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A look at the progress of a long-awaited title in the *Mount and Blade* series and the promise of what is yet to come.





THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW STANDARD IN GAMING

[Bannerlord](#) is the long-awaited prequel in the Taleworlds series *Mount and Blade*. Released for Windows in 2020, it beautifully innovates and expands on the iconic gameplay elements of [Mount and Blade: Warband](#) that sustained its [fans](#) for a decade before its release. In *Bannerlord*, the player recruits and commands feudal armies in their struggle to conquer a table-top style map with unique castles, cities, and villages. The conquest is carried out through immersive field battles and sieges. There are many detailed factions, each with their own unique unit types, culture, and city architecture.



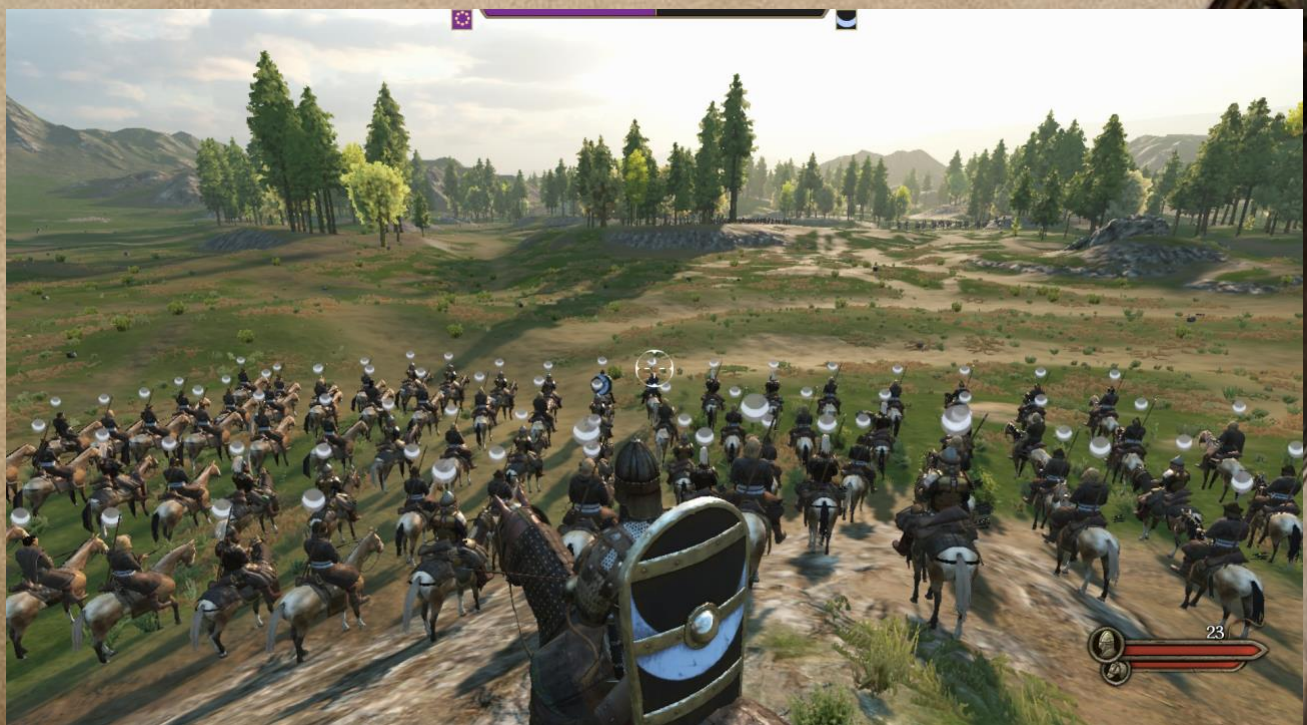
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Bannerlord is set in an era of the political chaos, the age of the Dragon Banner, centuries before the events of *Warband*. Bloodthirsty nations seek a lost banner of legend that bestows legitimacy and power unheard of in the land of Calradia since the collapse of the last great empire. With a piece of this legend in tow, the player can either pledge to an existing nation or carve out their own.

SINGLEPLAYER GAMEPLAY

While a sandbox game at heart, Taleworlds has developed the role-playing aspects of the series with their addition of quests and a storyline. Although the nature of the series rebuffs attempts to add too deep of a story, *Bannerlord* has given players a new way to frame their gameplay. The tabletop view of the sprawling cities, castles, and villages, when combined with roaming armies and peasants, give the map a life of its own.

Calradia is a complex ecosystem of wealth, war, and political intrigue. The items that villagers take to other markets are location specific. The local economies are so intertwined with the travel of villagers that any interruption can have unfortunate, long-term consequences. The roving armies waylay peasants; and so, because they have nothing to sell, peasants must return empty handed to their villages. Those villages can wither from riches to rags, which in turn saps the ability of their rulers to be financially prepared for war. For every burned village the butterfly effect ripples out so that there is less food to feed the cities, fewer recruits for warbands, and resentment that builds towards the nobles not riding to the defense of their subjects.



Joining the scramble, players are able to compete and interact with the hundreds of named NPCs, in addition to the nameless masses that populate the world. First-person combat with unit commands and formations take the player into the heat of battle as a real leader of men. Whether they choose to lead from the rear as a general or fight in the shield wall, battles are a life and death struggle with immediate consequences. Assuming victory was won, the player can then travel to cities to sell their loot. They can also choose to barter for smithing supplies, army equipment, or mercenary troops. The game offers a wide selection of items and investments that the player can sink their coin into.

Battles and sieges can be fought in every field and castle from one side of the map to the other. In *Bannerlord*, peace is merely the preparation phase for the next war; wanted or not, as many lords are constantly looking for easy targets.



Hundreds of units, on both sides, meet to battle on randomly generated battlefields. There is such a unique range of geography and architecture that one region can be easily identified from another just based on the features of the maps. Although the game goes more in-depth, the basic unit types are cavalry, infantry, and ranged. As a battle begins, the troops are divided into squads based on their unit type and numbers. These squads are individually led, which allows for some intense tactical maneuvering in more drawn out battles.

The cities and castles have to be individually sieged. A range of siege equipment has been introduced to the series. These machines add an air of efficient conquest to what before, in *Warband*, was a rudimentary system. To set the scene, hundreds of warriors have assembled in tight formation as they await weak points to emerge in the enemy's fortifications. A band of men rush the gates with a battering ram, runners deploy their ladders against the wall, and the men crowded in the belly of slow rolling siege towers blindly wait for the boarding bridge to drop.

Catapults, trebuchets, and ballista rain down on the defenders as they desperately fire back with arrows and machines of their own. Homes and shops are boarded up, helpless if the defenders should fail. From here, the siege is a winner-take-all engagement that could end with the attackers breaking against the wall or decorating the castle keep in the banners of the new ruling lord. Every new fortification grows the capabilities of the nation's war machine.



This overhaul to the game's mechanics has not come without their flaws. The optimization was initially very poor. Even now, there are many bugs, glitches and crashes that bring the conquest of Calradia to a frustrating halt. There are balancing issues with the faction strength, as well as issues with the map AI itself. These flaws are being patched as quickly as the development team can work through them; and being early access, the game was not going to be perfect. One of the driving motivations of being an early access release is that the game gets more intensive player testing to find what needs to be fixed.

SINGLEPLAYER GAMEPLAY

With their *Mount and Blade* series, Taleworlds provides more than an engaging singleplayer sandbox. *Bannerlord* is most comparable to the 2012 Torn-Banner-Studio release of *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* in its multiplayer gameplay. *Warband's* multiplayer lobbies were community hosted; however, *Bannerlord* has implemented a matchmaking system that operates alongside a handful of official Taleworlds servers.

There are matches with game modes ranging from field battles and sieges to teams commanding their personal retinue of bots around the map as they struggle for control of strategic points. The singleplayer troop trees are whittled down so that one of each unit type -archer, foot soldier, cavalry, etc.- from each faction can compete on an even, but diverse playing field. The arenas for these matches are, by default, edited versions of castles and cities from the campaign.





Bannerlord's initial release was somewhat mistimed to take full advantage of the series' most enticing elements. The *Mount and Blade* series is deeply rooted in an interconnected community with control over their own servers, so for *Bannerlord* to release without a functional multiplayer system was a mistake. The loyal following that kept *Mount and Blade: Warband* alive and active for a decade were mainly playing on privately hosted, modded servers. Players formed permanent teams, referred to as clans or regiments, that were able to form their own identities and cultures as the years passed. A culture of camaraderie and buffoonery is the foundation of these groups. They communicate by using platforms such as TeamSpeak and Discord. The modding community poured time and effort into creating maps for their custom servers. These custom maps also include custom game features that give each server an entirely unique feel. Besides grand and entertaining maps aside, the mods available are able change the game entirely. There are total conversion mods that add fan favorites such as StarWars, the Anglo-Zulu wars, and Lord of the Rings.



GOALS OF THE DEV.TEAM

The Taleworlds developers have released some map tools, but the main mod kits have yet to be released. Especially since there are still no privately hosted servers, the chance to establish a strong player base might have slipped away for good, or at least until the next Steam sale.



A BRIGHT FUTURE

For all of the mishaps, missteps, and mistakes made with *Bannerlord*, Taleworlds has delivered a game that can compete with AAA titles enough to briefly chart as one of the most played games on all of Steam. The singleplayer campaign, flaws included, made every day of the decade worth the wait. Developers are releasing steady patches and updates, so all of the problems that are currently plaguing the game will be taken care of as soon as possible. For those who played *Warband* the future is clear. Whenever Taleworlds feels confident enough to allow private servers to get up and running this new installment will be good enough to last another decade.