**REVERSE ENGINEERING: Gears of War – Final Boss Battle**

**Introduction**: Epic Games’s “Gears of War” launched in 2006 exclusively for the Xbox 360 and later had a PC version release. Gears of War remains one of the top selling Xbox 360 games of all time and has spurred three sequels to date. The sequels have not fared as well overall, although Epic Games has the strength of their reputation as industry leaders bolstered by the success of their game engines (ie. Unreal). Gears of War is textually rich at both the narratological and ludological level, introducing game mechanic innovations such as “wall-bouncing” and “active-reload” as well as featuring a compelling and exciting story about the decimation of a human race by the hands of clandestine monsters with an age-old grudge to bear.

The final boss battle in Gears of War encapsulates the narratological and ludological qualities of the game on the whole and it will become the subject of my analysis.

**Narrative Context**: Gears of War is split into five Acts, with the finale being set on a speeding train that carries the light-mass bomb – humanity’s last hope for stopping the Locust enemy horde. Although the game involves having multiple teammate characters (Damon Baird, Anthony Carmine, Augustus Cole, Minh Young Kim), the fifth act only brings Dominic Santiago along for the ride. This is a self-reflexive technique that keeps the player tightly integrated into the world of the game. Dom is the first character that we meet apart from the playable Marcus Fenix and the first act focuses on the Marcus-Dom relationship. This relationship is punctuated for the player when Dom is the only ally for the final act and then boss battle against the locust horde general, Raam.

The final battle comes after traveling the length of the freight train and having battled dozens of locust troops along the way. Keeping the perspective tight (ie not an open map world), the narrative and gameplay converge just before the final battle – attacks will have to be focused to defeat Raam as real estate is fleeting.

**Ludic Context**: Gears of War introduced many innovative gameplay features through unique mechanics. Cut-scenes in the game tended toward showcasing these mechanics, thus encouraging the player to utilize the features. The key mechanic innovations were wall-bounce, taking-cover, blind-fire and active-reload. The third-person perspective of Gears of War produces smooth mechanics and allows the player to remain properly oriented to the game world, even under duress.

Wall-bouncing allows the player to get to cover quickly, ducking under bullets as the character’s body reaches cover in one smooth motion. Another feature of wall-bounce is that the player can quickly pivot the character between two walls in order to dodge shots while maintaining targeting on enemies. Taking-cover was quite innovative for 2006 when Gears of War released and involves using walls for cover from gunfire. From cover the player can make the character blind-fire where the reticule will allow for weapon aiming without putting the character at risk of taking damage from enemy bullets. Finally, active-reload introduced a method for dramatically increasing the damage that player bullets deal. A scale – much like those in golf games – would appear when reloading and if the scale was engaged within a certain area of its range, then the gun clip would have active-reload bullets added to it.

The final battle against Raam requires utilization of all these featured mechanics in order to defeat the awesomely tough boss.

**Preparation for Battle**: In Act Five, the player takes control of Marcus once more and moves up the freight train with the assistance of Dom. Just before reaching the front car of the train, the player has an opportunity to swap out weapons and reload ammunition. If there are failed attempts to defeat Raam, then the reload point is in this area with weapons and ammo. Gears of War intelligently places ammo and weapon drops at checkpoints allowing the player to adapt to situations in the game. This is one of the ways that the game can be very challenging without becoming unnecessarily frustrating. When the player is ready, they enter through one of two doors. A cut-scene begins that presents General Raam spotting the heroes, Marcus and Dom. A friendly helicopter with teammates swoops by in an attempt to provide cover fire. Raam has a shield made from a murder of Kryll (Locust raven birds) that protects him from the helicopter’s spotlight. Raam turns his full attention to the pair of heroes and begins stalking them. The cut-scene also puts Marcus and Dom into cover and the sweeping pan of the final map reveals possible areas to move and take cover. Cut-scenes throughout Gears of War reveal elements of the maps that orient the player and allow them to navigate their environment fluidly.

**The Battle**: When the cut-scene ends, Raam is heading toward the player. There are multiple ways to beat Raam, however, the innovative mechanics are necessary to survive. The map is extremely narrow, being just one laneway that constitutes the train car. Behind select walls, there are lights shining that will keep the Kryll from instantly killing the player. Raam wields a massive troika gun. Raam cannot be hurt when he has the Kryll flying around him, however on intervals he sends the Kryll out to attack the player and the Kryll also disperse when hit with explosive damage from grenades or torque bow darts. The environment is kept tightly wound and the player does not have many options for navigating the map. This makes the boss level challenging in its own right.

The player will most likely want to use a ranged weapon, such as the torque bow or the longshot sniper rifle, however, they can also use the standard lancer rifle. It is essential to stay in cover and use blind-fire behind that cover. When coming out of cover, it is necessary to wall-bounce and roadie run. When the Kryll leave Raam, there is a fleeting opportunity to shoot him in the face. It is a major advantage to have active rounds for the longshot or torque bow. Heads shots on Raam are key.

The use of the unique mechanics in this boss battle should have been honed throughout the game. The unique mechanics are best used in conjunction – take cover to protect, blind fire to distract, active rounds to deal damage and wall bounce to evade and reposition. Gears of War is a game that focuses on close-quarters duelling and executing smoothness with multiple components of the game mechanics is critical for success. Raam, in effect, is a prelude for online play as he approaches the player with greater intent than virtually any other enemy character in the game.

After accomplishing the sequence of cover-distract-damage-evade several times, eventually Raam will fall leading to the final cut-scene for the game. Raam is no pushover and like most of the Gears of War games, there are glitches and exploits put in for “noobs” and “scrubs” that cannot meet the challenge on the strength of their gaming skill and execution alone.

**Mechanics**: Some of the unique mechanics have been mentioned, but it is also important to realize that for each mechanic feature in Gears of War, there is a time and place for its utilization. In the final battle against Raam, taking cover is possible at different locations on the map. However, there are no large walls where the player can take cover standing up. Through the map design and use of mechanics, Raam is made more ominous – he is always bearing down on the player. While in cover, there are other wall segments where the player can quickly rotate between them without having to stand up and expose the bulk of the character’s body.

Blind firing is more-or-less ineffective against Raam provided that the Kryll surround him. It is necessary to create explosive damage around him to shed this living shield. Gears of War provides the player with the ability to blind fire guns, but also to blind fire thrown grenades. This is critical when the player is in a tight spot, especially in the boss battle against Raam.

Active rounds do not require much skill to attain when reloading gun clips, however, the pointer in the scale that swings up and down for reloads must be stopped in a narrow range in order to activate the extra damage rounds. The pointer swings up and down in a rhythmic manner that is sometimes at odds with the pace of action on the screen. This effect brings a greater challenge for gaining active rounds. In fact, the unique mechanic is so nuanced in its operation that it is when the player is under pressure that they are most likely to falter on their “actives”. In Gears of War sequels the range for actives and the rhythm of the pointer sliding was tailored to specific weapons, making certain weapons more suitable for elite players.

The wall-bounce mechanic can be used in a loose or controlled way depending on the level of skill of the player and whether they are more intent on evasion or engagement. In the final boss battle with Raam, when Raam has closed in on the player, it is necessary to relocate. Wall-bouncing can be an effective way to dodge bullets, however, the placement of walls and boxes on the map make it very challenging to set up pivot points for wall-bouncing. Many Gears of War players rely on wall-bouncing in combination with lag to avoid taking damage in online gameplay. For the battle against Raam, the effectiveness of the wall-bounce is minimized and this is appropriate for a boss battle, in this reviewer’s opinion.

**Visuals**: One of the major selling points for Gears of War is its intricate and lush environments that meld Gothic, Roman and Constructivist architecture into a pastiche aesthetic that not only defines the era of the gameworld as being a timeless one, but also allows different generations and cultures in our society to identify with that gameworld. The visuals are thoughtful and ‘geared’ toward character identification as well as becoming focused on the utilitarian value of the game’s mechanics. That is to say, the visuals of Gears of War provoke a sense of “ruin-from-glory” that defines how the player comes to understand the personalities of the characters, while the dynamic between ruin and glory sets up a gaming experience that provokes focus and execution. The world of the game is about winning and losing, which is the epitome of apt for a shooter game itself. The visuals tie together the themes and mechanics. Aesthetics, story, mechanics and technology have significant convergence and intricate moments of intersection. The boss battle minimalizes the architectural features common to the game, however, lighting effects are maximized to compensate creating marked high contrast – a sense of light vs dark. In fact, Marcus must stay in the light or else he is instantly pecked to smithereens by the murder of Kryll.

**Conclusion**: Gears of War implements numerous unique features in its game mechanics while an ‘epic’ storyline progresses – now having been extended into two sequels and a prequel. The visuals of Gears of War tie together the mechanics and ludic aspects with the story and narrative aspects. The Gears aesthetic becomes a rich subtext for the game franchise itself. The final boss battle against Raam in Gears of War suspends the aesthetic and allows the player to have a focused experience engaging more purely with the narrative and ludic aspects of the game. This battle is akin to removing the face of a person and simply examining the two hemispheres of their brain. It is a raw experience and a raw battle. To defeat Raam, the player should have emotional investment in the story while understanding how to implement features of the game’s mechanics into smooth sequences of action and execution.

One might get the sense that the developers at Epic Games were interested in producing a game experience where playing the game allows insight into the meaning of a game. These profound ontological and epistemological impulses in the production of meaning have made playing Gears of War an unparalleled experience in gaming for myself. I have never encountered such a raw and yet rich gaming experience. It is likely the Epic Games’s connection to game engine development that has brought about this quality in Gears of War – a quality defined as one which invokes the very architecture of games when you play.

The final boss battle against Raam in Gears of War splays out this architecture, heightening the quality so very aptly for the climax of an event. Gears of War is truly epic as a game experience and it is exciting to know that the game has recently been remastered for the next generation of game consoles.