent with sewage and litter. Instead, the water would flow inside the cave from an ocean outside. This provided an opportunity for the fishermen to properly exit the cave to fish and return via the same vessel.
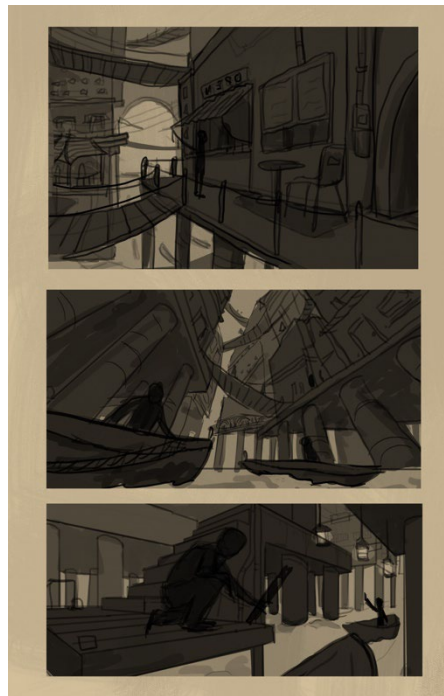

Fig. 5: Slums environment thumbnails

The role of a fishingperson in the Slums was now taking shape. The creation of other roles soon followed, each one being a part of a trade that is already familiar to us and key in having a society function: farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and so forth, each specialization of which would be passed down through families. More unique roles included maintenance people, who would provide upkeep for the Slums. Their labor consisted of combined facilities, custodial, construction, and community service work. Each Slumsperson would have to serve a mandatory two years in the role, during which housing would be provided in exchange for cheap labor. Because of the housing element, people often extended their service into several years or even a lifetime.

Fig. 6: Slumspeople trades

Working on subjects so familiar to our world prompted an interest in creating something brand new—a creature. Specifically, a creature that would service the Slums. First, I needed to figure out what service it would provide. I had already established that the Slums would have a water system, and that fishing would play a large part in their society. What if there was a creature that the fishingpeople rode on rather than simply a boat? Thus, the Beluma was created.

I started with sketching out different animals associated with sewers and aquatic life. This involved rats, alligators, and turtles.
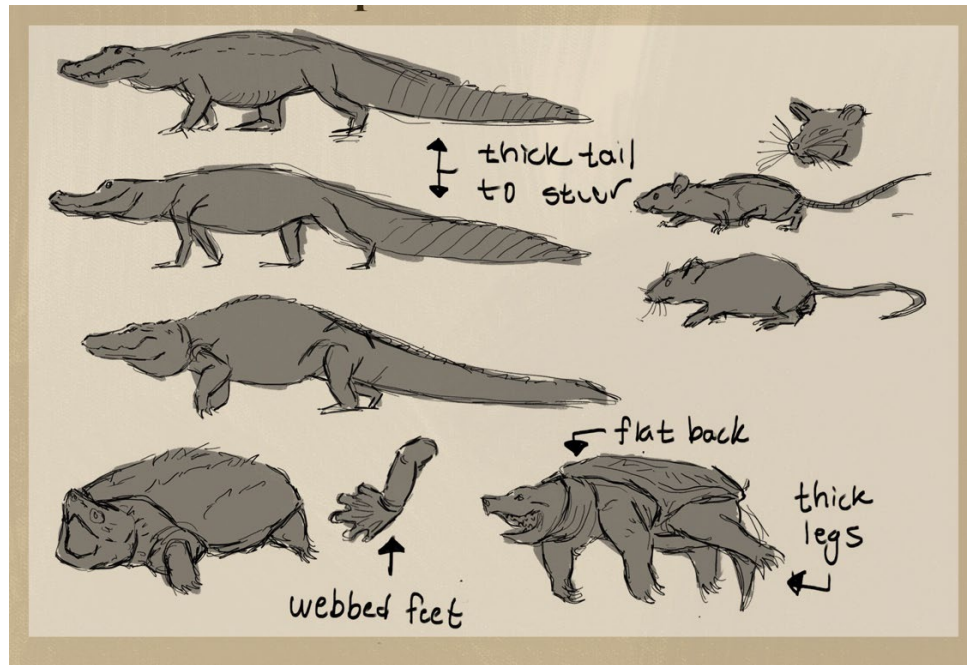
Fig. 7: Animal exploration sketches

Turtles became an attractive proponent to study because of their shells, which would provide a flat and sturdy surface for a rider. Alligators, similarly, were interesting because of their long and thick tails of which help them steer. With a shell and tail cemented as key characteristics, that left two major features to figure out regarding the creature. First was its head and second was its legs.

For its head, I tried iterations of an alligator head with and without a snapping turtle's beak. This gave the animal a very predator-like, aggressive appearance that I felt contrasted with its role as a working animal. Salamanders, I thought, had docile enough features with their sleek round heads and big bulbous eyes that it could substitute an alligator head. For its legs, I first tried structuring them after an alligator, but they didn't seem strong enough to propel such a large animal, let alone the weight of the structure and rider that would sit on top of it. I added turtle's

flippers to the front two legs, which looked more interesting and less like an alligator with a

turtle shell. To differentiate it more from a turtle, I added claws to the ends of the flippers, but

kept webbed connections between the hing legs' toes. After sketching these ideas out, it was clear

that a softer-looking head, turtle shell and flippers with an alligator's tail and hind legs was the

direction we wanted the Beluma to go.

Fig. 8: Beluma iterations

On the next set of sketches, I first focused on figuring out the face. I knew the head shape

would be soft and round, but what would its eyes look like? Its mouth? Would it have large

protruding eyes like a salamander, or black almond shapes enveloped by wrinkly eyelids like a

turtle? Would the mouth look more similarly to a sea turtle's beak or a salamander's lack of one?

I experimented with the Beluma's texture throughout these sketches, aswell, wondering if it

would be scaly all over, or have smooth or wrinked features to its skin. I played with giving it

spots, as some salamanders have, and potentially having its shell merge into scales on the rest of

its body.

A turning point occurred when I had the idea to replace the salamander with an axolotl, which is still very similar but undoubtedly more interesting. Axolotls have frill-like gills that protrude from their cheeks and a translucent flap-like tails, while maintaining a docile-looking facial appearance that I was already going for. Additionally, a bioluminescent element was incorporated, which made the design even more interesting and other-worldly.
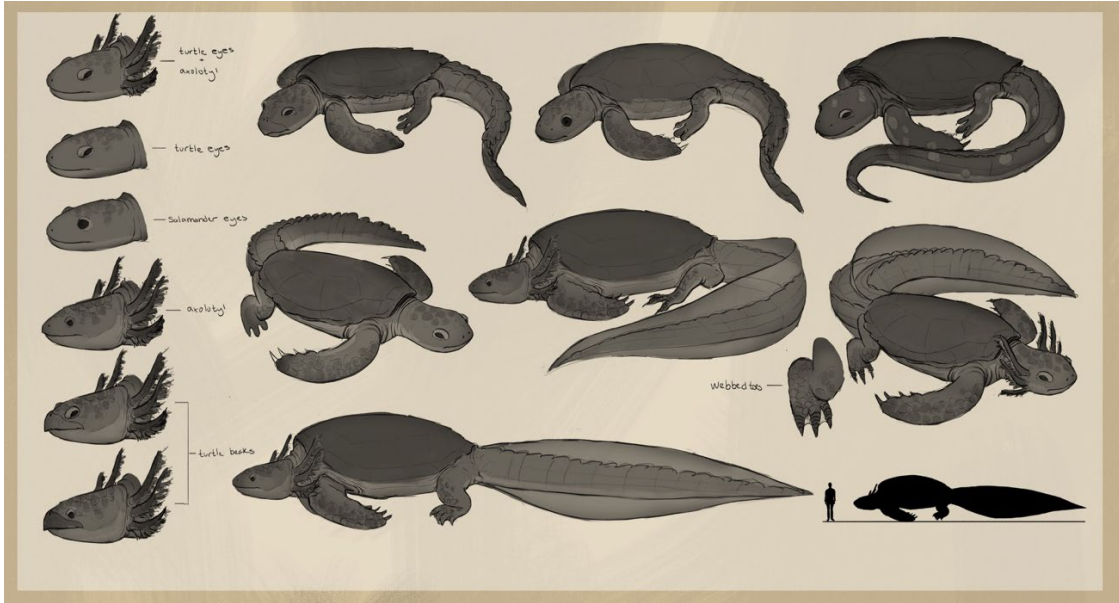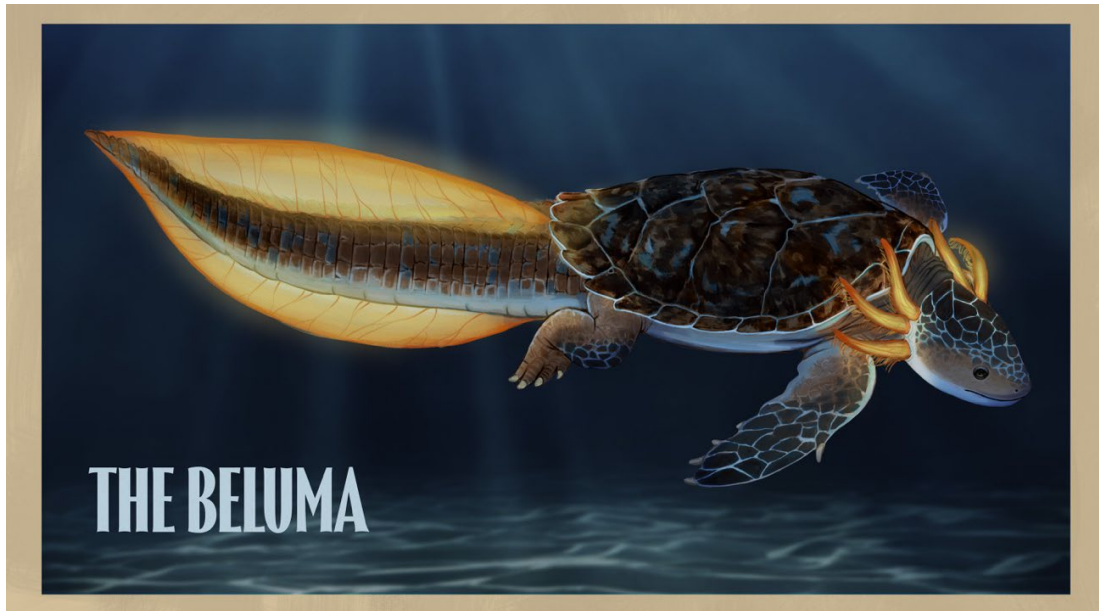

Fig. 9: Beluma exploration

Fig. 10: Beluma final design

I also explored options of what exactly the structure on top of the Beluma would look like. I had to consider the scale of the structure and its parts, the materials, how it was attached, how the Beluma would be steered, and how fishing off of it would occur. Some options had a canopy, and others did not—a canopy would be less ideal for fishing, where the pole would get tangled in the process of trying to toss the rod but could work for a fishingperson who was catching fauna through nets or diving off to collect edible aquatic plants or mollusks. Some iterations involved a mouthpiece to steer the head of the Beluma, while others would rely on something like a bait to prompt the Beluma forward.
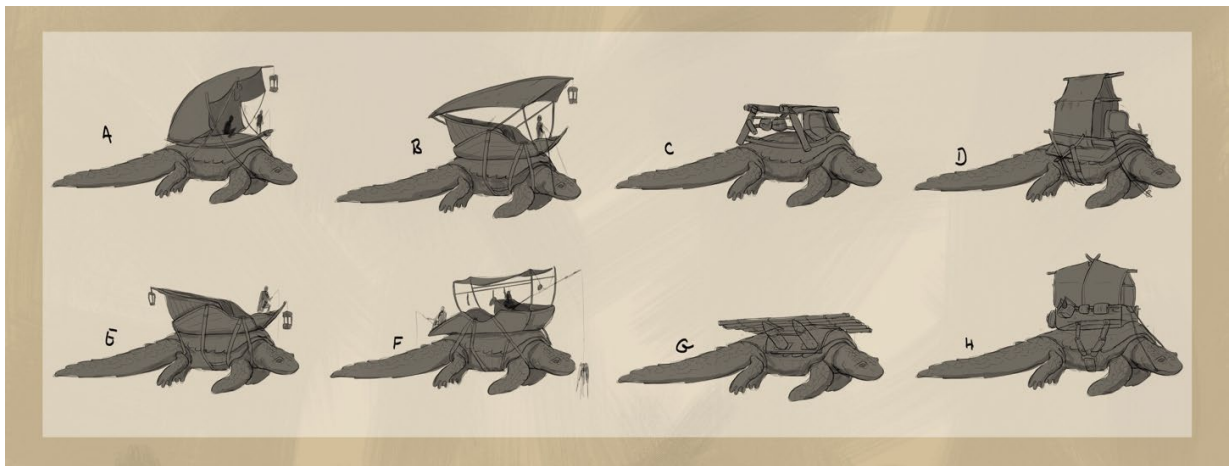
Fig. 11: Riding structure designs

Topside

As for the ruling class, they needed to be the opposite of the Slumspeople. I started, as I did with the Slumspeople, with costumes first. Bold primary colors, tucked in shirts, tailored pants, and shined loafers all were intended to juxtapose their Slums counterparts. I played around heavily with the cut of the tops, the way the pants fastened, and so forth. I wanted to incorporate patterns to an extent, since patterns were largely absent from the clothing of the Slumspeople. Khaki colors also were used to remind the viewer that these people, while wealthier and more

privileged, were not mindless royalties like those you might find in *The Hunger Games*, but

corporate-minded policymakers that manage the regulation and production of resources from the

Slums.

Fig. 12: Topside costume designs

Originally, I pictured Topside as divided into color-coordinated 'families' that would

regulate different resources—red for food goods, black for machinery, and blue for natural

materials—but to call them families didn't feel right. In the workforce, something like a family

makes one think of a small business, where each member is equally valued and valuable. Instead,

it made more sense that Topside would simply refer to these divisions as different departments,

which further juxtaposed them to the Slums, where trades were passed down through families.

*Fig. 13: Topside-specific department sketch*

Of course, if there is going to be such a strict system of laborer and beneficiary, then it must be enforced somehow. After all, if the Slumspeople are the majority population and they can exit the cave, what is keeping them there? What is keeping them in a position of inferiority? Professor Carpenter and I answered that question by introducing the Enforcers.

*Fig. 14: Enforcement costume and weapon sketches*

Enforcers are responsible for the hands-on supervision of the Slums production pipeline and ensuring the resources find their proper route to Topside. They also were heavy-handed on addressing criminal situations in the Slums, however degrees of corruption exist.

I came to a point in development where I was, once again, itching to create another creature. This one would be associated with Topside and would—once again—juxtapose the Slums in its design. I decided to make a bird, first mixing a peacock, secretary bird, and great blue heron because each one of them are widely considered as beautiful, regal animals. Additionally, the great blue heron has personal significance to me, as it is one of my family and I's favorite birds.
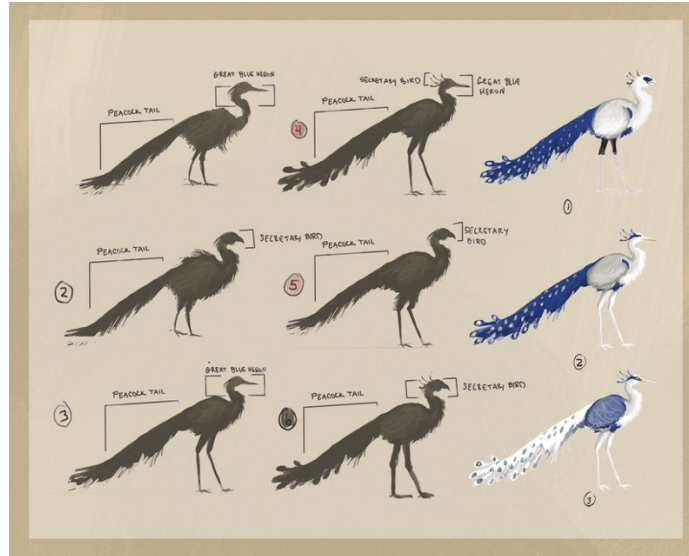
Fig. 15: Initial Celeryx designs

I wasn't feeling like the design was getting anywhere, so I kept iterating, eventually introducing a roadrunner to the mix, once again due to personal significance (my family is from New Mexico, where roadrunners roam) and because this gave a purpose to the bird beyond just looking beautiful, the same of which could be said about Topsiders. The bird also reflected the same bold color palate as Topside costumes. Combining the long legs of the great blue heron with those of the roadrunner instantly made the bird look quick, sharp, and speedy, making it the perfect opposite of the aquatic Beluma. On top of that, Professor Carpenter suggested that the animal be used for sport, to be bet on in races by Topsiders. This yet again illustrated a difference in Topside—where the Slumspeople valued the Beluma and worked with it, Topsiders used the bird for entertainment. The bird was eventually named the Celeryx, after the Latin word for speed (celer) and the word "rex" as it refers to both birds and 'king' in Latin.
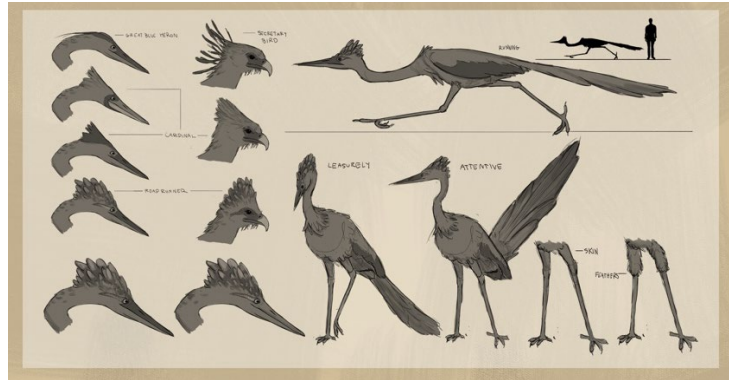
Fig. 16: Continued Celeryx design sketches

Fig. 17: Celeryx color options

Fig. 18: Final Celeryx design

THE STORY

Now that we had the world built, we could finally come up with a story. The original idea

actually came to mind on October 6th, 2022, and was as follows:

> Beginning: Main character and best friend as kids in a Spanish
> town, main character lives on base and friend lives off. Main
> character has to move away because of parent's duty station
> change. Middle: Main character comes back to town because
> best friend has died/disappeared, meets best friend's new best
> friend who was made in their absence. Main character and
> new best friend don't believe in cause of death, so they decide
> to investigate. End: The new best friend was the one who killed
> the old best friend, but the main character doesn't turn in the
> best friend because that's their new best friend!

Now, given that over a year later is when I revisited this idea, it would clearly need a

revamp if it was to align with what the project had become. So, that is exactly what we did. The

video game would open with the main character, Aoto, growing up in the fishing trade in the

Slums. His family has steadily produced fish for generations, a cut of which would go to

Topside, as protocol, the rest being sold at a family friend's shop. This shopowner's family has a

child the same age as Aoto, who Aoto is very close friends with.

Fig. 19: Young Aoto, friend, and Beluma sketches

Right off the bat, it is revealed that Aoto's mother is in critical condition from an illness, the applicable medicine to which is only in possession of Topside. This has prompted Aoto and his father to exhaust themselves with fishing so that an even larger cut of their earnings could go to Topside in exchange for doses of medicine. This practice of producing in surplus to give to Topside in exchange for something—in most cases, money—is generally looked down upon by other Slumspeople, however, because it is choosing oneself and Topside over the Slums community. Despite the taboo, Aoto's family persists in hopes that the mother will be saved.

During this part of the game, the player can explore the Slums, trade with other people, discover the world, and work a fishing and navigating mechanic through Aoto's pet Beluma. It isn't until Topside, taking advantage of Aoto's father's desperation, escalates their demands to a point that things take a quick turn for the worse. The stakes continue to heighten until ultimately Aoto's father confronts the Topside Enforcer that he has been trading with. He feels betrayed, having provided so much for Topside despite scrutiny from other Slumspeople. In the heat of the altercation, Aoto's father is killed. This is the call to action for Aoto, who is now the sole hope for his mother's survival. This leads him down another path of desperation, the efforts of which eventually amount to nothing, as he is unable to trade enough for medicine for his mother, who dies. In the face of these tragedies, his best friend and her family leave for Topside under circumstances not entirely understood by Aoto.

Now orphaned and with a burning hatred for Topside, Aoto finds his own community within a group of revolting Slumspeople, who plan to overturn the power dynamic with Topside. The bulk of the game is carried out during this uprising, where Aoto becomes close with another character who has long been a part of the revolution. The climax of the game would occur during an invasion of Topside, where Aoto's newfound best friend leaves his old best friend, who had

left for Topside, irreparably injured. Despite his previous loyalties to his old friend, Aoto continues to side with his new one.

Fig. 20: Aoto final designs

The choices Professor Carpenter and I made for the story originate from my personal struggles with maintaining friendships in my life due to constantly moving. I have felt desperate for constant close platonic companionship my whole life. This is a desire I projected onto Aoto, who's backstory sets him up to be someone who has been abandoned, not only by his family, but by his best friend at the start of the game. My intention with the climax of the story is that despite his previous loyalty to that friend, he shifts his loyalties onto another, because at the end of the day that is who is available to him. Even at the cost of his new friend being the one to hurt his old one, Aoto decides to turn focus to who the person who has become the new constant in his life.

CLOSING STATEMENTS

While Professor Carpenter and I created essentially an outline for a world and a story to take place within it, there is endless iteration and exploration that can be done to it. The most

exciting part about the project, to me, has been how much it can be expanded upon. Even if I

fleshed out every piece of concept art possible, I could turn my 2D concepts into 3D models, and

furthermore, even learn how to make it into an actual game. The possibilities, truly, are endless.

At the project's close, I look back proudly on the vast amount of work I made with Professor

Carpenter. The purpose I had for the project—to create concept art for an original world—had

been fulfilled beyond my expectations, and undoubtedly will continue to influence my future.