

Game Narrative Review

Your name: Benjamin Mora-Davison
Your school: Sheridan College
Your email: moradavi@sheridancollege.ca
Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2019

Game Title: The Banner Saga
Platform: PC / PS4 / Switch / Xbox One / iOS / Android
Genre: Tactical RPG
Release Date: January 14, 2014
Developer: Stoic Studio
Publisher: Versus Evil
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Alex Thomas

Overview

The Gods are dead.
The sun never sets.
A golem army marches south.
The world is coming to an end.

In the wake of this cataclysm, a hunter named Rook flees south with his daughter and the people of his town. Sporting only a handful of fighters and even scarcer supplies, Rook must navigate his caravan of refugees through a world falling apart at the seams. Children beg for food on the road, bandits extort travelers of their supplies, golems pillage cities and villages alike. Rook's decisions will not only determine his fate, but the fate of those trust him.

The Banner Saga is a sweeping and solemn tactical RPG that exemplifies how in desperate times, there are often no right decisions. As the player manages the population, supplies and morale of Rook's caravan, they are routinely presented scenarios with no happy endings. But decisions must be made, and by the end of *The Banner Saga*, it is clear that is not a game that is beaten, but a game that is survived.

Characters

Humans

The original creation of the gods. As farmers, merchants, woodsmen and warriors, they are the center of Viking culture in this world. Born out of the threat of the dredge, humans hold an unsteady alliance with the Varl that is tainted with mistrust.

- **Rook** – A skilled hunter from a long lineage of woodsman, Rook hails from the northern village of Skogr and is the main protagonist of *The Banner Saga*. Rook has grown up molded by the harsh winters of the north and is impeccable at hunting. However, having been unable to protect his lost wife from harm, Rook now wrestles with teaching his daughter, Alette, to be self-sufficient while also keeping her safe. Facing the end of the world, Rook questions his ability to lead his caravan of refugees south. So many seem to perish as a result of his decisions, his only wish is that his daughter not be among them...
- **Alette** – A youthful, aspiring hunter, Alette is from the northern village of Skogr and is also Rook's daughter. Despite losing her mother at a very young age, Alette is a very kind and compassionate young woman. However, she has no desire to take on the more traditional roles that women play in Skogr. Instead, she hopes to become a hunter like her father before her. To accomplish this, she uses her spare time to train extensively with her bow. Alette is more gentle-hearted than her father, and is very vocal when she feels he has asked unjustly. Ultimately, she hopes to carve a future of her own where she has no need to depend on anyone.

Varl

A race of horned half-giants, the Varl have twice the height and girth of their human counterparts. They are great warriors and live for great stretches of time, but as a male-only species, they cannot reproduce.

- **Iver** – Once known as the legendary hero Yngvar, Iver is a fearsome warrior who threw away his claim to the Varl throne. Upon killing a golem mother and her child to save his people, his shame consumed him. Instead of ascending to the throne, he vanished and settled down in the small town of Skogr. Throughout the generations, he has helped build and maintain the village, although none of the townsfolk know of his past. Now accompanying Rook's caravan south, Iver's past will play an integral part in the coming journey.
- **Hakon** – A legendary warrior of the Varl, Hakon is a charismatic leader and a playable protagonist in *The Banner Saga*. After the untimely death of his commander, Hakon finds himself in charge of a crucial diplomatic caravan escorting the prince of men to Groffheim, the Varl capital. Informed of the incoming golem invasion from the north, Hakon's actions will not only affect those he travels with, but the future of Human-Varl relations.

Other

- **The Dredge** - A race of golems forged by a rogue god to destroy civilization, the dredge are the main antagonistic force of *The Banner Saga*. The dredge were originally created to kill and pillage, but later generations of dredge are much more inclined to peace. Both humans and Varl have fought many wars in the past to keep the dredge at bay. The Second Great War saw the Varls and humans push the dredge into the far reaches of the north, never to be seen again. Over the hundreds of years since, the dredge have managed to create their own civilization in relative harmony. However, upon the stagnation of the sun, the Dredge have inexplicably invaded human and Varl lands once again...
- **The Serpent** – A colossal being lurking in the shadows, the serpent is a mysterious and unknown force in *The Banner Saga*. Claiming to hail from a prophecy that dictates it shall end the world, the serpent's movements in the physical world cause mountains to crumble and the earth to quake. However, the serpent is frustrated that an unknown darkness from the north seems to be stealing its purpose to end the world. Even those who were fated to destroy the world seem to be losing purpose in this dying land.

Breakdown

No Right Choices - Mechanical Storytelling in *The Banner Saga*



“Acts of charity save as often as they kill. Cold-heartedness reaps as much trouble as reward. In ‘The Banner Saga,’ there are no right choices, only priorities.”

The Banner Saga is divided into seven chapters, each of which task the player to lead their caravan through miles upon miles of unforgiving wilderness. For the majority of the game, the player guides Rook’s caravan as he and Allete flee from invading golems. But multiple chapters also grant the player control of Hakon’s caravan, an army of half-giants escorting the prince of men on a diplomatic mission. Regardless of which entourage the player accompanies, they must keep in mind multiple key stats of their caravan if they wish to survive:

- **Clansmen:** The number of human civilians in the caravan.
- **Fighters:** The number of combat-ready humans travelling in the caravan.
- **Varl:** The number of half-giants in the caravan, all Varl are trained in combat.
- **Supplies:** How many provisions you have to feed your caravan.
- **Morale:** The collective mental status of your caravan.

These statistics form the crux of *The Banner Saga*’s narrative scenarios. Do you risk your fighters to save helpless peasants from bandits? Do you use precious supplies to nurse a boy found on the brink of death? Even seemingly trivial scenarios can have far reaching effects on the status of the player’s caravan, and *The Banner Saga* has no issue punishing kindness and rewarding cowardice. Acts of charity save as often as they kill.

Cold-heartedness reaps as much trouble as reward. In *The Banner Saga*, there are no right choices, only priorities. The game constantly puts players into vulnerable positions that force them to make tough calls based on the statistical reality of their caravan's circumstances. It's sharp, mechanical-narrative commentary on just how difficult and burdensome leadership can be.



“The Banner Saga’s elegant harmony of gameplay and narrative keeps the stakes of battle both relevant and engaging.”

The Banner Saga’s thematic premise of hardship is taken to even greater heights through constant interplay between the gameplay and narrative design. When fights occur in the story, the game shifts to turn-based tactical battles where the player fights enemies with important members of their caravan. The key thing to note is that these battles are directly influenced by the status of the player’s caravan. For example, **‘willpower’** is a gameplay stat used in combat to do additional actions on a unit’s turn. However, if the morale of the player’s caravan is poor, the willpower of their units are reduced, limiting their actions. This means caravan morale is often the difference between a unit surviving or falling in battle. If a unit does fall in combat, they are injured and suffer permanent penalties until they get multiple days of rest. But resting on the road takes up an entire day of supplies. Does the player rest their units at the expense of their supplies? Do they press on injured at the risk of losing future fights? It’s easy to lend a hand with an army in full health, less so when your fighters are marred with injuries. The player’s gameplay dictates the context of their narrative decisions, and their narrative decisions dictate the context of their gameplay. It’s an elegant harmony of gameplay and narrative that keeps the stakes of battle both relevant and engaging.

Consequences - Narrative Structure in *The Banner Saga*



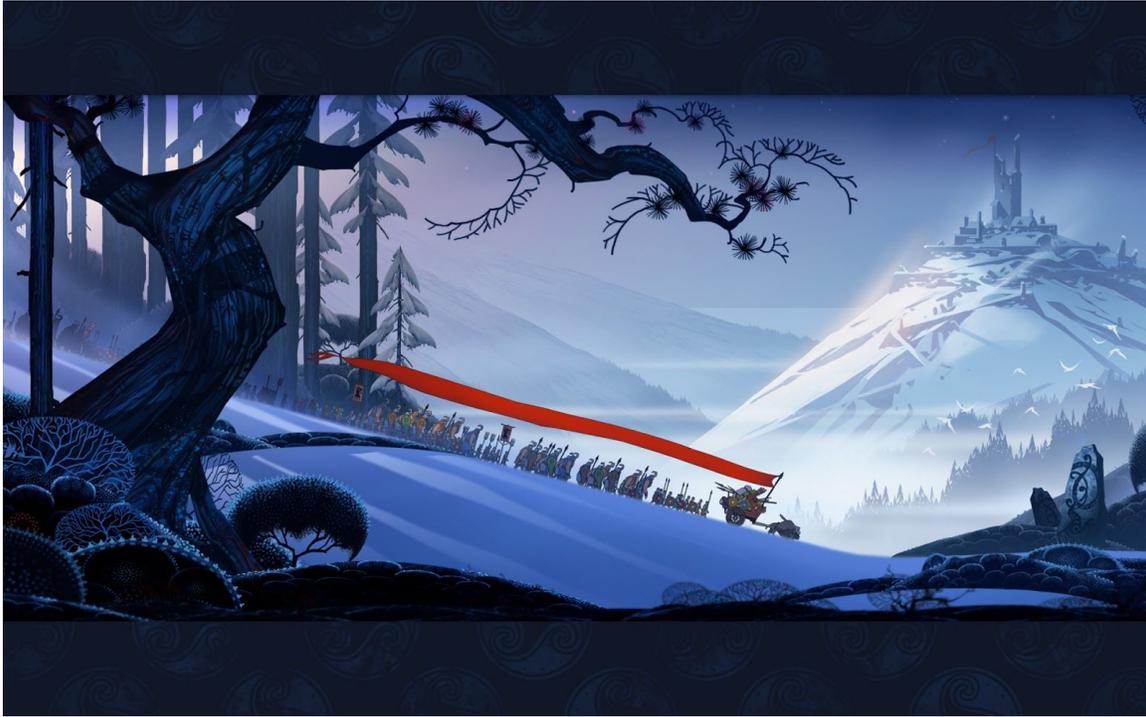
“Although many choices don’t affect the ending of ‘The Banner Saga’, they undeniably change and enhance the narrative experience.”

Despite the myriad of narrative choices presented to the player throughout *The Banner Saga*, the game’s overarching narrative is surprisingly linear. For all intents and purposes, the majority of the experience is on rails and the story sports only two endings. However, the journey that each player takes to said endings can vary wildly. Player choices have great influence over who joins their party, who aligns with their caravan, even who betrays them. *The Banner Saga* also makes it abundantly clear that no one is safe from death. Multiple major characters in the game can die due to player decisions and the game constantly keeps players on their toes. So despite the low number of endings, there is plenty of narrative content to unearth across multiple playthroughs.

One of the most potent examples of *The Banner Saga*’s narrative content is the plotline surrounding the character Onef. Onef hails from the city of Frostvellr and the player has the opportunity to kill him when sneaking into the city. But if the player spares him, he shows his gratitude by providing much needed supplies and joining the player’s party. The player can then use Onef as a unit in gameplay, and he helps the caravan out in recruiting fighters and bolstering morale. He even opens up to Rook about his troubled past. He genuinely helps the player’s caravan in multiple ways and feels like an ally. Which makes his ultimate betrayal hurt that much more. Having lost faith in Rook’s leadership, Onef attempts to kill Rook and murders multiple of the player’s clansmen before he is ultimately killed in a struggle with Alette. Stories of similar magnitude to Onef’s are littered throughout *The Banner Saga* depending on player decisions, and although they don’t affect the ending, they undeniably enhance the narrative experience.

It is also worth mentioning that although the majority of choices don't affect the ending of *The Banner Saga*, many greatly affect the outcome of both *The Banner Saga 2* and *The Banner Saga 3*. So multiple playthroughs are also encouraged in combination with the game's sequels.

The Long Road - Visual Storytelling in *The Banner Saga*



“Much like the scenery on a long road trip, the sprawling landscapes of ‘The Banner Saga’ host stories of their own.”

Breaking up the tension of *The Banner Saga*'s narrative and gameplay segments are long periods of silence where players watch their caravan roll across the world's nordic hills. Each of the player's clansmen march in the wake of their titular red banner, dwarfed by landscapes that would leave even the most cynical in awe. The weight of narrative choices in *The Banner Saga* can be taxing, and these gorgeous vistas provide much needed moments of reprieve. Not only are these caravan segments visually beautiful, they temper the narrative to a pace that is much more palatable.

Much like the scenery on a long road trip, the sprawling landscapes of *The Banner Saga* host stories of their own. From the perpetual twilight of the stagnant sun, to the towering godstones left behind by deceased deities, the visuals truly sell the history and stillness of this dying world. A stillness that the game has no qualms shattering. In *The Banner Saga*'s latter half, the static scenery bursts apart; mountains are ripped asunder, burning cities scar the countryside in raging flames, colossal creatures rise from

the earth. After witnessing the tranquillity and stillness of the world firsthand, it is this visual, dynamic apocalypse that truly hammers home the magnitude of what is being lost.

But what the visuals of *The Banner Saga* do best is sell the story as a journey. Every hill, every village, every mountain, every godstone, the player is with their caravan every step of the way. The caravan sequences instill a sense of scale and camaraderie that just wouldn't be possible through text alone. The visuals evoke such a strong sense of world that they truly make *The Banner Saga* feel like... a saga.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *The Banner Saga*, by far, is the game's cohesion of gameplay and story elements to create interesting narrative scenarios. Low supplies, injured fighters, poor morale; it's hard being a good Samaritan in crises, and crises are something that *The Banner Saga* creates constantly. Starving strangers line the road but your supplies are at their limit, do you still help them? A village burns in the distance but half your party is injured, do you fight to save them? These judgement calls are ultimately up to the player and there are no wrong answers, only consequences. Morale affects battles, battles affect supplies, supplies affect story decisions, story decisions affect morale; every mechanic intertwines with the game's story in a way that transforms how the player thinks about their narrative decisions.

Unsuccessful Element

If *The Banner Saga* stumbles anywhere, it is definitely the narrative pacing in the opening chapters. While the atmospheric narration and animated cutscenes do an amazing job at setting the tone of the story, they also bombard the player with lore, characters and locales at a rate that is difficult to digest. As a result, it can take a while before the player fully grasps what is actually happening in the story and get invested. Characters in particular are introduced rapidly one after another and are given scarce introductions. Many often die without the player even really understanding who they were in the first place. This lack of character knowledge and narrative context leads to even more confusion when the game shifts perspective. Multiple times the game refers to the player as "you" in the script, but figuring out who "you" are can be a task in itself. More explicit dialogue and slower divulsion of information would go a long way to making the opening chapter more comprehensible on the first playthrough.

Highlight



“Tonally, visually, and functionally, the ending of ‘The Banner Saga’ captures the essence of everything the game stands for”

Tonally, visually, and functionally, the ending of *The Banner Saga* captures the essence of everything the game stands for. Seeking to prove her worth, Alette asks her father to be tasked with shooting the golem commander, who has been chasing the caravan throughout the story. The player must choose whether to accept Alette’s request or entrust this matter to Rook. Ultimately, whoever the player tasks with this mission is killed in battle, their sacrifice paving the way to victory.

This culminates in a final funeral, where wrapped in the banner of the caravan, the boat of the deceased is set aflame and sails for Valhalla. As the flaming grave glides across the frigid waters, the backdrop shifts from the frigid arctic to the majestic backdrop of the afterlife, and the boat finally comes to rest between two trees. No matter who you choose, it is a powerful moment. Either Rook makes the ultimate sacrifice protecting his daughter, or Alette tragically perishes just as she comes of age. It is a moving conclusion that wraps up the story beautifully.

Critical Reception

While many reviews criticized *The Banner Saga*’s lack of gameplay variety, it was universally praised for its writing and narrative design. In particular, critics were impressed by how meaningful their choices felt. In Stace Harman’s review for *Eurogamer.net*, Harman recounts multiple anecdotes examples of his leadership causing all sorts of unforeseen consequences, then concluding “...the fact that I can outline my

mishaps here without fear of spoiling your own sense of discovery is testament to the myriad scenarios it presents, and the permutations of outcomes that can play out.” Chris Schilling of *PC Gamer* scored the game an 82/100 and echoed similar sentiments to Harman, commenting that the unpredictable consequences at every turn were “refreshing” and exemplary of “universal truths.” Schilling also had high praise for the non-playable caravan sequences, claiming that they evoked the sensation of journey “...in a more convincing manner than almost any other game.” In a review for *Destructoid*, Kyle Bursleson notes how the narrative elements evoke a sense of vulnerability that permeates throughout the experience and that, “By the end of the journey, I cared for my banner like a shepherd tending to his flock.”

Lessons

- **The mechanics are the message.**
 - *The Banner Saga* consistently communicates its narrative themes through its gameplay mechanics. From the micromanagement of the population and supplies, to the effects that battle has on the caravan's fighting capabilities; *The Banner Saga* puts players through its themes of hardship and leadership firsthand.
- **A picture is worth a thousand words.**
 - Through striking use of backgrounds and silence to visually tell and worldbuild, *The Banner Saga* evokes a sensation of history, time and journey that it never could with words. By marching the player with the caravans of *The Banner Saga*, players get a narrative grasp of scale and journey that just wouldn't be possible otherwise.
- **Non-linear stories don't need multiple endings.**
 - Even with a very limited selection of two endings, *The Banner Saga* creates an extremely compelling non-linear narrative experience. By framing the non-linear story of the player's caravan within an overarching linear structure, each player's journey feels wholly tailored to them, even if it ends the same way.
- **Exposition pacing is paramount.**
 - Players can struggle to get invested if they don't understand the context of what's happening, and the rapid and confusing exposition in *The Banner Saga*'s opening chapters acts as a strong barrier to immersion. Ensuring that exposition is clear, concise and well-paced will make it much easier for players to lose themselves in the game.

Summation

In a medium abundant with power fantasies, *The Banner Saga* should be commended for its uncompromising vulnerability. The fear of an ambush when supplies are low, the fear of a stranger claiming to be unarmed, the fear of failing those who trust you; *The Banner Saga* constantly crafts an environment where players can never truly feel safe. Every narrative encounter brings peril, every dot on the horizon a potential threat. But decisions must be made, the caravan must move forward. *The Banner Saga* communicates the thankless nature of leadership not only through its writing, but through every facet of the experience. The caravan's interplay with the turn-based battles, the visual storytelling of the caravan sequences, the non-linear story structure; they all come full circle to reinforce the game's themes of vulnerability and hardship, then elevate said themes to new heights. If the legendary Sid Meier is correct in saying "games are a series of interesting decisions," I can think of no game that lives up to that mantra as resolutely as *The Banner Saga*.

Reviews Cited

Burleson, Kyle. "Review: The Banner Saga." *Destructoid*, 14 Jan. 2014, www.destructoid.com/review-the-banner-saga-268853.phtml. (8/10)

Harman, Stace. "The Banner Saga Review." *Eurogamer.net*, Eurogamer.net, 9 Feb. 2015, www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-01-14-the-banner-saga-review. (8/10)

Schilling, Chris. "The Banner Saga Review." *PCGamer*, 23 Jan. 2014, www.pcgamer.com/the-banner-saga-review-2/. (82/100)