**Caveat Aedifex – Artistic Pastiche in the Gears of War Franchise**

Epic Games launched their Unreal Engine 4 in March of 2014 making it available to the public for licensing. The fourth generation of their game engine seeks to replicate the success of previous generations and extend its use throughout the industry. As game developers, Epic Games boasts of several titles for multiple platforms, however the Gears of War franchise is undoubtedly their prime asset. 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. The sequels have not fared as well overall. Although Gears of War 3 had successful sales numbers, it eventually disappointed the gaming community for having not fixed many of the bugs that Epic had promised would be fixed after controversy with Gears of War 2. The critics were not as optimistic as the community had been and the Gears games have progressively received lower ratings from Metacritic and GameRankings as each sequel has been released. Gears of War Judgment was released in 2013 and critics were quick to match the reaction of the fans of the Gears series – Epic Games had laid an egg.

It would seem that the waning popularity of the Gears of War games can largely be attributed to ‘buggy’ code, the subsequent proliferation of glitches in online gameplay and a shift to mechanics that bastardized the origins of the series in favour of pandering to and mimicking other game franchises such as Halo. These are all aired out as reasons for loathing the trajectory of the series by the fans in their online communities and ‘gearspedia’ forums. However, I would suggest an intervention – namely, the Gears of War art pipeline can be understood as representing the whole of the issue. The development of art for the Gears of War franchise has developed through an interest in hybridization, but Epic Games denying the art team a biblical text as resource eventually led to pastiche effectively diluting the originality of the Gears of War aesthetics, style and brand. The lack of an Art Bible allowed veteran team members to retain visionary control while new art team members had the freedom to bring something brand new to the Gears aesthetic. Unfortunately, the lack of structure and rampant borrowing of source material and reference began to confuse fans as each sequel morphed further into something brand new – and this left the games open to be interpreted as trying to imitate other game franchises and to fans understanding the Gears style as not unique and new but instead as a messy pastiche.

In Tom Bissell’s article, “The Art and Design of Gears of War”, it is explained that the first step in the art pipeline was to develop concept art for the enemy characters. Originally, the enemies were called “Geists” and were designed as wraith-like, pale humanoids – perhaps the souls of fallen soldiers from a planet bent on global war [Insert 1: Geist]. The interest of these ghostly villains was to abduct Seran children. The art director, Chris Perna, designed the first geists, but something critical was felt to be missing. The creator of Gears of War - Epic Games’s Cliff Bleszinski - gave the art team their primary direction for character design: a blending of Resident Evil 4 and Unreal Tournament. Perhaps, the geists seemed too much like a hackneyed portrayal of infected zombies type characters. The art department went back to the drawing board and concocted a new threat – the Locusts [Insert 2: Locust]. The Locusts were still emerging from the underground, however, they were no longer inspired by the idea of the restless human soul, but instead were inspired by something often parasitic and threatening to the human body – insects. The Locusts had a very unique feel and the original concepts blended a variety of bugs (slugs, grasshoppers, spiders) with humanoid forms to create unique classes of Locust enemies.

Once the enemy class had been sketched out, the art team turned toward the heroes – the COG soldiers. Again, Bleszinski wanted something that blended Resident Evil with Epic’s other game franchise, Unreal Tournament. He also wanted the designs to emphasize an element of the narrative: the COG soldiers were a “band of brothers” and the designs should emphasize this camaraderie. The art team drew up concepts for Marcus and the other COG. Their armour was an amalgam of ancient styles (Samurai, Crusader) with modern warriors (SWAT, urban mercenary). Again, the goal was to poach styles from history and other games and then blend them into a hybrid. The primary character and protagonist of the story, Marcus Fenix, was not coming together as anticipated. He appeared generic until an artist on the Gears team, Jay Hawkins, did another pass. Marcus was made to look rough, scarred and pockmarked [Insert 3: Marcus]. It was then believed that he was unique and the team moved on with the rest of the set of characters. The way that Epic made the characters ‘feel’ like a band of brothers in battle was to desaturate the color palette for the environments and have blue highlights popping in areas of the COG soldier’s armour plating. Many of the environments in the first Gears of War are set at nighttime and the neon blues register well making teammates beacons in the dark to follow [Insert 4: Blue Armour].

Luke Plunkett in his article, “Destroyed Beauty…” moves onto the next set of developments in the art pipeline for Gears of War – designing the environment. The art team produced an abundance of “speedpainting” landscape concept art pieces. They did a comprehensive mapping of the overall game area. Once again, the broad strokes architectural style was a hybrid from blending recognized architectural styles from Western history [Insert 5: Architecture]. Many of the buildings had rising Doric, Ionic and Corinthian pillars and pilasters. The areas around the building had huge open courtyards reminiscent of Ancient Greece and Rome. Ornate detail was subdued because of the limits of the engine at the time. In fact, texture popping was a big problem for Gears of War games, making it difficult to rack focus onto detail for the architectural design. Materially, the buildings were cold and hard recalling utilitarian architectural design from Futurist and Constructivist movements. Facades had a symmetry and emphasis on rectilinear principles of geometry recalling the Art Deco movement of the early 20th century. Many of the buildings had ornate substructures such as flying buttresses recalling Gothic architecture. The Gears architecture is undoubtedly a rich tapestry of style which works through many major movements in Western history. In fact, each architectural style has a close relationship to the culture of the Seran people from the narrative of Gears of War marking the architecture as a rich subtext for the Gears universe. Sera is a planet of humans interested in war and conquest much like Ancient Rome, who worship their military heroes much like European aspirations to appease saints through Gothic architecture, and Serans are a race that believes strongly in technological advancement, much like that which inspired Art Deco. Through the first game, this hybrid architecture worked – it was new and fresh. Plunkett objects to the Gears of War art team dubbing the style “destroyed beauty” because he misunderstands the meaning of the term. Plunkett believes that the term refers to a reveling in having taken beauty and destroyed it through decay and ruin, but what the term actually means is that the style is the beauty of detritus and ruin.

By the end of the first Gears of War game, the art team had developed an aesthetic for the enemies, heroes and architecture that had many inspirations and efficiently blended them into a unique, hybrid style. Pastiche is about imitation, eclecticism and intertextuality, however, it is also often thought of as ‘soupy’ and ornate – it draws attention to itself. The Gears of War’s art style was hybrid, but it was also unique and new. As sequels were produced the lack of an Art Bible led to layering more and more new reference on top of what was already there. The clash of styles led to a pastiche aesthetic and inevitably drew attention to itself in an unwanted way. John Gaudiosi in his prophetic yet ironically titled article, “Everything Old is New Again” traces the development of art style through the Gears of War series. Written during the release of the fourth game, Gears of War Judgment, Gaudiosi notes that the original game in the series was dark and gritty – colors were desaturated and the tone was dark. Each sequel was matched with an upgrade to the Unreal engine. Epic Games took advantage to show off the new capabilities of their engine and used Gears games as their proverbial guinea pig. Gears of War 2 added color and lighting. It was thought that this choice was advantageous for showcasing graphic detail, however, it could be argued that the sombre theme of a post-apocalyptic world was undermined. Gears of War 3 went a step further using the engine’s new global illumination light system which allowed for adding a lot more colour. The art director, Chris Perna, stated that the game had a “lighter, more mid-tone feel”. For the fourth Gears game, they attempted to move back toward the aesthetics of the first game. The game was to be darker in tone and emphasize the original aesthetic of “destroyed beauty”. However, residential areas in the game’s environment had light palettes and Epic didn’t hold back from pushing breakthroughs in lighting and shader advancement. They enhanced the bloom for a dreamy feel which could be suggested as antithetical to the sobering themes of the narrative. It is an odd juxtaposition to say the least.

For Gears of War Judgment, character design was ‘geared’ toward freshening up the look of the main cast and to use uniform and armour to reveal character demeanor, disposition and personal history. Cole was a new soldier so his uniform was more like that of a civilian, Sophia was an elite guard so her uniform was sleek, black and stealthy, while Paduk’s affiliation with the Spartan UIR made his uniform bulkier [Insert 6: Armour]. There was still no Art Bible for the art department but they did have weekly art meetings. In effect, through emphasizing individual character traits through external markers such as armour, Gears had taken a step away from their original design strategy for showing the COG as a “band of brothers”. Admittedly, Gears of War Judgment is about the last vestiges of the old order of a divided Seran people run by military autocrats. In Gears of War 3, new classes of enemies were designed. The lambent locusts from previous Gears of War games were diversified. They are a volatile class of enemy and explode when they die. There was a good opportunity to use the upgraded lighting and shaders to show off the lambent locusts. However, savage locusts were another class added to the third game and had a primitive, steampunk style (a hybrid unto itself) – brass tones, lots of accessories, loose fitting garments and sections of exposed flesh [Insert 7: Savage]. In short, Gears of War sequels were adding new styles willy-nilly creating a visual ‘cluster-fuck’ aesthetically. The lack of an Art Bible did allow for quick adaptation, but clearly adding disparate styles over top of each other eventually led to pastiche and a confusing aesthetic that had no particular or specific claim to being original. As such, the game franchise became rife with criticism and conjecture about the developer’s intent to bring in fans of other game franchises such as Halo and to in effect alienate their core fan base.

It is clear through the development of the Gears of War franchise that the art department holds the key to making good first impressions with audiences. When the art pipeline has no consistency and no Art Bible to follow, the results of development can become digressive, derivative and pastiche. What was once deemed original and new can soon be claimed as imitative thus alienating the core fan base. Much as the eyes are the window to the soul… visual art on the screen is the eyes into the soul of a game, so the key should be honesty and transparency. Pastiche becomes a device for veiling that window and those eyes. It then becomes easy to misrecognize and misunderstand the game. An art bible ‘religiously’ adhered to during the art pipeline can help remove layers that might be perceived as opaque cataracts that obscure the game’s sense of uniqueness and mask its intention. Without the consistency granted from an Art Bible a game risks moving from inspired hybridization to confusing pastiche. The game could be confused by players as trying to be something that it is not and sequels most certainly run the risk of being wayward from their original inspiration. Game developers would be advised to adhere to the credo, “caveat aedifex” – let the creator beware.

Sources Cited

\*images courtesy of Gearspedia @gearsofwar.wikia.com

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