



## Making of Lonely Mountains: Downhill



# Making of Lonely Mountains: Downhill

In our cover story we show once more that you don't need a lot of employees to develop a game that is a lot of fun.





“With loving looks, superb sound design, extremely tricky gaps and great controls, Lonely Mountains: Downhill could not only warm the hearts of many bicycle fans, but also of lovers of outstanding indie games.”

In December 2019 the ceremony of the German Developer Award (“Deutscher Entwicklerpreis”) took place in Cologne. There were many very good games nominated, but one game stood out as it received frenetic applause from the audience at every mention in the hall. In the end, this game was awarded as “Best Indie Game”. The name of the game - you guessed it - was Lonely Mountains: Downhill.

One year ago Berlin-based developer Megagon Industries released the downhill mountain biking game on Steam. By now it's also available for PS4, Xbox One, Windows, Linux, Mac OS and Nintendo Switch, which is the strongest platform regarding sales.

With loving looks, excellent sound design, extremely tricky gaps and great controls, Lonely Mountains: Downhill could not only warm the hearts of many bike fans, but also of lovers of outstanding indie games.

Megagon Industries was founded by Game Designer Daniel Helbig and Programmer/Technical Artist Jan Bubenik in 2013. Their first two releases were the puzzle game “Twisted Lines” and the arcade game “... and then it rained”, both with a minimalist aesthetic, which Megagon has also retained for Lonely Mountains: Downhill. For this game Megagon just released the first DLC “Eldfjall Island”. The volcanic island of Eldfjall is the largest “Lonely Mountain” to date and offers four new routes, new effects (thunderstorm, erupting volcano), Viking-style outfits, a professional helmet and unlockable backpacks.

Later this year another (free) update is planned. It will introduce “Daily Rides” where players will compete across platforms for the top spot on the daily ranking. Each day a route with new obstacles and shortcuts will be randomly selected. The daily challenges take place over a three to eight week season, during which new rewards can be unlocked - depending on, among other things, your ranking at the end of a season.

But enough of forewords: Now let the developers themselves have their say. Megagon Industries writes about the

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Lonely Mountains: Downhill was awarded for "Best Indie Game" at the Deutscher Entwicklerpreis 2019 (German Developer Award).

bumpy development process, the search for a publisher - which they didn't want at first - and the special kind of design.

But we'll start with an interview with Co-Founder and Game Designer Daniel Helbig!

### **Making Games: Please tell us briefly about your career in the gaming industry.**

**Daniel Helbig:** Jan Bubenik and I have both been working in the industry for quite some time. After my graduation from the Games Academy, I worked as a game designer for Keen Games and remote control productions before co-founding Die Hobrechts in 2010. That's where I met Jan who originally comes more from a CG/animation background and worked as a freelance developer on a wide range of different projects at that time.

Together we worked on a children's game called "Karl's Castle" ("Wimmelburg" in German). Since then we have collaborated on many more games and in 2013 decided to found Megagon Industries. Noah joined the team in 2018 after graduating from the S4G School 4 Games.

### **Did you expect Lonely Mountains: Downhill to be such a big success? How did you celebrate?**

It's really hard to say what our expectations were. When you show the game at a conference and the booth is packed all day you feel like the game will do really well. When you release an awesome gif of the game on social media and no one likes it, you suddenly fear that not a single person is going to buy it and the whole project will fail horribly. It's a rocky road. I think, in the end, we still hoped that the game would do well, but we also mentally prepared for

the worst case. When the game was finally released, we spent all day refreshing the store pages and watching Twitch streams. It took us a few days before we were calm enough to celebrate the release with some of our local indie dev friends.

### **Lonely Mountains Downhill is very different from your previous titles. How did you get the idea to make a mountain biking game? What inspired you?**

The main inspiration was a mobile skiing game called "Skiing Yeti Mountain" from Featherweight Games, which influenced the very early prototype. Although it has super simple controls it really feels great and we wanted to have that kind of feeling for our game. Because when you sit on your real bike you don't think about which button to press, you just ride. That's the experience we wanted to have.

From an art perspective, Lara Croft Go and Monument Valley had a huge influence on the look of the game.

### **From your point of view, what is the greatest strength of the game?**

We feel like the greatest strength of the game is that it was already fun to play right from the start - and luckily this never changed over the development. We have already put in several thousand hours of testing the game and it still happens that we start to actually play the game although we just wanted to quickly test something. Because the fun of the game is so easily understandable, it also makes it easy to communicate. You luckily don't need an elaborate elevator pitch when people can grasp the concept by just looking at a single screenshot.



**DANIEL HELBIG**

Co-Founder & Co-CEO

Daniel Helbig is Co-Founder/Co-CEO of Megagon Industries. Before spending most of his time on the Lonely Mountains, he worked as a Freelancer Game Designer and Creative Director/Co-Founder of Die Hobrechts.



**What would you do differently in hindsight?**

Oh, that's a difficult question. We made a lot of mistakes but they were also an important learning experience, so I wouldn't want to miss them. But I do feel that we made some design decisions that might not have the best cost/benefit ratio. Maybe doing smaller mountains would have been smart because we really spent a huge part of the production just optimizing the game. I believe business-wise one of the things we would do differently next time would be to be more confident when it comes to things like project timelines and budget negotiations.

**You are a very small core team. What advantages does that give you and do you want to keep it?**

Being a small team definitely gives you the ability to iterate faster and it makes it less difficult to try out new ideas. You may take things into your own hands and do them quickly because there are not that many people to consult on. You can also keep documentation to a minimum and project management is easier because normally everyone knows what everyone else is working on anyway.

We definitely need and want to grow as a team (we're hiring Unity programmers and level designers at the moment) but it would be nice if we could keep the speed and flexibility while at the same time improving our production workflows.

**You have received funding from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg. How difficult was it to get the funding? Can you give our readers a few tips?**

Actually it wasn't that difficult. Not only because we already had some experience from previous application rounds but mainly because the team from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg is really helpful and they guide you through most



A nature unspoiled by human-kind is one of the game's USPs.

of the process. I believe it took something like 2-3 months from the initial contact till we got approved for the funding. What really helped was that we already got a good prototype and a clear vision.

So my main tip would be to reach out to your local funding institution really early so that they can help you to circuit some of the obstacles before you ride into them.

**How long will you be busy with updates and extensions for Lonely Mountains: Downhill?**

That's hard to say, I guess as long as people are still interested in the game and as long as it makes sense economically. We still have a lot of nice-to-have things on our to-do list. We also have to see how well the Eldfjall Island DLC will perform and whether it will make sense to think about another DLC.

**What comes after that?**

We can't say anything official yet but we started to work on something new and after more than five years of Lonely Mountains: Downhill it feels really nice!

**Left:** The release cake wasn't a lie. Backed by the lovely creators of Trüberbrook, the bildundtonfabrik.

**Right:** The Megagon Industries Team and volunteers. (F.r.t.l): Daniel (MT), Jan (MT), Jule, Noah (MT), Jasper, Nils.



# Making of Lonely Mountains: Downhill

## The Long Way Down

The rocky history of Lonely Mountains: Downhill.



PRODUCTION



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When we released Lonely Mountains: Downhill on October the 23rd 2019 for Steam, Xbox One, and PS4 it was the end of a development ride that took us more than four years. Nearly a year after release the game has now sold more than 60.000 units across all platforms (including Switch which was released half a year later). By now more than a million players have played the game. Let us take a look back at the start of the ride and highlight some of the things that we learned along the way.

Although we released the game on consoles and PC, Lonely Mountains: Downhill started as a small mobile game in the summer of 2015. At the time Megagon Industries was a very different company.

It was founded in 2014 by Severin Brettmeister, Jan Bubenik, and Daniel Helbig in Berlin, Germany. All of us were freelancers at the time, knowing each other from Die Hobrechts - a previous company we worked at together. Although we had a shared office, we worked individually on separate projects. But besides our day jobs, we also cooperated on different private game

prototypes in our spare-time. One of them was the premium mobile puzzle game "...and then it rained" which was released in May 2014 for iOS. At that time we founded Megagon Industries not because we wanted to found and run a game studio. We simply needed a legal entity to publish the game on the AppStore.

"...and then it rained" got a lot of love from the Apple editorial team and surprisingly became a modest hit (at least compared to our initial expectations). It wasn't successful enough for us to quit our day-jobs but it motivated us to start working on a second premium mobile game that grew up to become Twisted Lines.

Although Twisted Lines was in a lot of aspects the better game, it wasn't nearly as successful when it got released in September 2016. You could also say it pretty much tanked.

In hindsight, the mistakes we made are pretty easy to spot - but to cut it short the root of all of them was that we still worked as freelancers, splitting the time between work-for-hire jobs and our games. The result was a release without proper marketing



and preparation. This was important learning as it heavily affected the future development approach of our next game.

### Close view

Lonely Mountains: Downhill is a downhill mountain biking game. The vision for it was always clear. We wanted to build a fun arcade biking game where you had to find your own way down the mountain. Instead of racing against other players, these mountains would be your antagonists. The game started as Jan's pet project somewhere in the middle of 2015 while Severin and Daniel were working on Twisted Lines. It was initially planned as a small mobile game with a 6-12 months development cycle. But because we still worked as freelancers, the actual work on the prototype cooked on a low heat for most of the first year.

This started to change after we put out some gifs of the game on social media (mainly Facebook groups, Twitter, and some private developer forums). The reaction of the community was pretty much overwhelming. The numbers of likes and shares (and even a small Rock Paper Shotgun article) were on a totally different level than any reaction we ever got for our previous games. From that moment on, we knew that this game had the chance to become something special.

Although our mobile version was really fun, most players thought that the game would even be better to play with gamepad controls. After implementing it, we quickly agreed. Without really thinking through all the consequences we shifted the development from mobile to PC. Luckily this was probably one of our better decisions as we don't think the game would have had the same impact as a premium mobile game. But it also led us on a development path that would take years longer and be more demanding than we ever planned for.

As we had just burned ourselves with the unsuccessful release of Twisted Lines, Jan and Daniel decided that for the game to get its proper chance, we had to do it full-time. Unfortunately, Severin had to leave the company shortly before due to private circumstances. So we scraped together our savings and started to develop a proper PC prototype. Our goal was to show it for the first time at Quo Vadis, a game developer event in Berlin. The feedback on the finished prototype was amazing and it marked the beginning of a year that we spent in total exhilaration.

- We made our first trailer and put up a Greenlight campaign on Steam. After four days, we had ~8.000 votes with a 93% positive rating.
- We continued to show the game at several events (Unite, Indigo, Amaze,

"Although our mobile version was really fun, most players thought that the game would even be better to play with gamepad controls. After implementing it, we quickly agreed."

gamescom, PGA) and always got great feedback.

- As our savings were running out we got a 50.000€ government funding by the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg.
- To pay our half of the funding we ran a Kickstarter campaign which closed at 45.000€ (which came down to 30.000€ on our bank account due to fees and taxes)

So in late 2017, the future was looking bright and sunny. We had funding, an active Kickstarter community, very positive press, some awards and nominations. Although a lot of publishers approached us, we were pretty much hellbent on publishing the game on our own. We were motivated, hopeful - and naive.

With the start of 2018, we crawled deep into the development trenches. But as the game started to grow we came to realize that some of the systems we had built didn't scale well in full production. Especially the way we created the levels was not only limiting (which can be a good thing) but required a lot of switching between Unity scenes, which was just a pain to work with on bigger trails. So we scratched what we had and instead of using the Unity terrain system, we decided to build our own. Looking back, this was the moment our initial planning started to go off the rails.

Forwarding a couple of weeks the new terrain system turned out to be pretty swell. Not only allowed it for fast changes and iterations, but it also lifted the restrictions on map sizes. Suddenly we had the power to build huge full-fledged mountains containing multiple trails that were all connected and intertwined.

Our original release goal during the Kickstarter campaign was mid of 2018. But with great level design power comes... bad performance!

Gamescom 2017: Showing the 2nd Prototype as part of the Indie Arena Booth.





Traveling the world: Each trail is unique and has its own landmarks.



## Bumpy times

Instead of working on gameplay features, we spend the first part of the year working on technical solutions to keep the performance playable. We ended up building a custom pooling, culling and LOD systems to handle the hundreds of thousands of objects that now formed our mountains. At this point, our planning wasn't just off the rails - we were in no-man's-land.

Summer went by and we set a new deadline for September but soon realized that we wouldn't be able to keep this one either - and that the funding we had wouldn't carry us over the finish line. Also, another infectious thought had started to grow: maybe self-publishing was not the best idea for us?

Although we had spread the word about the game pretty well in the past, we had now gone completely quiet on social media. Worse, we had started to neglect our community because the development of the game had consumed us completely. And the amount of work that still needed to be done - content and feature-wise - was a mountain of its own.

It was time to swallow our pride and look for help.

We were contacted by a dozen publishers since we shared the first initial gif. But in the end, there were only two that met the criteria we had set for ourselves, and that in turn wanted to go all the way with us. The newly found Swedish publisher Thunderful was one of them.

Partnering up with Thunderful not only promised to give us another round of funding to finish the game, but they also would take some of the marketing and PR responsibilities off our plate and offered to handle the console ports. We closed the deal at gamescom 2018.

After a pretty exhausting year that didn't go the way we planned, things again took a turn in the right direction. Most of the performance problems were solved, we had new money in the bank and a new partner to take care of all the things we strongly

"If you ever think about porting a game that is still in constant development, learn from our mistakes: don't do it or, at least, plan twice the time it would take to port a finished game."

neglected over the past year. We also were able to hire our first employee Noah, who joined the team as our first proper artist in October 2018. Everything was looking good and we set on a new goal: We wanted to release on all four platforms the same day in April 2019. What could go wrong?

It turned out that you can have too much of a good thing. In our case our Achilles heel were events. Knowing that the release of the game was only half a year away and equipped with the Thunderful war chest, we wanted to raise the awareness for the game again. Therefore we started to showcase Lonely Mountains: Downhill wherever possible. We went to MAG, EGX Berlin, Day of the Devs, EGX rezzed, GDC, TwitchCon, and took part in an Xbox press tour.

Being "on tour" with the game felt awesome but it would have been even more so if the game we showed would have actually been finished. Every event meant no development progress at all and required us to make new builds and marketing material. Travelling and jet-lag started to take a big toll on us and the development. We had soon again arrived at the point where our newly set release target was already too close.

So we decided to cut every nice-to-have feature that was still on the list. Animals, ghost system, replays, Twitch integration - it all went on the post-release update list (where they remain till this day). But being on the road all the time wasn't our only problem. If you ever think about porting a game that is still in constant development, learn from our mistakes: don't do it or, at least, plan twice the time it would take to port a finished game. Together with Thunderful and the porting studio we decided to drop the Switch port for now. But even with the new smaller scope and one platform less, it didn't look like the game would be ready for an all-platform release anytime soon.

So another gamescom arrived and we showed the game at the Indie Arena Booth for the third time in a row. Although



development was nearly finished at this point, the console versions were stuck in submission limbo. As no one knew how long it would take to get every version approved, we still had no release date. No release date meant that we had nothing news-worthy to say about the game as we had already burned through every other marketing message in the past years. We were physically and mentally exhausted from all the attended events, and we had a nearly finished game that no one seemed to care about anymore.

But there was one upside. Shortly before gamescom, a deal was made with Microsoft that Lonely Mountains: Downhill would be available on Game Pass from day one. Without going into details, this at least meant that we would be financially safe for a while when the game would come out - no matter if it would be a success or not.

But even without the financial pressure, everyone just wanted to have the game out the door.

### Turning into the final straight

Our targeted release date changed all the time as out of nowhere new bugs, performance issues, and problems with the console submissions emerged. Finding a good release date between constant Steam Sales, huge game events, and big AAA releases is already hard. Finding a new one every two weeks because something again took longer than expected destroyed the last bit of mental sanity we had left.

When the console versions finally made it through the approval process, we settled for a release date two weeks later on October the 23rd - nearly 1.5 years later than what we promised our Kickstarter backers and more than four years after we started our mobile prototype.

Having two weeks for your release PR isn't a lot of time. The trailer has to be finalized and you need to create gifs, texts, and images for social media. Press statements have to be written and keys distributed. You need to reach out to streamers, Let's Players and Steam curators. And most importantly, you have to connect with the platform holders to hope for some kind of store feature.

Being already mentally on the edge, the two-week crunch before release nearly pushed us over the cliff. When we finally hit the publish button we were just happy that the ride had, at last, come to an end.

Luckily people loved the game. Although our leaderboards servers went down shortly after we went live, Steam reviews settled on 90%. Sony and Microsoft both posted our release trailer via their official channels. Most of the press seemed to dig the game and enough big and small streamers picked it up so that the game even entered

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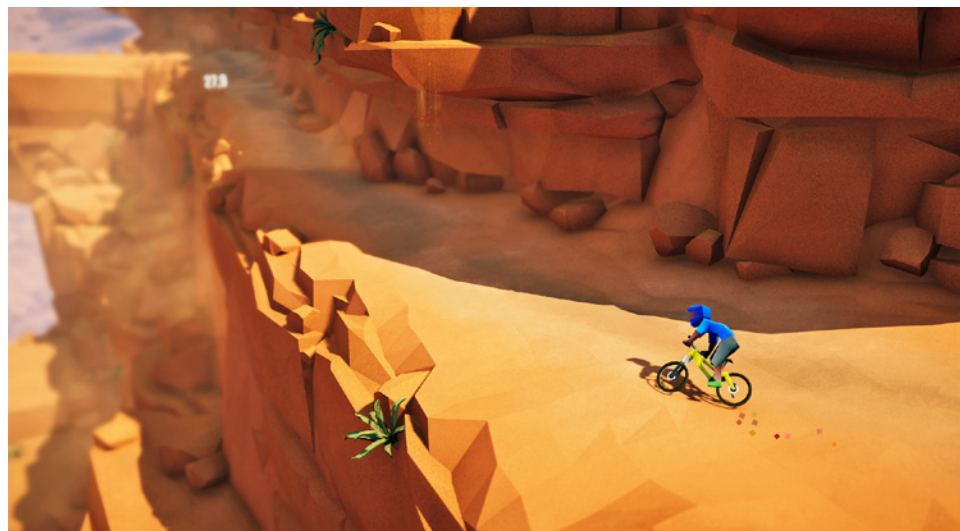
the “most played games on Twitch”-list for a short while (it peaked at 42k concurrent viewers). It still had some technical problems and crashed here and there, but overall it ran pretty stable and most bugs were fixed the weeks after release. Although we were still tired, our burnt-out developer souls were beginning to heal.

In the months after the release, Lonely Mountains: Downhill won multiple awards and was even nominated for two IGF awards. Despite the obvious fact that it wouldn't be the next big indie hit (although a lot of people told us that over the years), sales numbers were solid enough. We knew that we would be able to continue with Megagon Industries and that our ride wouldn't be over yet.

Skipping forward a year. Although Switch was released six months later it is our strongest selling platform now. It even triggered a small second press wave that also pulled the other platforms in its wake. We have a strong and active speed-running community that despite all odds still manages to make new record times daily. As we want to make Lonely Mountains: Downhill a long-term success, we're still updating the game with new features like daily challenges and also built our first DLC - Eldfjall Island.

We're often talking about how the development of the game went off the planned path - not only once but multiple times - and whether we should have cut content and features way earlier. But in the end - although development had a lot of ups and downs - we believe the resulting game was worth it as we not only learned from every crash but also found friends, business partners and a community of crazy speedrunners and mountain bike enthusiasts along the way.

The development was often a ride close to the edge.



# Making of Lonely Mountains Downhill

## How to (not) pitch to a publisher

Finding a publishing partner for Lonely Mountains: Downhill.



PRODUCTION



**DANIEL HELBIG**

Co-Founder & Co-CEO

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In over four years of development of Lonely Mountains: Downhill we never actively pitched our game to a publisher. We luckily never had to participate in Meet-to-Match speed-dating or to fill out forms on a publisher's website. Still, we had the great opportunity to talk and present the game to a large variety of publishers over the years. We talked to bigger and smaller ones, newly found publishers as well as industry veterans, and we even had an offer to become a second party studio.

In this article, we want to tell our story of finding a publishing partner without looking for one. We also want to talk about why we didn't end up self-publishing our game, the mistakes we made, and the reasons we are happy to have partnered up with Swedish publisher Thunderful. But first a disclaimer: Most of this story happened

between 2017 and 2018. A lot of the channels and opportunities that helped us do not exist in this form anymore. They have either lost a lot of their effectiveness or are way harder to reach, as they are now used by too many developers and publishers.

And although we are a very small team and started with little financial backing, we come from a privileged background. Before starting to work on Lonely Mountains: Downhill we already had multiple years of industry experience and enough financial savings to work full-time on our prototype for several months. Also living costs in Berlin are pretty cheap compared to a lot of other places in the world.

We also knew that if everything would fail and the game would be a total disaster, we could always come back to our freelance jobs.



So please take any advice in this article with a grain of salt as your game might have different needs and our situation at the time might not apply to your or your team's current situation.

### But now let the story begin

It was the spring of 2017 and we were absolutely sure that we didn't need a publisher. Life was good. We had just finished our PC prototype for *Lonely Mountains: Downhill* and got amazing feedback for it at the Quo Vadis - a game developer conference in Berlin. We had just gone through the Steam Greenlight program where ~8.000 people voted in favour of the game. Our first public trailer made it on PC Gamer, Kotaku, and Rock Paper Shotgun without us ever writing a single press release. On top of it all, we were invited to show the game as a "Made with Unity" showcase at Unite Amsterdam.

This whole indie marketing thing seemed surprisingly easy! All it needed was a few good gifs in some Facebook groups, participating in #ScreenshotSaturdays on Twitter, submitting your game to events and suddenly everyone seemed to talk about it.

Looking back, we already made a lot of mistakes during these first important months. We never had a proper plan to announce *Lonely Mountains: Downhill* to the world. It kind of happened and we just went with the flow. When the very first gif of our game went viral (at least a little bit) the game didn't have a name, no website, Facebook, or Twitter page. There was no way whatsoever for people to follow the development.

We made the same mistake with the Greenlight campaign. Our Discord-Server and newsletter didn't exist yet and although 9,000 people voted for the game, we were never able to reach out to them again, as Greenlight closed a week later.

Publishing a game starts with the moment you publicly talk about it. But at the time we didn't know that. The world of indie games had welcomed us, and our little biking game with open arms and the future was looking bright. We were in the process of getting state funding from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, and in our all-time high we had come up with an even more ambitious plan: we wanted to finance the development through Kickstarter. We also wanted to self-publish it as we thought that Greenlight had just proven that we could easily market the game ourselves.

It was shortly after the Greenlight campaign that the first publisher reached out to us - through a Twitter DM.

This would be a reoccurring theme for the next two years. Although we are pretty sceptical when it comes to the B2C effects of social media marketing, Twitter seems

to be the place where every publisher hangs out to scout new projects, so we can recommend keeping those DMs open.

Our first talks with publishers weren't going well and we want to deeply apologize to everyone who had to deal with us at that time. The main problem was that with state-funding and the upcoming Kickstarter we already had a plan to self-publish the game. But at the same time, we were curious to hear what a potential publisher might offer and to keep the door open in case the Kickstarter would fail. Unfortunately, this resulted in a lot of talks that could have been more productive as we were not able to give any definitive statement about a potential partnership. Speaking to every publisher also took a lot of time and mental energy.

In hindsight, the months before Kickstarter would have been the best time to close a deal with a publishing partner. Public interest in the game was high and we were financial-wise in a good position. The positive press and social media posts gave the game "social proof" and demonstrated that surprisingly there was a market for it. We had created a unique IP, strong visual identity, and had a great demo. We were in the rare position that when we talked to a publisher it was less about us needing money but more about the publisher who wanted in on the game.

Would we have known at the time that we would need another two and a half years to finish the game, we would have taken these discussions much more seriously.

But we were still going headstrong for self-publishing and it needed another six months of development until it slowly grew on us that we might have made a mistake. Unfortunately, our situation was now way worse than it was before. While the Kickstarter was successful, it "only" made €45,000, way less than a lot of people (publishers included) had predicted. Development was lacking behind, our targeted release date was completely unrealistic and our company bank account had seen better times.

Also, the hype about the game had cooled down dramatically. We had told people so much about it during the Kickstarter that there wasn't anything newsworthy to show or talk about anymore - a problem that should accompany us till the release of the game. It didn't look much better on the console development front - while we had managed to get approved as developers for all consoles, the dev-kits were just catching dust in our office as we were still working on the core game.

Although a few of our publishing contacts had endured, some of the initial interesting parties had closed the door on

"In hindsight, the months before Kickstarter would have been the best time to close a deal with a publishing partner."





**Left:** Showing the game for the very first time at Quo Vadis 2017.

**Right:** Pitching the game on children's bicycles in the Kickstarter trailer.



us in the meantime. While the reasons we heard varied, from keyboard controls that were not good enough to the game not being far enough in development, we felt that the common divisor was that people just sensed that we were not ready for a serious publishing partnership. It was time to change that.

Fortunately, talking to all the publishers over the year had helped us to understand what we were looking for in a partnership. While we never wrote it down at the time it boiled down to this:

#### We wanted the publisher

- ▶ to be willing to invest real money into the development (1 additional year) and marketing of the game. A lot of publishers who had approached us in the past wanted to have a 30% rev-share just for distributing the game and sending a PR through their mail list. This was not the partnership we were looking for.
- ▶ to take care of the console ports themselves or willing to give us an additional investment to build up an in-house porting team.
- ▶ to take care of the console submission and approval process as well as functional and console compliance testing.
- ▶ to market the game and have a different and more international press network than the one we had built up ourselves.
- ▶ to have good contacts with platform holders.
- ▶ to take care of localization.
- ▶ to understand how to market to content creators

#### We also wanted

- ▶ a general rev-share in our favor as we had already spent a lot of time and money to get the game to this point.
- ▶ a rev-share from day one after release. We wouldn't do full recoupment deals,

whether for the development costs nor marketing investment as we were scared that we would run out of money before the costs were recouped. Luckily this was also a requirement from the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg so we had some good arguments for it.

- ▶ an additional development budget after the release for bug-fixing and maintaining the game.
- ▶ to keep the IP - this was non-negotiable.
- ▶ to keep the creative control over the project, also non-negotiable.
- ▶ to keep documentation and project planning to a minimum. We were two people sitting side by side and we worried that involving another party into the development would slow down communication. Although looking back, little more documentation wouldn't have hurt.

We also had a closer look at each publisher's portfolio. We not only checked if the portfolio would fit our game but we took a look at the successful titles and especially the unsuccessful ones.

There are quite a few cases where a publisher only has one successful light-house game in their portfolio surrounded by a lot of titles that went by completely unnoticed. This always leaves the question if the game was just so good that it would have succeeded even without the publisher's help. A publisher who can make the most out of a mediocre game can be a way better choice than one who has this one title that sold millions but is surrounded by a grave of dead indie games no one has ever seen or heard from.

Of all the publishers that remained and were still interested in talking to us, in the end only two fit the bill.

But as we now knew that we wanted to have a publishing partner and what it was that we were looking for, all discussions

"We not only checked if the portfolio would fit our game but we took a look at the successful titles and especially the unsuccessful ones."



turned way more productive - even when it didn't match.

The reason we finally decided to swipe right on Thunderful was not only that they ticked most of the boxes. We felt that we had found a business partner we could trust and who believed in the vision we had for the game. We already met Ed Valiente, who was Thunderful's head of publishing at the time of the deal, years earlier at Indigo. It was one of the first events we ever presented Lonely Mountains: Downhill.

He was already an early fan of the game even when he didn't work at a publisher. So when we finally met again, we already knew that his love for the game was genuine and not just a random business opportunity. So, in the end, all the time we had spent showing the game and talking to publishers even when we were still hellbent on self-publishing the game, turned out very valuable. It created the network and gave us the experience to find the right publisher when we finally came around and realized that self-publishing a multi-platform game with a team of two was a little bit too much for us.

### To sum up our learnings

- ▶ Marketing the game starts the first time you talk about it. Have a Steam page, Discord, website, newsletter, and social media pages ready.
- ▶ If possible, spread the initial word about the game yourself. Concentrate early on really good looking gifs and get "social proof" for your game and IP. Ideally, you reach a point where publishers desperately want to talk to you instead of the other way around. But even if you want to reach out to publishers, it becomes way easier when you can show them that your last tweet got a few hundred or even more retweets.
- ▶ A lot of tools to make your game publicly known only have a limited lifespan. Facebook groups once worked well - now you can just completely ignore them. The same for self-promoting Reddit or Imgur posts. Greenlight now only exists in history books. But new things come up all the time, so be quick, keep an eye open, and experiment with different things.
- ▶ Be present on the show floor when you show the game at events. A lot of publishers reached out to us after seeing or playing the game at some event or talked to us in person. Showcasing the game at multiple events in a row often leads to a point where they simply can't ignore you anymore.
- ▶ Build up your own community and marketing channels. Also, try to establish your own press and platform contacts. Otherwise, you're back to zero after the game is released and you start working on your next title.
- ▶ If you simply can't find a way to market your game there is a high chance that a publisher will have the same problem - as they use the same tools. A good publisher might improve your marketing material and multiply the reach but if your best gif doesn't work at all then it won't suddenly be successful if your publisher posts it (Except if the publisher is Devolver as it seems that they can just sell anything).
- ▶ Decide if you want to work with a publisher or not. In case you're not interested let them know early. You can still schedule a meeting just to get to know each other but it's better if both sides are on the same page.
- ▶ Start building your network to publishers and also other developers before you need it. People are way more open and relaxed if they feel like you're not only talking to them for business reasons.
- ▶ See if there is the possibility to get state-funding (or any other kind of funding for that matter) before talking to a publisher. It's way easier to talk about money if you know that you can still pay the rent next month if the deal falls through.
- ▶ Try to aggregate good looking numbers before talking to a publisher. Wishlist numbers, Discord members, social media followers. If you can demonstrate that you already reached potential customers by yourself, they will worry less about their own marketing capabilities.
- ▶ Talking with publishers takes a lot of time and is mentally exhausting. But it also helps to get through the process often. Each discussion clarifies your vision and lets you know better what you want to get out of a partnership. But carefully balance both things.
- ▶ Do your due diligence on a publisher. Ask yourself (or the publisher) why one title from their portfolio was successful while another one failed.
- ▶ If you start talks have a production plan prepared and know what budget you're aiming at.
- ▶ Don't plan the budget with the same bootstrapped salary you used to survive on your savings. Your publisher probably won't bootstrap.
- ▶ Make sure that you have enough financial lean way after the release. It takes a long time until the money from Steam and especially consoles is paid out and even longer till you get it from the publisher.
- ▶ Make sure that any contract with the publisher covers the costs for bug-fixing and potential updates after the release.

"Start building your network to publishers and also other developers before you need it. People are way more open and relaxed if they feel like you're not only talking to them for business reasons."

Having gifs that are easily understood makes marketing your game a lot easier.



# Making of Lonely Mountains: Downhill

## The Art of Lonely Mountains: Downhill

How to create a world (in more than 6 days).

ART



**NOAH CAREV**

2D/3D Artist

Noah Carev joined Megagon Industries in late 2018 as a 2D/3D Artist. He started his artistic career as a graphic designer, studied game art at S4G School for Games in Berlin and is now working on Lonely Mountains: Downhill.

When I joined Megagon Industries in late 2018 as a 2D & 3D Artist Lonely Mountains: Downhill was already in mid-production. Although a lot of the mountains were still in development, my main focus was to create the level art and decorate the mountains within the established art-style. While we had some - mostly unwritten - rules for the art direction of the game, there were no comprehensive concepts for the mountains, and a lot of decisions were just made along the way. Luckily, it turned out fine. The game was generally praised for its art-style and although some of the mountains are less coherent than we aimed for, we were pretty happy with the result.

Nonetheless, when we started to work on our new DLC mountain "Eldfjall Island" we decided on a different approach. Instead of jumping headfirst into production, we wanted to do proper pre-production this time. For me, this not only meant to come up with a coherent art direction for the new DLC but also to look back at everything we learned from the previous mountains. In this article, I want to share our workflow, the inspiration we used, and how the art direction held everything together.

Before we started to work on the actual new mountain, we needed to understand the visual pillars of the game we had just shipped.

► High Level of Detail: Although the game is often classified as a low-poly game,



we do use a higher level of detail for our assets and in a higher quantity than most other low-poly games. This allows us to create very rich environments that feel natural but are readable as well as easily memorable.

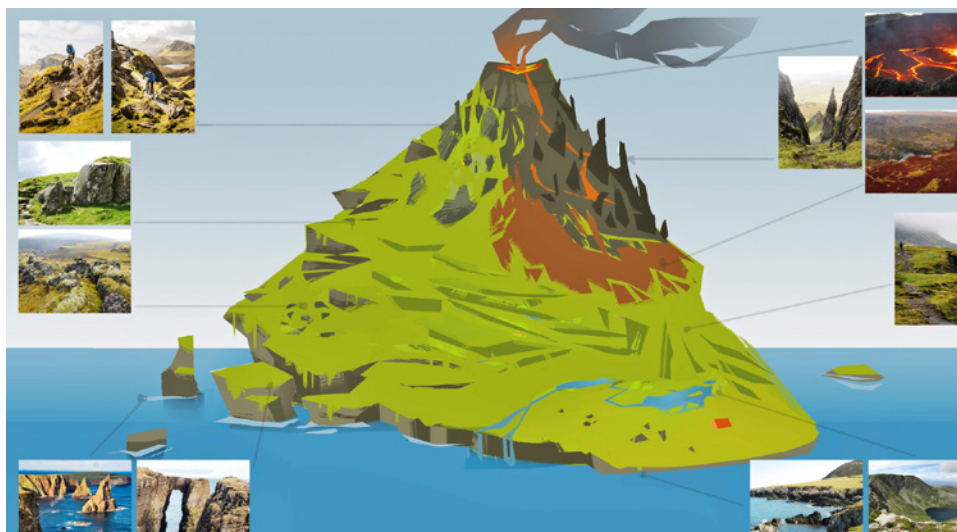
- **Strong Color-Schemes:** Each mountain has its colour scheme. We use harmonious base tones for the grounds and rocks against strong accent colours for plants and flowers to make each area of the mountain unique and recognizable. Lighting, particles, and post-effects round up the look.
- **Backgrounds** are as important as the trail itself: We want the player to feel like the trail he is riding is only a little part of a much bigger world. So we try to make room for scenic views and give trails as much depth as possible.

Knowing our foundation, we were able to begin the creative process by looking at the big picture. Our first mission was to find an appropriate theme for the mountain. Once you have that, you can then break down big shapes to smaller details.

For example, each mountain is made of trails, and each trail is made of several checkpoints, a checkpoint has different areas, and each area consists of individual spots.

This means that as soon as you have the main theme, you can come up with ideas to make each trail unique while still being a part of the bigger vision. You can then look at the individual sections of each trail and create a visual progression from the peak to the finish line. At last, you look at each spot on the mountain to make sure that every turn looks unique and easily recognizable.

So, how did we find the theme? Luckily we already had a large pool of ideas to choose from as we had already done a poll during the Kickstarter campaign asking our community which future mountains they would like to see. The problem: a snow



One of the first visual explorations of a volcano island with references to highlight different areas.

mountain was sitting on the top of that list. But as the original release for the DLC was planned for early summer, the time felt not right for a snowy landscape. So we chose the second most wished mountain - a volcano.

Once we had decided on a topic, I started extensive research to get into the right mood.

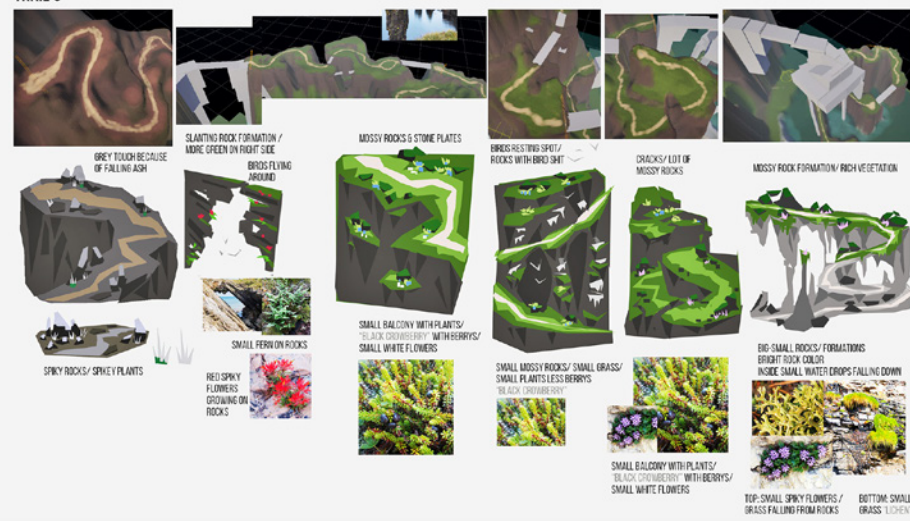
I collected images of different topics like Iceland, Scotland, volcano, earth cracks, and more. The goal was to understand what kind of atmosphere we wanted to achieve, which assets we would need, and what natural phenomena we could use to create unique looks for each trail.

For "Eldfjall Island" we ended up combining a chill environment with the heat of a volcano as we knew that this strong contrast would give us a lot of different possibilities. Although our main reference Iceland has poor vegetation, it's rich in unique rock formations, mossy landscapes, and impressive cliff structures formed by water. To design an entire environment without any trees was an interesting challenge for us. Keeping these natural resources in mind, I started to sketch rough mountains

We made a few concepts and decorated in-game scenes to prove the idea of a mossy and volcanic environment.



## TRAIL 3



Before we started the production we made a proper plan for each trail. This overview helped us a lot to design the mountain as a whole ecosystem.

to explore different ideas. As mentioned before, we tried to focus on the big shapes instead of digging into details too early.

Our main question at this time was, how could we create a whole mountain full of mossy rocks without losing variety. So for the next step, I drew more detailed sceneries, representing different parts of the mountain: ancient mossy hillsides, cliffs, and volcanic ground. To prove our concepts, we went further and made a few 3D rock assets, implemented them in Unity, and arranged a small playable scene. It's crucial to evaluate the design in the game itself early on. Camera angle, light settings, colour, and most importantly, the scale of the assets play an important part in how everything comes together.

After a quick overpaint in Photoshop, we got a better understanding of how we could use rocks and vegetation to create diverse environments, without overpopulating every corner with grass and flowers.

Parallel to the research, we started to build the mountain in Unity with

For Eldfjall Island we used the first time different coloured rocks and a custom moss shader which allowed us to create much more variations out of a limited number of assets.

placeholder assets. At this point, both the level design and concept art affected each other. With each level design iteration, we were able to define the overall look of the mountain better. We worked together to make each trail unique and gameplay-wise interesting but to also preserve the mountain as a whole ecosystem at the same time.

Before the production phase could start, we needed proper visual guidance for each trail, so I headed back to the drawing board. I made screenshots from each part of every trail and sketched a small thumbnail with the final idea. A few sample images and a description of the area were added to understand the concept better. Our main criteria to check if each part was unique enough to be recognizable from a single screenshot.

We planned to start the first trail with a windy plateau, followed by lush green areas with more vegetation, and the sandy beach at the end. The second trail was mainly to be dominated by a giant thunderstorm. For the third one, we wanted to start with falling ash to remind the player of the proximity of the volcano and then continue to focus on a scenic route with a wide view on the ocean. As the grand finale, we wanted the fourth trail to start on top of the erupted volcano.

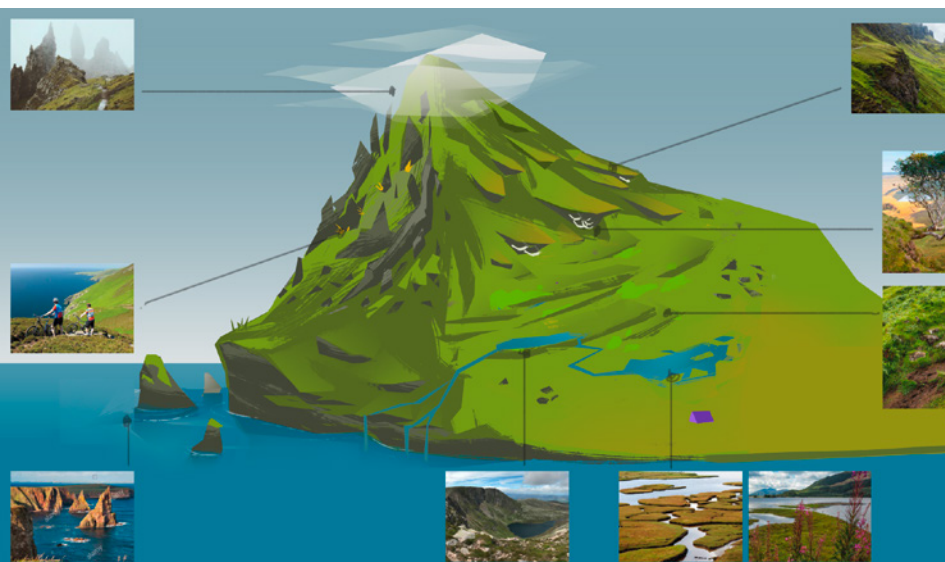
Now we were able to see the progression of the whole mountain. We also had proof that our moss-covered stones and rock-formations were interesting enough and could co-exist with an erupted volcano. We were confident that we could create a recognizable environment with low vegetation and without any trees.

## After all this exploration, we could finally start with the production.

In this phase, I built different rocks, pebbles, plates, columns, and so on. The workflow was always the same. First, I made a







This early concept shows the idea of the mainland with steep cliffs and wide areas for sprinting. Clearly a contrast area is missing here, the volcano.

rough blockout, implemented it in Unity, made a prefab, and went back to Blender for more details if I was happy with the initial asset idea.

While I was working on the level decoration, I gradually built the assets I needed for a specific section. Little by little, the asset pool was built up.

For the level decoration part, I started with painting the terrain colours. For a fast-paced game like *Lonely Mountains: Downhill*, the main path should always be visible and clear to read. Player guidance is the key here. Once the ground texture was finished, I started to populate prominent areas like bridges or memorable spots like big rock formations. So step by step, each area was built to be unique, but without re-inventing the wheel.

As for everything else, I used big shapes first and added details later. This allowed me to keep everything at a glance and to make sure that we were still within the vision we had for “Eldfjall Island”.

The customization part was also driven by Iceland as our main theme. Okay, to be fair, it was actually more inspired by the early history of Scandinavians. Unlike other regions colonized by Vikings, Iceland had no local population. However, we used our artistic freedom to make playable Viking-like outfits, paint jobs for bikes, and wooden shields as back accessories.

When we were finally done decorating the mountain, we started thinking about marketing materials. Most important was the key artwork which represents the DLC on all platforms. Like for the mountain itself, we started with the big picture.

### What do we want to show in the key artwork?

We normally always focus our artworks on the rider - so that everyone understands at first glance that it's a biking game. But

we also wanted to give enough visual space for the new mountain, as this is the DLC we're selling. So we ended up with an image using the rider to guide the viewer's eye along the cliffs to the Vulcano, containing all the important information about the DLC that we had established early on.

In retrospect, although we spent way more time on research and concepts than we did for our previous mountains, not rushing too early into the production phase has paid off. Because we had a clear vision of each trail and how we wanted to achieve it, there were only a few areas we had to rework during the production, and we only had to do one art pass for most of the sections.

But still, there were a few blind spots we tackled too late. The first one was trying to create a suitable look for the lava streams, which took longer than initially planned. Not going too deep into technical details but we tried different approaches and in the end settled with a full lava mesh, a handpainted flow map, and a custom shader. The second stomach ache we had was the distant ocean. We had to find a solution for how to visually match our regular nearby water with the endless ocean in the background. This also took longer than we initially expected. So even with proper preparation, not all challenges are always predictable, and some need a lot of time to solve. We have learned to plan more time for the unforeseen and will tackle major tasks as quickly as possible in our future projects.

When your art style is already established, it's half the battle to build a world around it. Once you find a proper design language, you can apply it to nearly everything within the given IP. For “Eldfjall Island” it helped us a lot to find strong references to work with. We found enough visual input to get inspired and to create our own believable *Lonely Island*.

Even the screenshots tell the story of Eldfjall Island. There is a moss-covered area, a volcanic zone, a rainy bridge, the beach and many more.

