

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Kenshi

Platform: PC

Genre: Survival Sandbox Real-Time Strategy Role-Playing Game

Release Date: March 20th, 2013 (Early Access); December 6th, 2018 (Official)

Developer: Lo-Fi Games

Publisher: Lo-Fi Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Chris Hunt

Overview

Sandstorms rage over the bloodstained land of *Kenshi*. The cruel sun rises on the horizon and a wanderer decides to pursue their dreams of something more than just survival. They pack their few personal possessions and set off, stepping foot beyond the city walls and leaving their old life behind.

By nightfall, the sun sets on their mutilated corpse, stripped clean by bandits and a feast for the Bonewolves.

Kenshi doesn't talk about an attractive protagonist finding their place in the world, nor does it tell an aspirational story about overcoming adversity in the face of injustice – in fact, *Kenshi* doesn't tell you anything. *Kenshi* simply drops you in the middle of a hostile world with a rumbling stomach and one question: *What does living mean to you?*

Characters

Kenshi is a game of factions. Individuals in *Kenshi* carry very little weight in influencing the state of the world – even the most advanced characters with the best equipment can struggle to take on more than a few moderately-leveled attackers. When characters' actions are limited almost purely to those of survival, they have very little ability to bring about large-scale change. Factions, on the other hand, can defend themselves from outside attackers, utilize natural resources to found cities, wage war on corrupt regimes, and form cultures from the unifying beliefs of its people.

- **The Player Faction** – All the characters under the player’s control, be they warriors, farmers, traders, thieves, researchers, or anything else. The game starts with a variable number of characters in the player’s faction, depending on their starting path, but this is usually one character. As the player explores the game world, they’ll come across many unique characters who can be recruited to their faction. The recruits of Kenshi are greatly varied and come in a significant number of forms, from wandering mercenaries to escaped slaves, retired adventurers to faction representatives. The player’s faction can be as small as one character and as many as thirty, depending entirely on how the player wishes to play the game.
- **Wanderers** – The most common type of recruit for the Player Faction. These characters are most often found hanging out in bars but sometimes can reside in exotic places such as an abandoned factory from the Old World or a crumbling tower in the middle of nowhere. Wanderers each have their reasons for joining the Player Faction, be it to pay off debtors, the promise of protection in a hostile world, or simply wanderlust. Wanderers can either be procedurally generated from a set of models, names, personalities, backstories, and stats based on the location they are found or hand-placed and crafted with a custom backstory and personality.
- **The United Cities** – Also known as The Empire, the United Cities are a faction that controls massive tracts of land in the southern and eastern reaches of Kenshi. The United Cities rely heavily on slavery and serfdom to generate food and building materials, some of such farms can rival the size of cities, using as many slaves as there would be civilians to grow food from otherwise infertile land. This social hierarchy is so fundamental to the function of the United Cities that anti-slave sentiments are considered extremist and those who express such ideas are treated as terrorists.

Allied closely with the Traders’ Guild, the United Cities are fundamentally obsessed with monetary gain and generally treat it as the measure of a person’s worth to the point that being poor is a crime punishable by imprisonment or slavery. Many of the most lucrative bounties the player can pick up come from the United Cities seeking retribution against those who would seek to usurp their corrupt empire, including a bounty placed on the legendary Tinfist, leader of the Anti-Slavers.

- **The Anti-Slavers** – The Anti-Slavers, as their name implies, are a faction dedicated to freeing the oppressed and downtrodden who have found themselves in the forced servitude of others. Anti-Slavers are skilled martial artists and many refuse to use weapons altogether, preferring to fight their and others’ oppressors with their bare hands. The Anti-Slavers themselves are composed of diverse peoples, recruiting any who express interest in ending slavery and prove their skill in battle. Due to their culturally radical ideals, the Anti-Slavers have made many

enemies, including the two most powerful factions in the world: the United Cities and the Holy Nation.

- **The Holy Nation** – The Holy Nation is a radically theocratic society governed by an individual known as Holy Lord Phoenix (colloquially “The Phoenix”), an individual whom many believe is the reincarnation of the Holy Nation’s first emperor. Their society is based on the religious dualism between the human god-creator Okran and the dark demoness Narko. This religious zeal manifests in many ways, including xenophobia against non-humans, sexism against women, and rejection of individuals who don’t follow their core beliefs. The Holy Nation is radically opposed to technology and information, being openly violent to the sentient robot race known as Skeletons and burning or locking away any books that are not their holy text or propaganda that aligns with their beliefs.

All citizens of the Holy Nation are required to carry a copy of their holy text, the Holy Flame, on them at all times – refusing to do so will result in a warning if the character is a male Greenlander (a human sub-type with light skin), repeat offenses or being something other than light-skinned male results in escalating action including imprisonment, violence, or being captured and sent to the reform camp in Rebirth, which uses slave labor to produce building materials. Many people have fled the oppression of the Holy Nation and have formed or joined various factions to fight back against them, including the Anti-Slavers and a predominantly female faction known to the Holy Nation as the Cult of Narko, or to others as the Flotsam Ninjas.

- **The Flotsam Ninjas** – Named after the deadwood forest in which they reside, the Flotsam Ninjas are a faction diametrically opposed to the Holy Nation, dedicated to providing a second life for those who have been oppressed by the Holy Nation and taking down the corrupt rule of The Phoenix. Many recruits of the Flotsam Ninjas are female, nonhuman, or both and directly come from a background of oppression from the Holy Nation. Recruits are typically illiterate and stuck in an enslaved mentality. Over time, however, recruits are taught to read, express their opinions openly, and fight – a necessity for the area, since the Flotsam Ninjas base of operations lies precariously close to the Cannibal Plains.
- **The Shek Kingdom** – The Shek Kingdom is a faction located in the southwestern reaches of the world and is composed almost entirely by Shek – large, horned humanoids with grey skin and exoskeletal bone plates on most of their body. The Shek follow the teachings of Kral, a legendary Shek warrior that united the Shek tribes into a centralized nation hundreds of years ago. These teachings put honor in battle above all else, to the point that dying in battle is the most honorable thing a Shek can do. These beliefs have led to a dichotomous caste system composed of warriors and servants – warriors being exactly that and servants being defeated or cowardly warriors who were spared in battle or fled for their lives.

During its peak, the Shek Kingdom was a powerful nation, however, it has since become a shadow of its former self due to its dwindling population, lack of craftspeople, and rampant infighting among many Shek splinter factions. The queen of the Shek Kingdom, Esata the Stone Golem, seeks to reunite the Shek Kingdom once more and reverse the toxic ideology that has led to its downfall, however, rogue Shek factions such as the Band of Bones, Kral's Chosen, and the Berserkers oppose her advances, clinging tightly to the old ways.

- **The Machinists and Tech Hunters** – Sister factions, the Machinists and Tech Hunters seek the knowledge left behind from the old world. The Machinists are a group of academic elites based in the remote city of World's End that work as historians and engineers, dedicating their lives to spreading knowledge throughout the world through the distribution of books. The Machinists work closely with Skeletons – the enigmatic sentient robot race present in *Kenshi* – relying on their centuries of knowledge and experience to proactively prevent catastrophes like that which destroyed the Old World.

The limited experience of a few Skeletons isn't enough to get a cohesive view of the world or understanding of technology, so the machinists often rely on the aide of the legendary band of mercenaries known as Tech Hunters to explore the ruins of the Old World to find artifacts and ancient records. Tech Hunters are skilled fighters – many ruins of the Old World are often inhabited by dangerous robots, stationed for centuries guarding an ancient tech center.

- **Minor Factions** – In addition to major factions, there are a vast array of minor factions each trying to find safety and make a life in the hostile world of *Kenshi*. Bandits like the Dust and Starving Bandits roam the world extorting food and currency from isolated travelers, rogue ninja clans like the Shinobi Thieves and Black Dragon Ninjas pick off stray members of major factions, and radicalized splinter factions like the United Heroes League take the justice of their parent faction into their own hands. Each faction of *Kenshi* has a story, from the silly Crab Raiders who base their entire society around the massive crabs native to the southeast to the Skeleton-comprised Skin Bandits' horrifying quest to emulate humanity by fashioning skin suits from humans.

Breakdown

There's a trap that many people fall into when talking about narrative in games. They may look at games with a carefully scripted story and a host of immersive characters like in the 2018 *God of War*; or perhaps a game where the story itself reacts to your decisions similar to a choose-your-own-adventure book, affording great agency to the player, much like Telltale Games' *The Wolf Among Us*. These games are almost exclusively limited to the role-playing genre and tend to have varying degrees of constrained gameplay experienced from either a single character's perspective or a select few. These games are colloquially referred to as "Narrative Games".

Kenshi isn't a narrative game. In fact, *Kenshi* combines some of the farthest genres from traditional narrative games as you get, including real-time strategy and sandbox. Your character isn't the chosen one – they're made of flesh and sinew just like everyone else – and starvation is just as likely an end as being murdered by roaming bandits.

Does that mean that it doesn't have a narrative? No, far from it.

Kenshi opens with a screen that allows you to choose your starting state, offering a wide breadth of options, from as humble as being a lone wanderer with a small nest egg of Catan Credits (*Kenshi*'s currency, colloquially referred to as "cats") all the way to being a one-armed escaped slave deep in the barren wastes with a bounty on their head. After creating your initial player character, the game doesn't open with a cutscene and necessary exposition to set the world up or a safe tutorial area to learn the mechanics. No, *Kenshi* just dumps you straight into gameplay – you don't know what you're doing, you're clumsy at working the controls, and you're probably going to die.

Death is an important and intentional^[1] part of *Kenshi*'s experience. The world in *Kenshi* is harsh and unforgiving – rather than opting to show this to the player through a cutscene or expository dialogue, the game has the player experience it firsthand by starving to death or being killed outright.

Starvation and death are closely tied in more ways than one. Throughout their time in *Kenshi*, the player will continually be harassed by groups of bandits demanding food or money – the most common of which being from the Starving Bandits faction. These bandits will fight to the death if the player doesn't hand something over, either knocking the player unconscious so they can take what they need from their backpack or dying themselves – a fate that was waiting for them anyways.

Bandits are far from the only ones looking to eat in the desolate world of *Kenshi*. Bonedogs, Gorillos, Skin Spiders, and the dreaded Beak-Things are a few of the creatures that are just as fine with eating each other as they are eating the player. Even herbivores such as the hulking Garru or bone-plated goats can kill a starving attacker with relative ease.

This leaves us with two motivations implicit to every living thing in *Kenshi* – food and security – but civilized peoples have one more thing to worry about: freedom. When anything can and will kill you, survival comes at any cost and empathy runs low. Slaver camps set up across the world will capture stray wanderers and sell them into indentured servitude for meager amounts of currency and food. Slaves tend to be in no rush to escape either – at least they have food and a place to stay when in the forced service of others. When freed by anti-slavers, slaves will sometimes climb back into their cages and call for the guards in hopes that they will be rewarded. Freedom comes second to survival for some, yet for others it is the reason for living.

Self-reliance is conventionally desirable, at least in Western society, but *Kenshi* – through systemic interaction alone – explores the cost of freedom under a more critical lens. When someone is free in *Kenshi*, it means that they can do whatever they want, but, in exchange, they have to provide for themselves. This is extremely difficult in such a hostile world where even a single stray Beak-Thing can spell the end for your entire faction.

Being a part of a larger faction, on the other hand, offers security and varying degrees of freedom. The player can buy a house in one of the major factions' outposts and enjoy the privilege of protection from the outside world, at the cost of having to follow local ordinances and cultural expectations. Take the United Cities, for example, where citizens enjoy a reasonably good life built upon the backs of slaves. If one falls down on their luck or runs short on money for any reason, they are liable to be arrested and put into slavery themselves.

What the player makes of these cultural norms is up to each individual. The player is afforded great agency in how they decide to affect the world – possibility is as large as the world itself. Every step of the player's journey is a decision, and these decisions – combined with an unforgiving environment rife with conflict – create player stories.

Say the player decides to begin as a slave to survive the early game and be able to level up in a safe environment. Naturally, the player won't want to stay a slave for long, and the player is forced with a choice – sacrifice their freedom for security and food or fight for their freedom by escaping and face the dangers of prosecution and the outside world. This decision alone sparks quite a story, especially once the other systems of the game get involved. See, NPC guards don't like their slaves escaping and will openly attack any escapees with great prejudice to inspire fear and obedience in the other slaves.

Now the player's story is a matter of *how* they escape – do they knock out a guard by training their stealth and assassination and sneak out in disguise, or do they make a run for it in the dark of night when the mounted crossbows have a higher chance of missing them? Does their plan go off without a hitch or do they now need to find a robotic replacement for their lost arm?

The game doesn't end once the player reaches a point where they can consistently get food, be safe, and exercise freedom – in fact, once the player can begin making decisions aside from the most primal instincts is when *Kenshi*'s narrative begins to blossom.

One of the most integral parts of *Kenshi* and its most idealized mechanic is its building. The player, with sufficient resources, may erect constructions of various forms and function nearly anywhere in the game world, allowing the player to claim a bit of *Kenshi*'s world for themselves. If the player wants anything more than the most basic building shells, however, they're going to need to conduct research.

Research is done by using books at a research bench and represents the player poring over the knowledge contained within to learn how to create different things. There will come a time, however, when the player is unable to progress any further on secondhand information and needs to go to the source themselves. These ruins of the Old World are sparse and derelict, often crumbling apart from the passage of time. Contained within is a vast treasure trove of knowledge and tech, however, there is a reason that this information has laid in peace for so long.

Protecting laboratories and factories are mechanical guardians, brutally efficient, and still in functioning order. It takes quite a significant group of warriors to be able to battle through the guardians. If the player does manage to get through, however, ancient science books, engineering blueprints, and valuable tech abound. This promise of treasure and progress provides a significant lure for players to put themselves in dangerous situations, leading to more player stories.

Building is far from the only goal a player may decide to pursue. Even if a player decides to pursue building above all else, it's almost impossible for the player to not have to deal with combat at some point or another.

Combat in *Kenshi* is rough and gritty. Combatants can be eaten alive, bleed out, and lose appendages – sometimes all three, like as is often the case when fighting the dreaded Beak-Things. Unbandaged wounds will continue to fester, potentially knocking characters into a pain-induced coma that, if left untreated, will most certainly spell their demise.

The player isn't the only one affected by the brutality of combat, however. Enemies will shriek in pain, curse the player, or just start sobbing uncontrollably at the loss of a limb. Surviving characters will mourn the loss of their friends and enact vengeance on the player by attacking them on sight the next time they see them or seek out justice in the form of arranging a raid on the player's outpost.

With each combat encounter carrying the possibility of death or vengeance, the player has to choose their fights carefully. Bandits will throw themselves into combat with reckless abandon, having little to nothing to lose, so paying off extortion attempts is a very real consideration. Player-motivated combat also has a high risk of serious injury or death – witnessing injustice or wanting to seek vengeance against bandits is often something the player just has to endure until they're adequately powerful, at which point they can consider fighting back.

All fighting in *Kenshi* isn't just for survival or the realization of ideals – such is the case with bounties. There are two types of bounties: accumulated and named. Accumulated bounties happen whenever a character commits an act against local ordinance and can occur from any character. Named bounties, on the other hand, are put out by factions and feature a rough description of the suspect, their crimes, and the promise of a large payout.

Players familiar with traditional role-playing games will recognize named bounties as quests and start training up for them. If the player explores enough of the world and speaks with enough NPCs, however, they'll notice there's a significant political agenda behind almost every bounty, accumulated or named.

Slavery, for example, is commonplace in most of the world and completely acceptable. Freeing slaves or fighting for slaves' freedom is considered terrorism in the Holy Nation and United Cities and can accumulate a pretty sizable bounty rather quickly – but rarely will the player's own bounties exceed those of Tinfist, the leader of the Anti-Slavers, who is wanted dead or alive for 100,000 cats.

This simple interaction tells a lot about the game world: the Holy Nation and United Cities have *very* deep pockets, the anti-slavers are a significant enough threat that the slaving societies can't just deal with them, and that Tinfist has been at this for a long time, meeting great success in his efforts.

Now, while some bounties are as simple as handing over a body to the authorities and receiving a bag of cats in exchange, most carry consequences for the game world that scale closely with how difficult it is to achieve them. Turning in a rebel leader, like leaders of splinter Shek factions, lead to camps being abandoned and occasionally replaced with small settlements by the faction you bring them in to. Capturing leaders of world-power factions, on the other hand, can have serious ramifications for the game world.

Say the player decides to pursue The Phoenix, the leader of the Holy Nation. It's going to be one hell of a fight to capture him, but if the player manages to do so and turns him in to the Shek Kingdom, Holy Nation cities will begin to fall to the Shek uprising, being destroyed and reoccupied in the process – in fact, it's not uncommon for a reclaimed town to have half of its buildings in ruins and the population be a quarter of what it was before.

Like its combat system, politics in *Kenshi* are rough, never yielding a truly optimal outcome. Even though the player might've brought about the end of The Phoenix' rule, Holy Nation uprisings of the few surviving Holy Nationalists will be spurred on by seeing their leader martyred, and those who didn't survive will be almost innumerable: lives of Holy Nationalists, Shek denizens, and likely many members of the player's own faction were the price to pay for ending The Phoenix's corrupt rule.

Strongest Element

Kenshi has intentionally committed to making an uncompromising, tough-as-nails experience. This experience is the cornerstone of its largest themes: the price of freedom, the cost of war, and how things that improve the world take so much more time and effort than those that contribute to its downfall. The player has the opportunity to take a different stance on each of these themes each time they play the game, such as testing

how compliance with a corrupt system can be easy but only makes life more difficult for everyone around you or experimenting with creating a haven from oppression versus destroying oppressive forces. Through every gameplay session, the player has an opportunity to experience the cost and difficulty of each decision they make and decide for themselves if it was worth it.

Unsuccessful Element

Kenshi uses factions to tell its stories, however one major faction feels like it just doesn't belong in the world: the Shek Kingdom. All of the factions in *Kenshi* represent a different reaction to a hostile world and the Shek Kingdom is no different, representing the unsustainability of constant war. However, the methods by which this is accomplished are problematic for several reasons. The Shek Kingdom falls into the trope of being a Planet of Hats, where every character that comprises it is either a warrior or a disgraced warrior. There are few Shek that question this belief or mourn the fall of their once-great empire, instead opting to cling to the culture of war that defined their society hundreds of years ago.

While the Holy Nation and United Cities offer a critical observation of blind religious zeal and the corruptions of capitalism respectively, the Shek Kingdom's observation of war – being that war is unsustainable – falls short by comparison and makes the Shek Kingdom feel that much shallower,

Highlight

After months of training, sieging outposts, and reclaiming land from the Holy Nation in the name of the Anti-Slavers, my player character, Colossus, turned his sights to the fortified outpost of The Phoenix. Colossus led wave after wave of sieges against the stronghold, striking without warning in the dead of night and claiming the lives of The Phoenix's personal guard. Those who were not killed in battle outright would recover between attacks, just as Colossus did, but still their numbers dwindled with every passing day.

Finally, the fated day came as Colossus cut a path to The Phoenix's chambers and faced off against him in single combat, for every guard that could protect The Phoenix was dead or lie bleeding out in the street. The sound of steel ringing off steel echoed through the bloodstained streets as Colossus and The Phoenix crossed blades over and over again. The vast majority of attacks were blocked by the other with their blades only landing glancing blows until finally Colossus struck a decisive blow and The Phoenix succumbed to his wounds. Hastily, before he too blacked out from blood loss, Colossus applied bandages to staunch the flow of blood from his wounds. After doing the same to The Phoenix and disarming him completely, Colossus laid down for just a moment to recover his strength before making the trek back to Admag with The Phoenix to put him on trial.

Critical Reception

Robert Zak of PC Gamer – 84/100

Zak begins his positive review by teasing *Kenshi*'s player story potential, stating "I've been a shopkeeper and a thief, a lone wanderer, and a slave, and I've been an entire community of people working together to—one day—erect our own city in the wasteland. One day." He emphasizes *Kenshi*'s dynamic systems and open-ended gameplay, stating "There are a few missions you can pick up by talking to people, but the best stories are those that emerge organically out of *Kenshi*'s systems." He goes on to talk about a few such systems and their effects on gameplay, mentioning "There are so many little layers here that the narrative possibilities feel endless." Zak concludes his review by saying "*Kenshi* is huge, amoral, and opaque enough that I'll be deciphering it for a very long time."^[2]

Alec Meer of Rock Paper Shotgun – Recommended

Meer opens his awestruck review by trying to convey the sheer scope of the systemic interactions present in the game, stating "I could, I suspect, dash myself against *Kenshi*'s wind-bleached rocks for a full year and still feel ill-qualified to pass judgement upon it." He goes on to state, about the game's premise, that "[*Kenshi*] offer[s] you a whole world, and shrug[s] at any attempt to divine purpose from it. That's up to you." Meer closes out his review with a somewhat melodramatic sentiment, saying, "[*Kenshi* is] a game of everything, a game of nothing. Eternal, unknowable, remarkable, infuriating, *Kenshi* defies easy judgment. *Kenshi is*. I implore you to play it."^[3]

Lessons

1. When creating characters out of groups of people, extra care needs to be taken to avoid stereotypes and the Planet of Hats trope.

A Planet of Hats is created when all people of a society share a single defining characteristic, be it physical or ideological. *Kenshi* both succeeds and fails in this regard, creating both nuanced societies with many different perspectives as well as trope-ridden factions. These more nuanced societies dramatically improve immersion by showing that people aren't defined by their society but can be influenced by it, while stereotypical societies can break immersion at best or completely ruin the experience at worst, especially if the player identifies as something being misrepresented by a stereotype.

2. Player stories are created when systems force the player to react.

Like in traditional storytelling mediums, systems that make the player react ask questions and cause the player to make decisions that define their story. Unlike traditional storytelling mediums, however, what the player ends up choosing isn't dictated by an author. *Kenshi* uses this player agency – hand-in-hand with its high difficulty – to allow the player to fully explore the problem space for themselves, seeing firsthand how their decisions play out in the context of the story and their own role-playing experience.

3. Use negative space to reinforce your game's narrative.

Kenshi includes a myriad of features, cross-pollinating systems, and lore infusions, however, some of the key points of its narrative are told by what the game *doesn't* have – most notably its lack of tutorial. Tutorials are a feature so universal and fundamental to games, however, *Kenshi* intentionally opted out of creating one, risking losing a significant amount of players to reinforce its core theme of making your own way in an apathetic world.

Summation

Despite *Kenshi*'s almost lack of explicit story elements, fans have been enjoying sharing tales about the game for years and likely will for years to come. Each of these stories is dear to the player that recounts it, not because it had optimal cinematic impact or because it was a gripping experience from start to finish, but because it's theirs, and nobody's experienced anything like it.

References

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