



The Art Of

Soul Bound

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Introduction

This project aims to challenge the conventional portrayal of rider-mount relationships in games by designing a unique character and creature duo explored through concept art. In many games, mounts are often treated as simple transportation rather than fully realized companions, with their relationships to the rider sometimes coming off as underdeveloped.

To address this, this project focuses on creating an original duo for an adventure-type game, whose design reflects a more dynamic bond, using avian-inspired forms and behaviors to shape their connection and link them visually.

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Influences / Inspiration - The Last Guardian, Avatar, Fantastic Beasts all use uniquely appealing designs and methods of communication between creatures / riders.



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Key influence - The Last Guardian

I found a video where the game's creative director, Fumito Ueda, speaks about how they were able to achieve a believable feel with the mythical creature (Trico) in the game. A key point that was spoken about is the challenge of conveying a sense of emotion through the creature - one way they tackled this was by making the creature's eyes change to specific colours according to it's mood, e.g, red when trying to appear threatening. Small details like this are something I could explore within my project to push the emotional storytelling further and bond between the creature / rider - e.g, as a method of communication.



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Primary Research -
Zoo Visit

Taking images to use as:

- reference photos
- design inspiration
- textures for photo bashing

(Pictures taken around
Longleat Zoo)



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Additional photographs taken around Longleat Zoo, to inform my designs by keeping them grounded in reality. There are lots of close-ups of different feather/skin/fur textures that could be used for photo bashing or as texture references. Some animals had features that made them more characterful/expressive, such as wonky teeth or scars - something I could look at exploring through this project to improve my designs.

The parrot/hand photographs are useful for seeing how a smaller creature might be carried.



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Primary research - I visited a bird show and took a series of slow motion bird flight videos to inform my creature design - I knew I wanted the creature to fly, and was going down a more avian design route - so these were useful for keeping my work grounded.

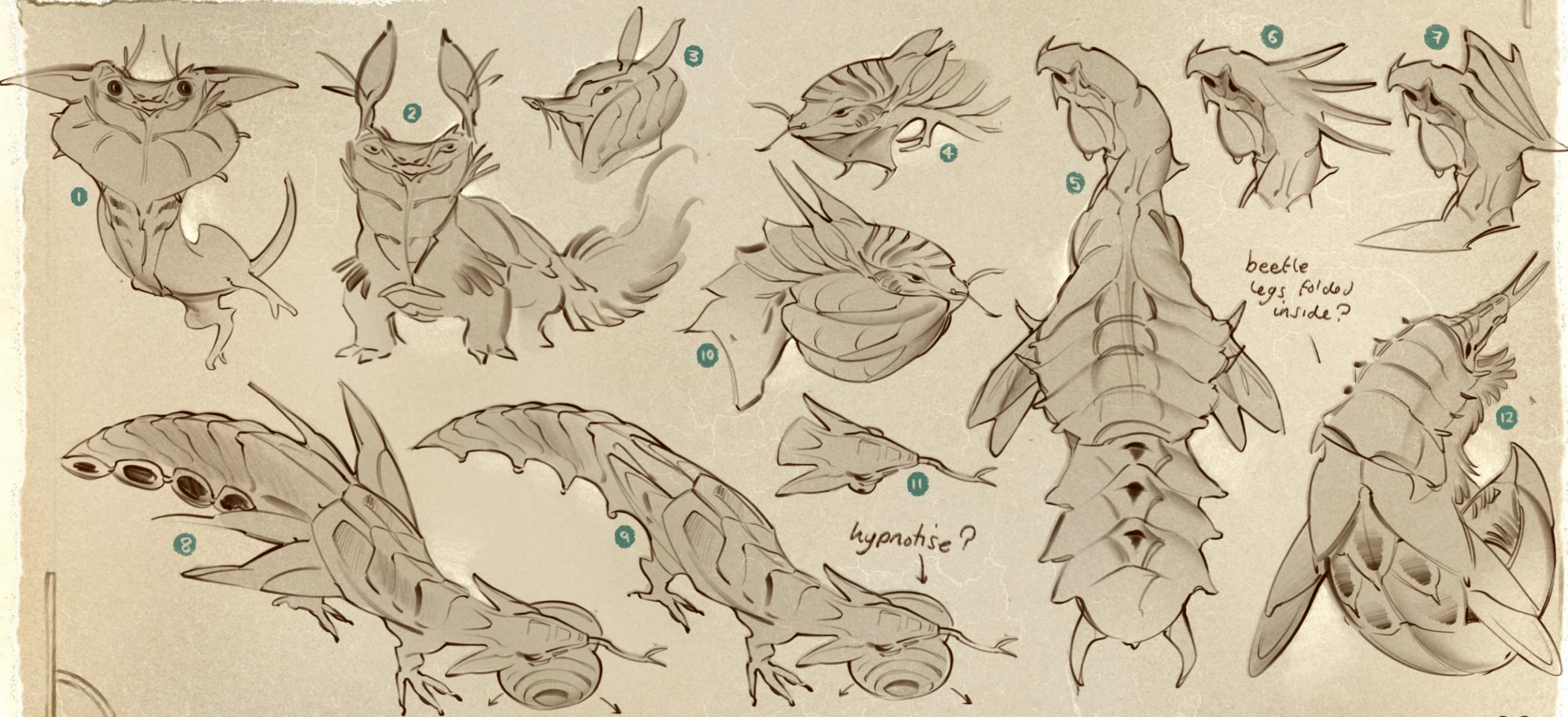
Recording these in slow motion allows for the feather movements to be captured more clearly.



*Creature
Development*

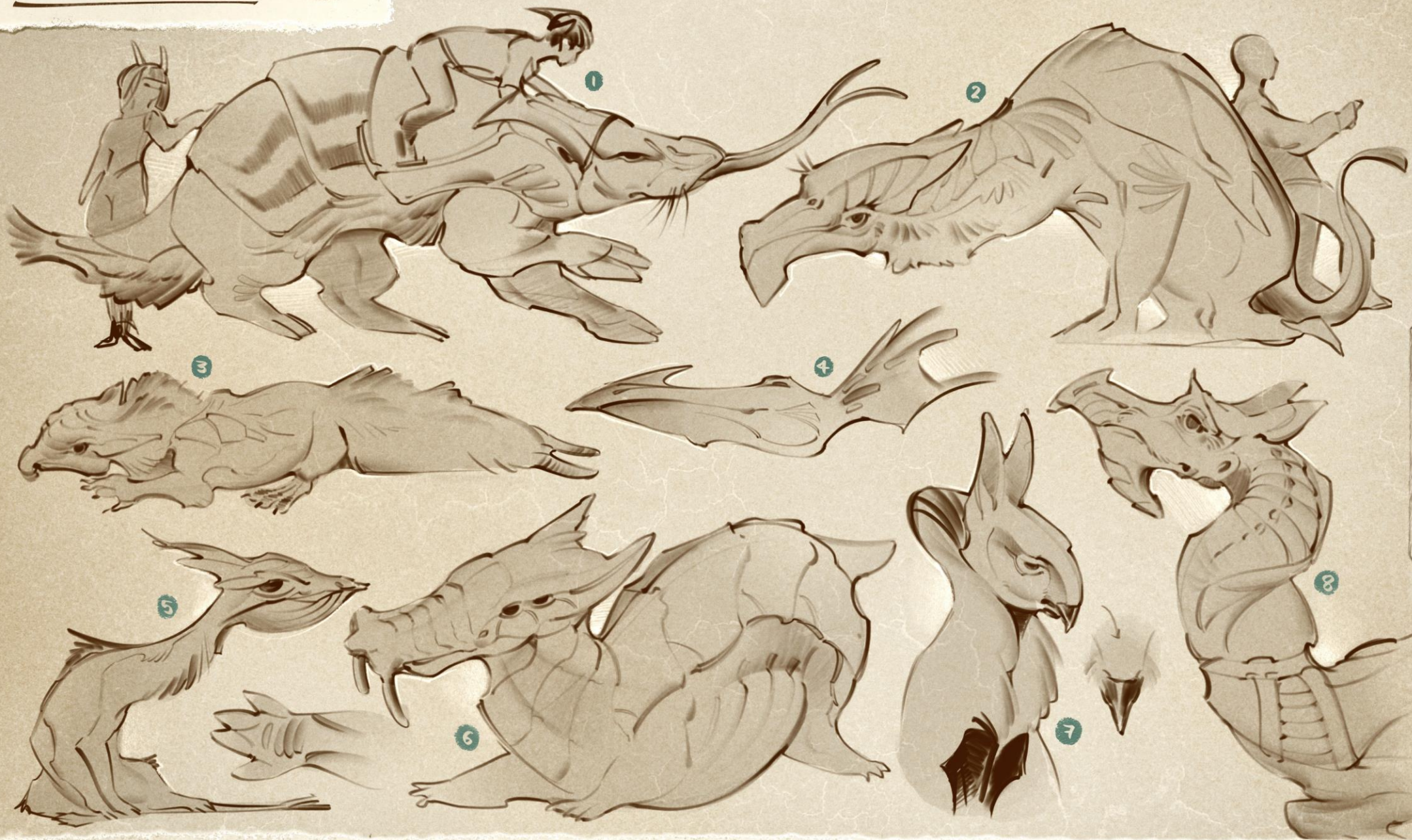
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Bluesky Sketches



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Bluesky Sketches



Eye types:



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Bluesky Sketches



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Bluesky Sketches



companion ideas - also feathered?



Rider Companion

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Bluesky sketches -

In these sketches, I set out to explore a wide range of possibilities for the creature design, pushing myself to generate as many unique concepts as possible. Drawing inspiration from my primary research - photographs taken at the zoo - I aimed to keep the designs grounded in reality, ensuring they maintained semi realistic looking anatomy for believability.

One of my key project goals was to create something unusual and distinctive, or surprising. To achieve this, I experimented with blending features from different animals in different ways, resulting in creatures that feel more intriguing and surprising. By combining familiar animal features and anatomy in unconventional ways, I hoped to strike a balance between both mythical and believable looking creatures.

This phase of the project was been useful for helping me refine my ideas and discover which directions to go in, for further development. Moving forward, I plan to take some of the more successful sketches and develop them further to enhance their uniqueness and visual appeal.



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Sketches exploring the idea of having a creature with a pelican-like throat and tail that can inflate to represent different moods – perhaps as a unique way to communicate to the rider. This would align with my project goals of the two having a deeper connection, such as their own form of language.

Bluesky Sketches
- alternative angle



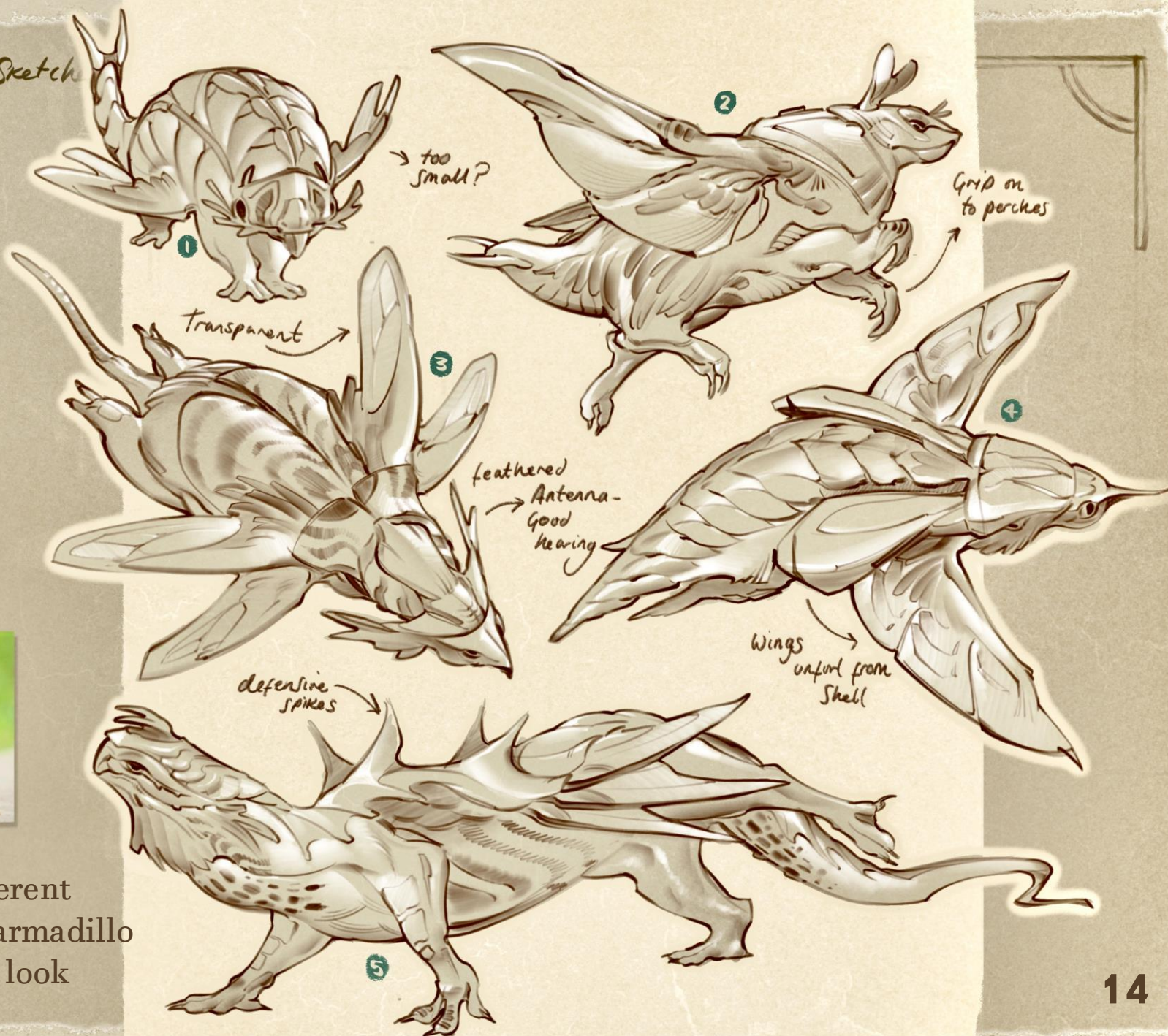
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Bluesky Sketch

References



Incorporating different beetle wings and armadillo traits for a unique look



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Bluesky Sketches

The body is covered with shorter feathers to blend the avian and insect parts of the design together more seamlessly – trying to avoid it looking too much like recognisable animals.

Having two-toed / clawed feet also helps to fit with the more alien feeling design I am trying to go for.

beetle-like
shell

transparent

From my previous sketches exploring different variations of beetle wings for the creature, I chose to take this design forward to develop further. The combination of beetle, mammal and bird elements give it an unusual appearance, with a slight alien feel, which aligns closely with my project goal of creating a unique looking design

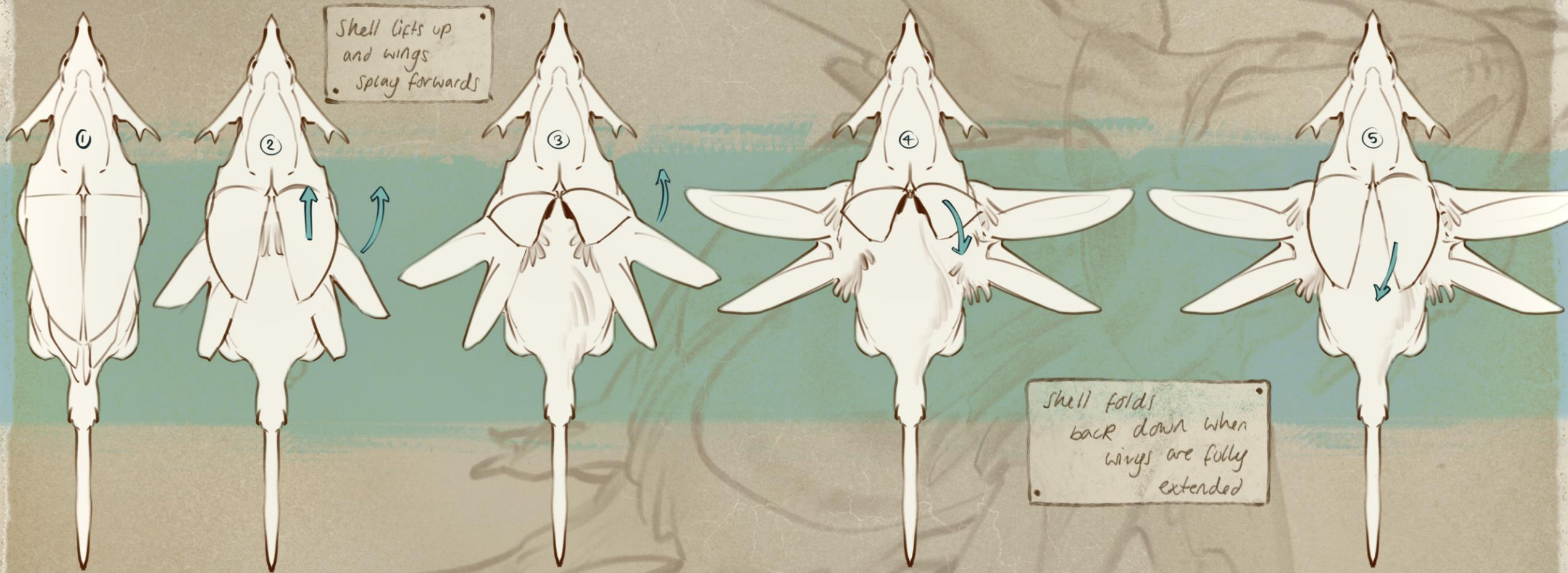
owl/hawk
face
structure



Researching how different types of beetle wings unfold to use as a reference for my own work. I liked the idea of the creature's wings unfurling from its shell, similarly to beetles - slow motion videos of this process made it easier to see each stage clearly. As I want to keep this design's anatomy looking relatively realistic, these will act as a useful guide.

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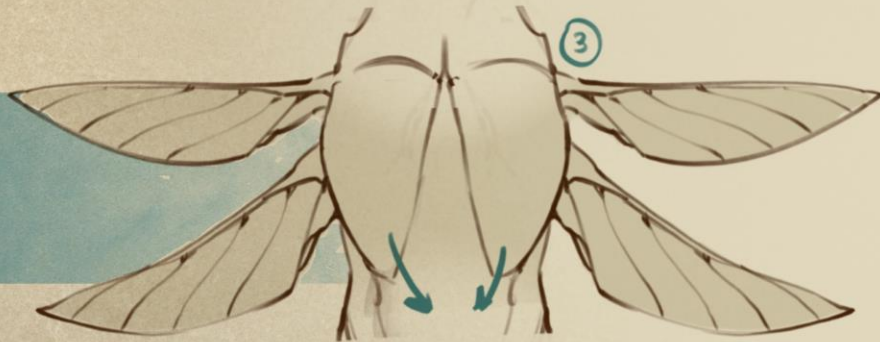
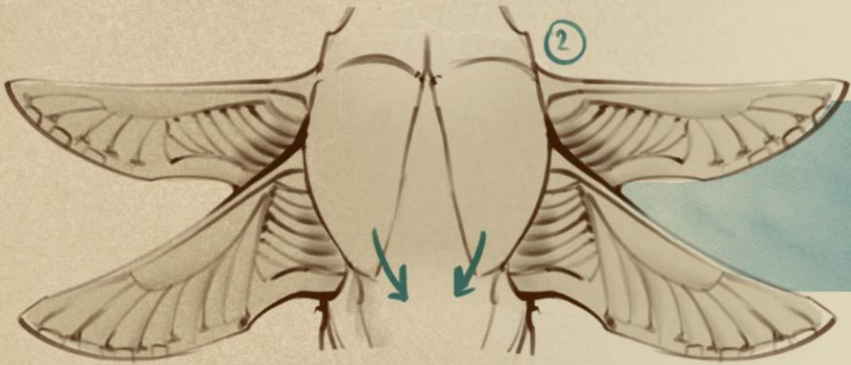
Wing unfolding diagrams



Wing unfurling diagrams influenced by my beetle research – the shell pops up to allow the wings to fold out, before going back down – but remaining slightly tilted upright during flight, potentially to act as a back rest for the character / rider during flight. While unfolding more like a beetle, I imagine these wings would flap more similarly to dragonfly and hummingbird wings – becoming a blur when flying.

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Wing Variations



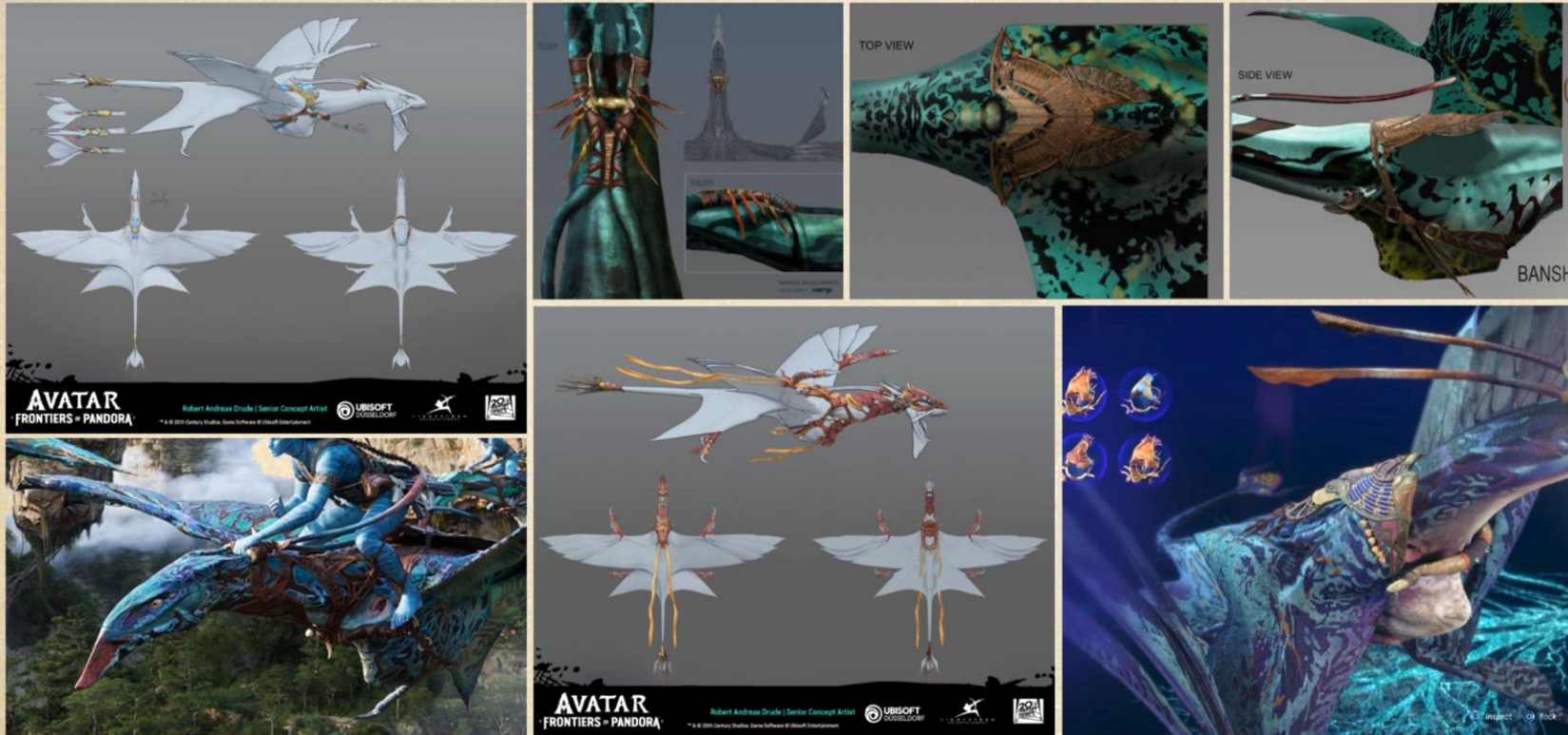
Tail Variations



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Influences / Inspiration -

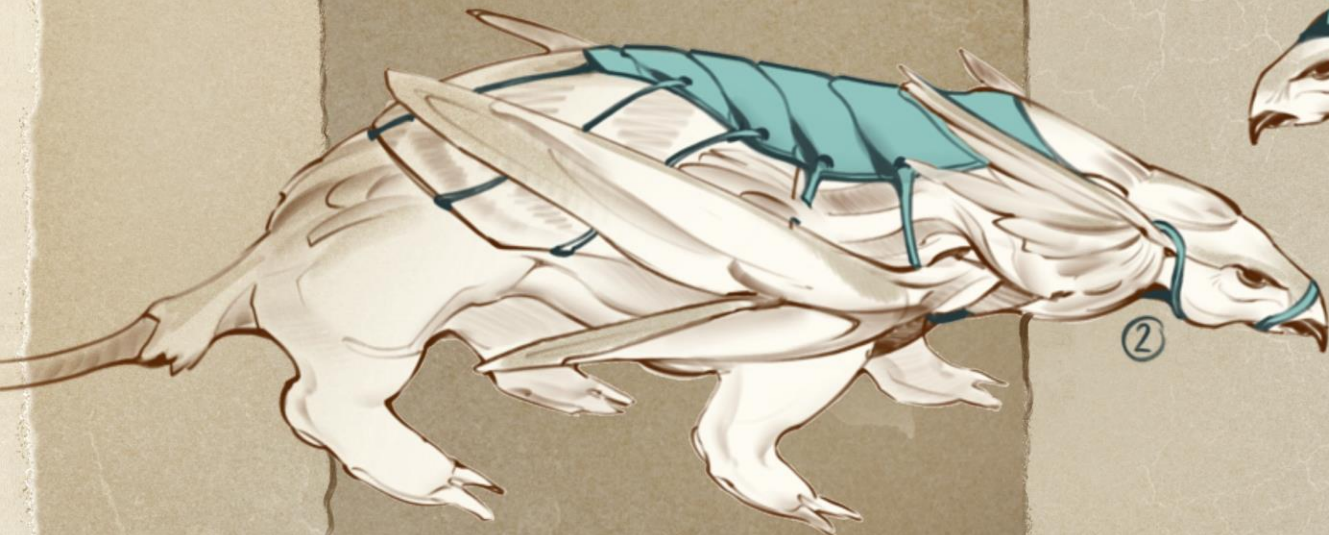
design integrated
+
purpose - built



These images show concept art for Avatar (film and games) banshee harness designs - I chose to take inspiration from this example because I like how the harnesses look purpose built, and have a handmade feel while also looking practical. They blend nicely as a part of the design rather than something that looks out of place. As I plan to explore harness designs for my own creature design, this will act as a perfect example for me to follow, so that it can be neatly integrated into the creature's design.

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Harness Ideas



Segmented armour – harness allows for movement and blends with the direction of the feathers.

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harness Development

I encountered some issues with my initial bluesky harness sketches - they didn't allow the creature's wings to unfold while being worn. To target this issue, I sketched a refined version that attaches to the creature's shell rather than around its front legs, with hinged areas to allow the wings to unfold.

This sketch also shows the scale of the rider compared to the creature, and demonstrates how they would use the harness - this positions them closer to the neck and shoulders of the creature, to avoid blocking the wings from opening - it is key the creature is able to fly while wearing the harness.



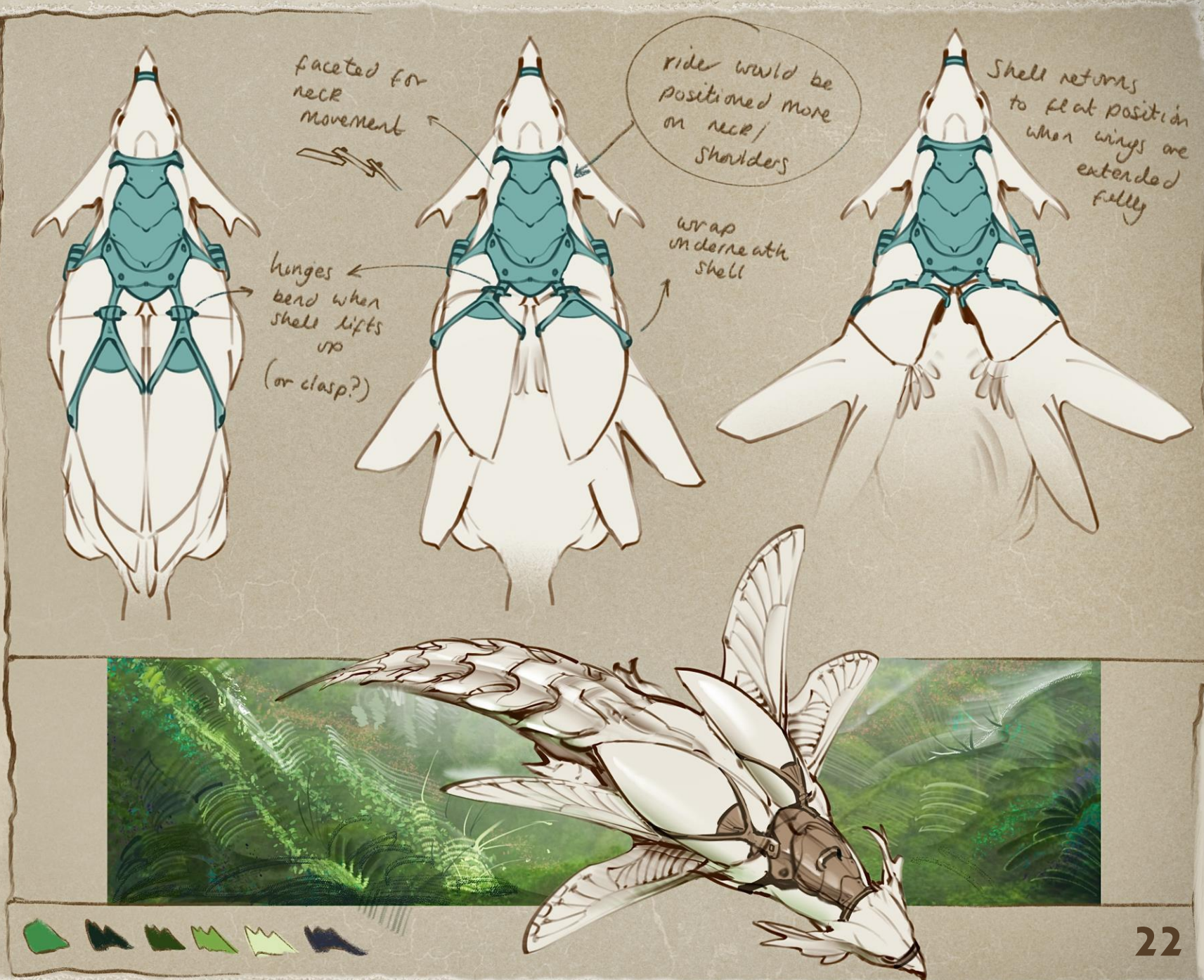
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harness Development

Keeping the successful parts of my previous designs, such as segmented areas and adjustable straps, I produced a more developed harness design. These sketches demonstrate how it allows the wings to move, using hinges at the wing joints.

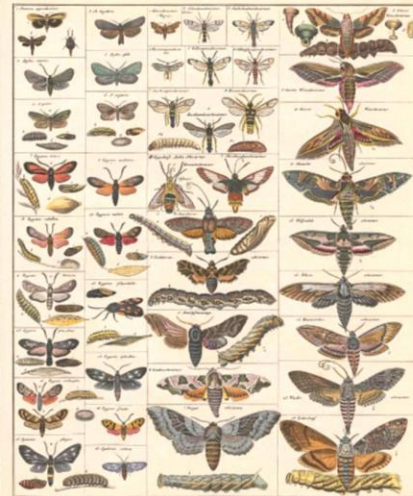
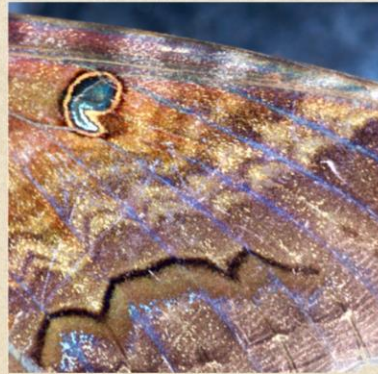
This version also includes stirrups for the rider to use during flight / riding, inspired by horse harnesses, which also help to provide a more practical / believable appearance.

The lower sketch shows how this might look in motion – and with an added handle for grip.



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Influences / Inspiration -

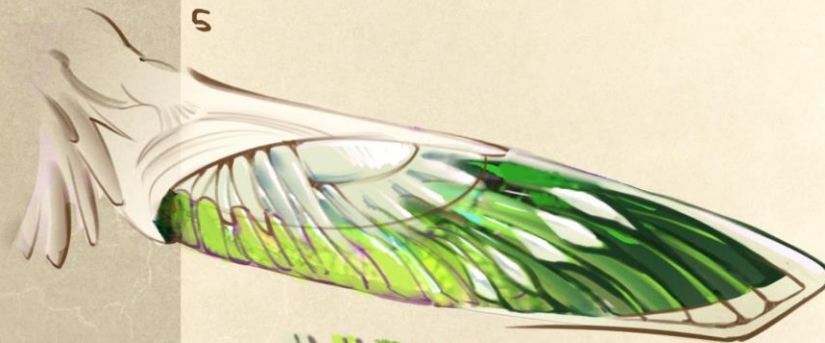
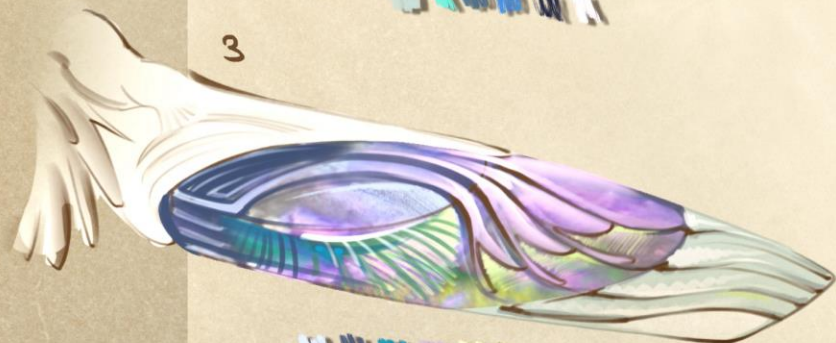


These images show examples of natural moth and butterfly patterns, colours and shapes to inform my own work. I plan to explore how I could achieve an iridescent effect on certain areas of my creature design - such as the wings - which could act as a surprising pop of colour in contrast to the rest of the design. This links back to my initial intentions of creating a more unique / engaging design.

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Colour Exploration - Wings

References

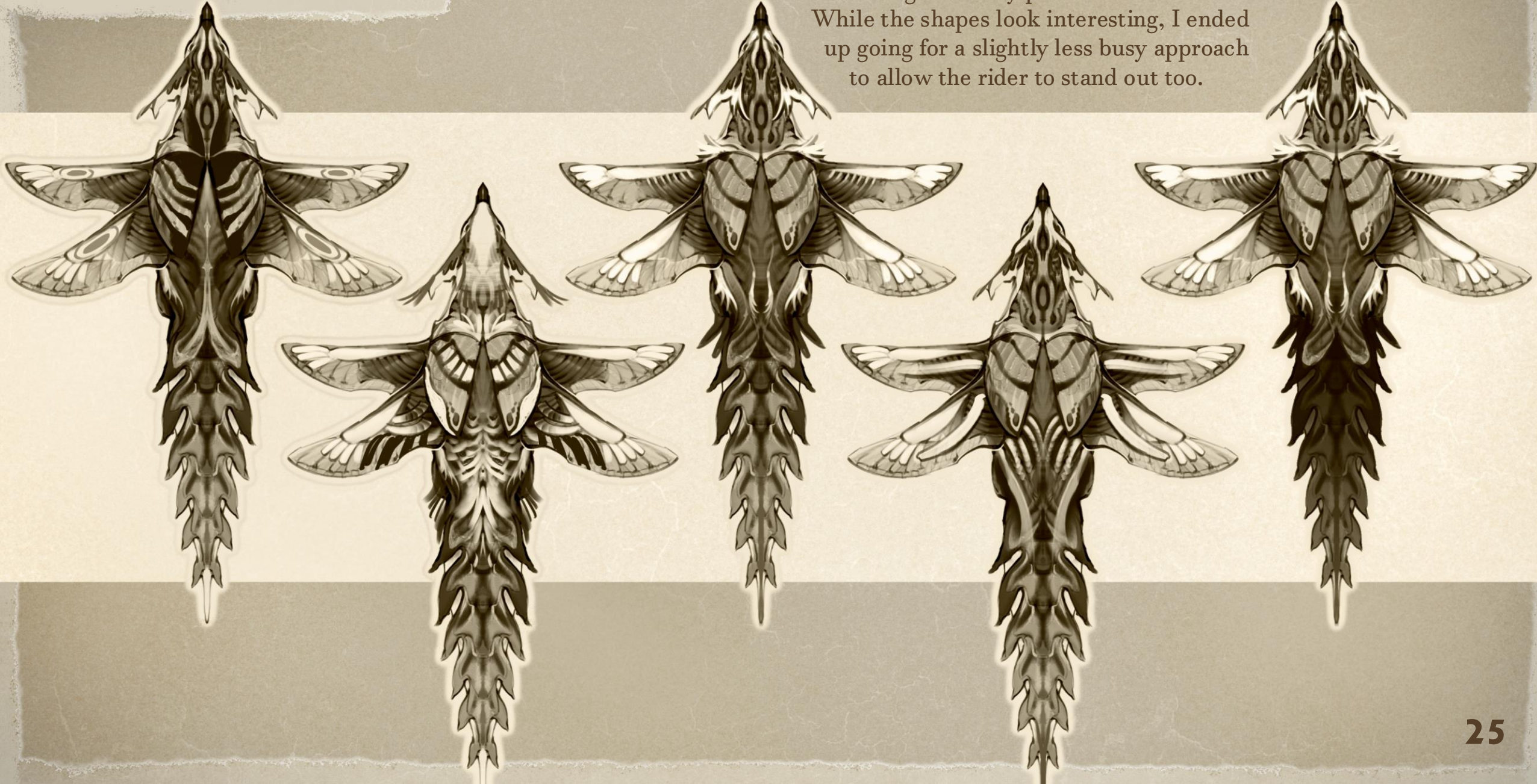


Iridescent /
transparent



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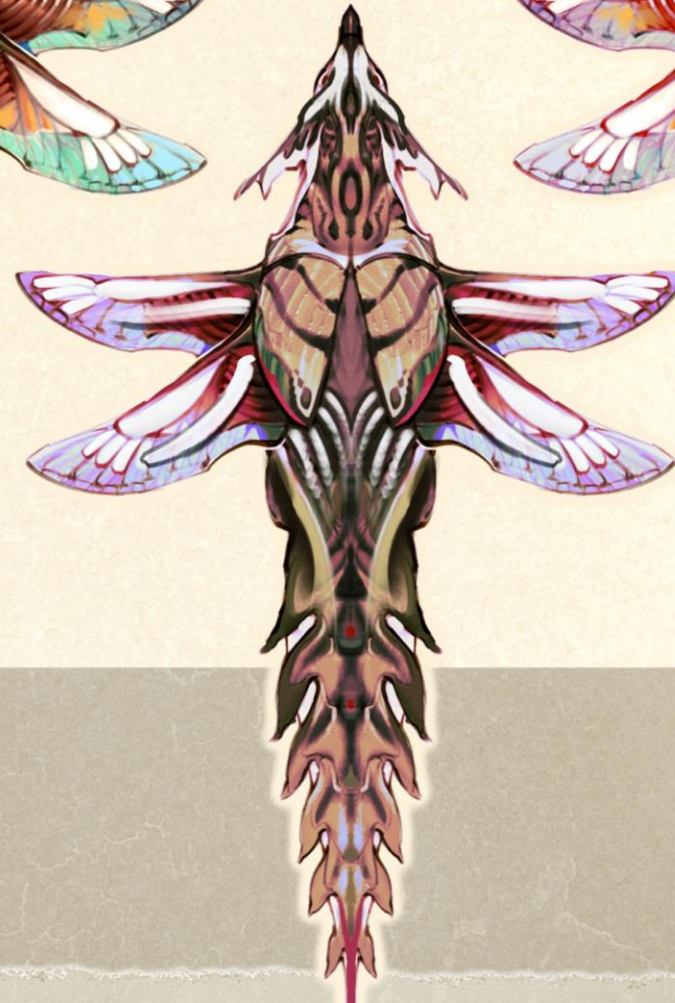
Exploring pattern options influenced by moth wings from my previous mood board. While the shapes look interesting, I ended up going for a slightly less busy approach to allow the rider to stand out too.



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Colour Exploration

Colour iterations exploring how the wings could offer an exciting, hidden pop of colour. To inspire these, I looked at images of tropical birds – this does help to give them an exotic look, but I chose to tone it down a bit with my later designs.



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Texture exploration -

As my previous designs were starting to look too busy, I tried a different method - using my primary research photographs to overlay and blend different textures to a base sketch. I think this looks more realistic than before, and the textures help to make the design more visually interesting, however I still plan to tidy these up further.



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More design variations

I went through a lot of design variations before ending up at the final result - the problem I was trying to solve here, was the issue of the design looking too busy - I explored alternative colour palettes and patterns but ultimately what made the difference, was breaking the design into clearer shapes, with a better sense of contrast - this helped to cut out any extra noise and left me with my final design

By changing the side/abdomen feathers to match its ears, the design appears more cohesive with matching shape language. The lighter colour also breaks up the form nicely.



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Design sheet

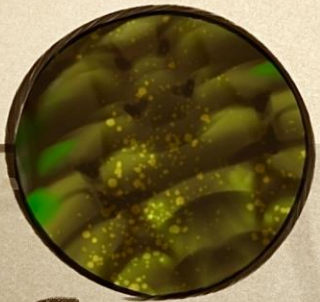


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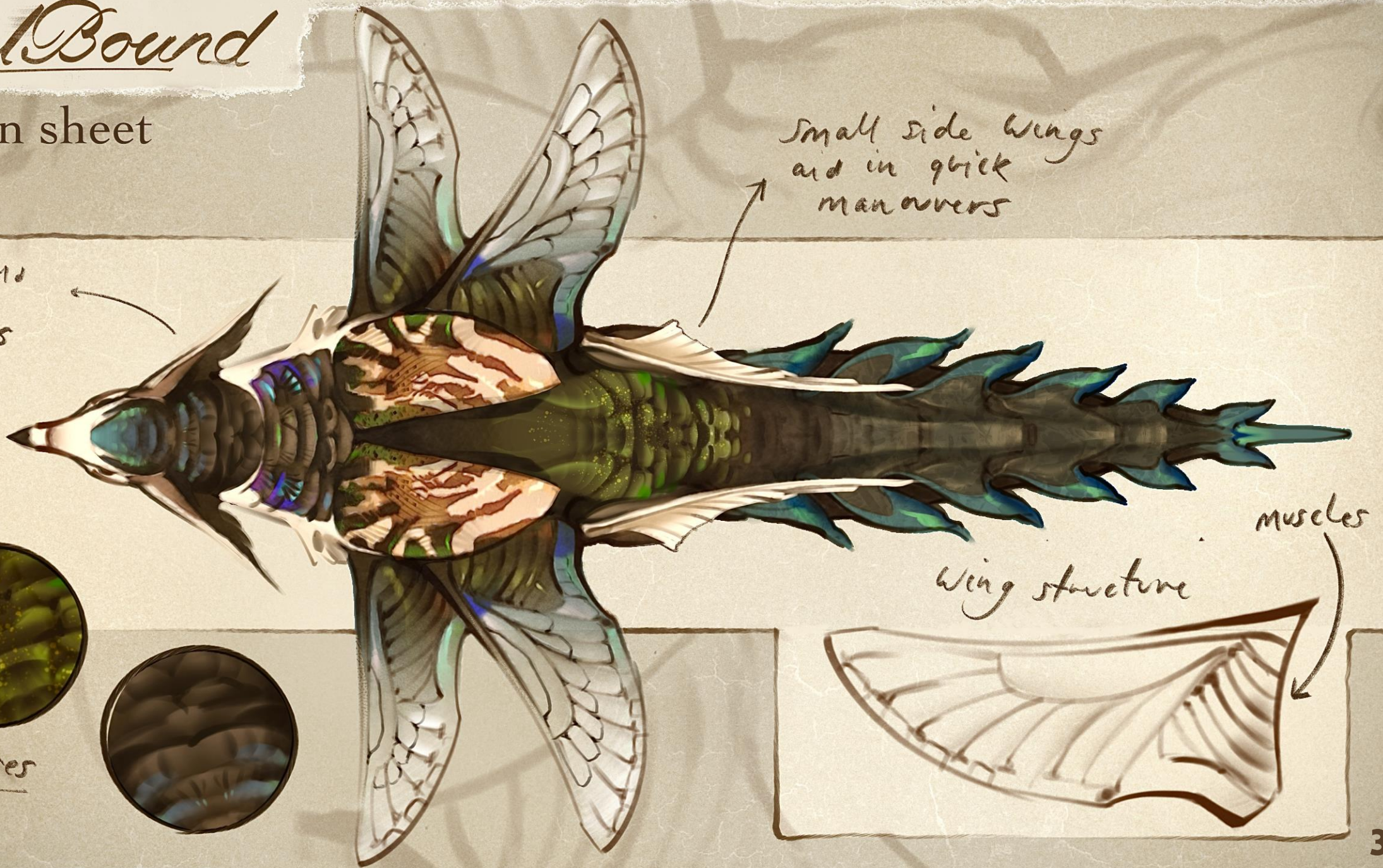
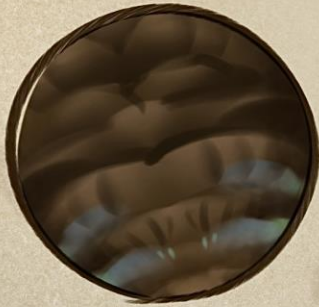
Design sheet

ears fold
flat in
dives

Small side wings
aid in quick
maneuvers



Textures



Wing structure

muscles





stirrups



grip

Shiny coated
leather

Stretchy, adjustable
bands wrap under
shell and neck

*Rider
Development*



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Character Bluesky



①

more animalistic?



②



③

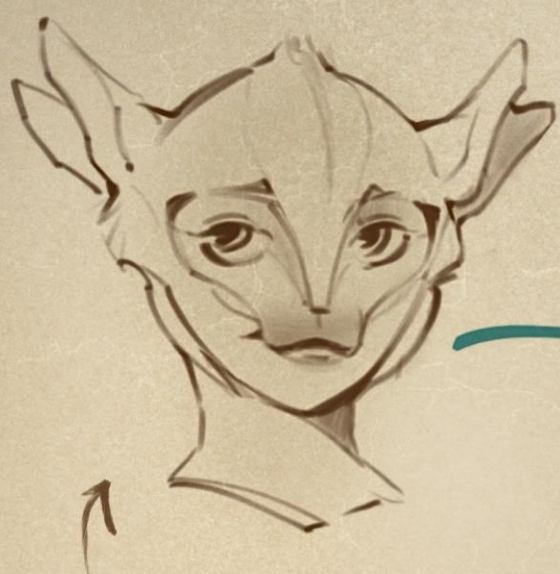
more human -
appearing



④

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Character Bluesky



quick
alterations



Cute design
to contrast with
the Creature



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Exploring the character's stance / walk -

I tried to go for a slightly more creature-humanoid looking character by exploring the idea that it could walk on all fours - this would further enhance the surprise / uniqueness of the design. I used some of my lemur photographs as references for this - while useful, I think this resulted in a design that looks far more like a creature than a character.

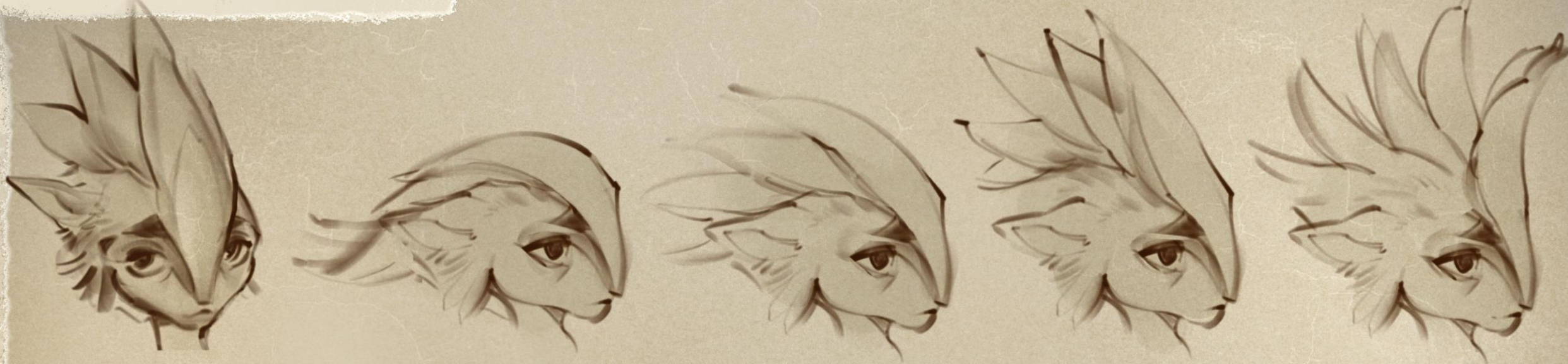


Feathered tail?



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Character head crest movement



As it is key the character is able to communicate with the creature, I explored how I could incorporate movement inspired by cockatoo crests into the design - using its head feathers to indicate emotions. This also offers the opportunity to include a hidden pop of colour in the design, and helps to add a sense of surprise to the design too.

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Rider Design
Sheet



eyes

Colors



flat
Colors

Shaded

Silhouette



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Tired



Sad



Excited /
defensive



Neutral

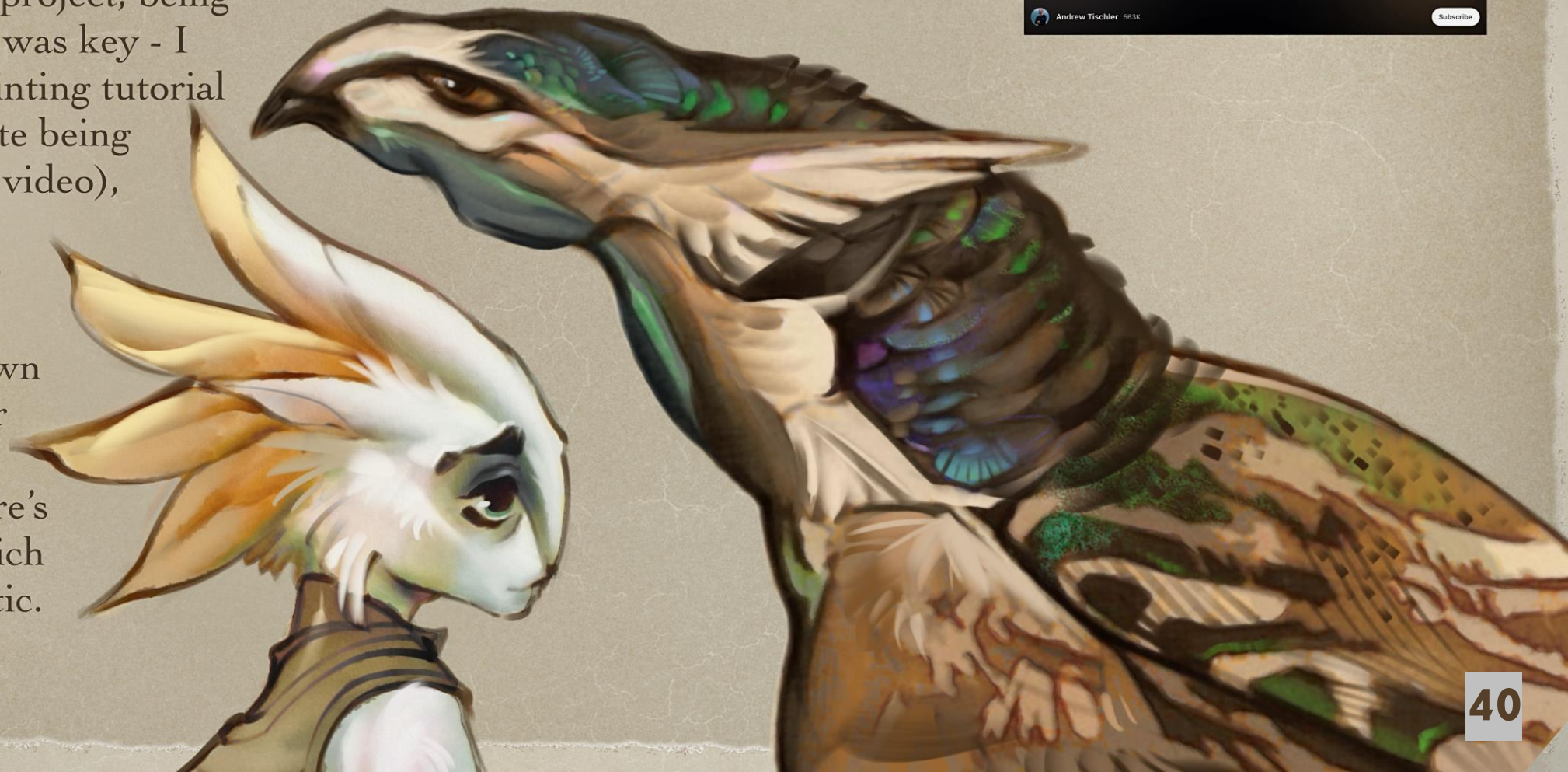
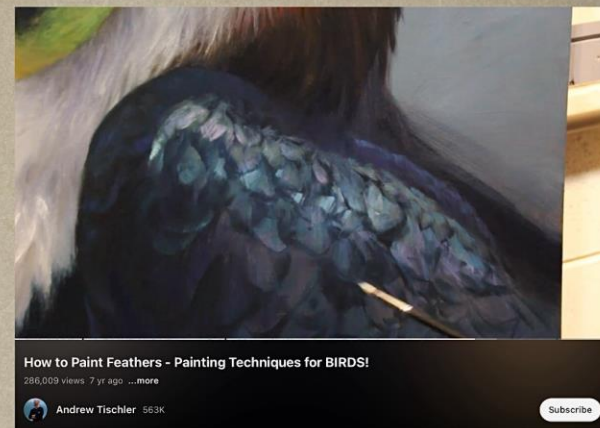




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Painting feathers tutorial

As I wanted to go for a semi realistic style for this project, being able to paint feathers was key - I followed a feather painting tutorial for this, which (despite being a traditional painting video), I found really useful and was able to bring similar layering techniques into my own work, giving the rider a fluffier look, and improving the creature's iridescent effects, which now look more realistic.



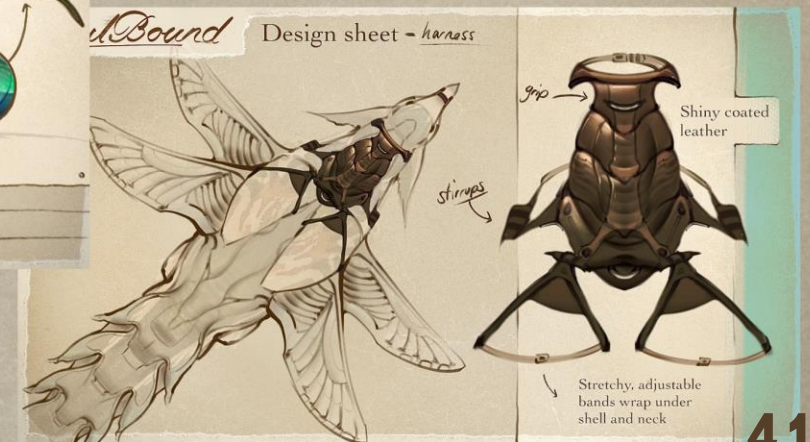
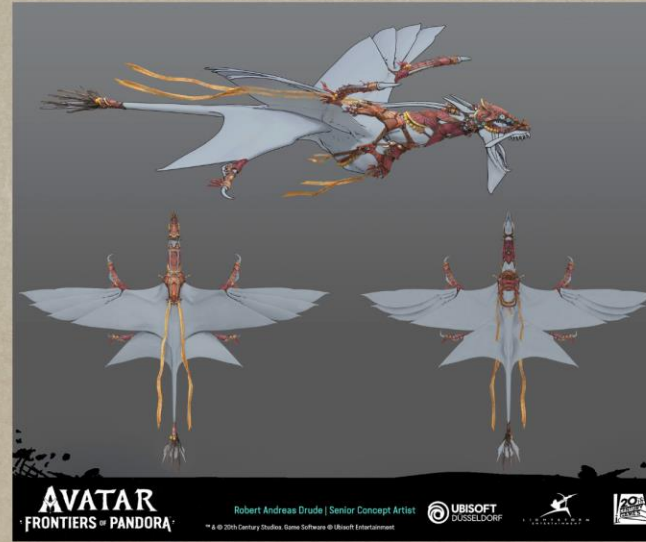
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Industry comparison - Avatar

Compared to one of this project's main influences, Avatar, I think I was able to achieve similar results in some areas. While the styles are different, the level of detail shown in my creature design is similar to what is presented in their renders.

I tried to use similar layout techniques, such as with the harness, to show how it fits around the creature - despite this, it does not feel as deeply integrated or hand crafted / purpose built as the banshee harnesses do - this could be improved with some additional personalisation - the rider's items, graffiti or similar.

The Avatar design sheets show multiple angles, some posed with the creature's mouth open too - to push my work further, this is something I could do to improve my own design sheets and give the characters a more developed look.



Conclusion / Evaluation -

Overall, I am pleased with the outcomes of this project, and the quality of the work presented. I believe the character and creature designs align with my initial intentions - to create an engaging, visually unique duo with a strong sense of connection. This bond is particularly effective due to the shared avian features in both designs, which help to link the characters visually and reinforce their relationship. The character's ability to communicate emotions through the positioning of its head crest adds an extra sense of dynamism to the design, making interactions feel more expressive. Additionally, this feature contributes to a stronger silhouette, improving the overall visual impact. The combination of a humanoid-avian hybrid with a more creature-like counterpart also helps give the project a unique look.

Despite this, there are several areas which could be improved, such as:

Sculpting and painting over the final designs in ZBrush, which would provide a clearer reference from multiple angles for a 3D modeller. Additionally, creating more action-movement sketches of the duo would provide improved reference material for an animator, as these could involve key interactions. Exploring the relationship between these characters and their environment could further enhance the project by adding depth and a stronger sense of narrative. This could be achieved through more environmental or key art sketches. Another aspect that could have been stronger is the creature's ability to express emotion. While the character has a clear method of communication through its head crest, the creature lacks an equally distinct way to convey its emotions, which could make interactions feel slightly one-sided. Adding in more expressive features - such as changes in posture, iris size (eye-pinning, like birds?), or movable elements - could significantly improve this.

Additionally, the call-out sheets could have been more detailed and presented from alternative angles. Certain elements, such as the harness, would benefit from more breakdowns to be clearly understood from a 3D modeller's perspective - as well as sketches demonstrating how the rider uses the harness.

References / Citations -

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Jie, Y (2024) *Avatar banshee set*. Artstation. Available at: <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/04xEoe> (Accessed 04 March 2025).

The end - thank
you for viewing

