The game, Gears of War, opens with the title screen. The aesthetic design for the entire franchise emphasizes chiaroscuro lighting and a hybrid of Gothic and Art Deco architectural styles. Remaining at the title screen will eventually lead to a cut-scene introduction that fully splays out the aesthetic tropes. The cut-scene is narrated by Myrrah, the Locust Queen. The cut-scene establishes how the humans of the planet, Sera, have taken warfare and cultural intolerance to the brink of their very extinction. However, instead of being permitted the resolve to learn from their mistakes, they are pitted against an ancient species, The Locust Horde, that resides in the catacombs underneath the geological crust of the planet. The onslaught of the Horde is known as Emergence Day. The humans of Sera reacted to the attack by unleashing devastating satellite weapon strikes against their own cities. The population was decimated. The few survivors struggle to find refuge from the Horde while the COG army fights to destroy the Locusts for good. Through this cut-scene the stakes of Gears of War is established.

The title screen leads to a menu screen which allows the player to choose between Campaign mode, Versus mode, Achievements and Options. Text is provided to explain the purpose of all menu selections. Campaign mode allows for the choice of playing cooperative or single player, both online and offline. There are three levels of difficulty to choose from, however, the most difficult (“insane”) is not accessible until the game has been completed on the middle difficulty (“hardcore”). The game provides text to explain that “hardcore” mode is for players who know how to get headshots. I have decided to play on hardcore mode. The game loads and another cut-scene establishes the current storyline bringing the player up-to-speed and acquainting them with the playable character - Marcus. Marcus Fenix is the protagonist and he is rotting in a jail cell. His platoon partner, Dominic Santiago has sprung him from the cell. We are informed that the general who had jailed Marcus for insubordination has now issued a pardon because the Locust Horde attacks have increased and all experienced soldiers are needed on the frontlines.

Text prompts provide instructions for gameplay and are subtly situated in the top left-hand corner of the HUD at first. The top right-hand corner of the HUD indicates where Dom is located in a general direction. When exiting the cell, Dom stops Marcus and provides him (and the player) the choice to get the rust out with a little training or get ready to fight immediately. In effect, this option is functional as a means for experienced players to skip through a tutorial level. If the player chooses “combat”, they enter one room with enemies prior to reaching the room which will also be along the final leg of the “training” path. I will choose training in order to analyze how the game developer teaches game mechanics to the player. Marcus claims he needs to work out the kinks. They enter the main prison.

The action onscreen is frozen as a text prompt in the center of the screen explains the feature, “point of interest”. The ‘Y’ button is used during the game to focus on key moments in action and story development. This button will also turn Marcus to face whichever of his teammates is speaking in situations where there is no other significant point of interest. For the first point of interest, a King Raven combat helicopter flies overhead and causes glass panes to fall on Marcus’s head from the ceiling above. He takes damage which is displayed by a red gear-cog symbol in the middle of the screen. The redder the gear-cog becomes, the closer the player is to being killed. The player is taught about taking damage and how it is displayed prior to even facing an enemy. This alleviates frustration or confusion for the player. The main prison also has a red gear-cog symbol spray-painted on the wall. At this point, the symbol really stands out in the bleak environment. Underneath the symbol is a collectible cog-tag (Easter egg). After picking up the tag, the screen freezes action once more to explain that the left-bumper button will reveal current objectives. This is a handy way for the player to avoid getting lost. When the screen freezes action to teach a new mechanic or feature, the action does not resume until the player executes the mechanic or feature thus guaranteeing that they register how the game works.

An experienced or curious player will know to melee bash objects with soft or fragile textured appearances, such as couches and tables. Once the couch in this opening area is bashed, it reveals a small ammo case. The game continuously provides an icon prompt over collectibles indicating that the ‘X’ button will add the item to the player’s inventory. The hidden item also provides a clue that collectible cog-tags may also be hidden from within destructible objects. While Marcus follows Dom out of the main prison to a walkway, Dom as an NPC, is physically indicating certain mechanics, such as taking cover and hard aiming. At the door to the walkway, a panel on the far wall has to be shot. The action is not frozen but a text prompt appears to explain to the player that they must aim with the left trigger button to accurately shoot from a distance. Shooting the panel opens the door to the walkway. The next text prompts teaches the player that pressing the ‘A’ button is used to make the character take cover on barriers, such as walls or tables. While in cover, another text prompts teaches the player that they can quickly shift between cover objects using the left joystick. Like the reminder on item pickups, the option to move from one cover to an adjacent cover is always displayed with an icon at the bottom of the screen. This icon literally shows the profile of Marcus on two bits of cover with an arrow between them implying movement and the green ‘A’ button to indicate how to engage the mechanic. Gears of War, is significant in video games for having been the first game to fully exploit the use of cover in a combat shooter.

Pressing ‘A’ and forward on the movement joystick allow the character to mantle jump over cover. The game does not explicitly teach this mechanic but provides places to practice the move. At the end of the walkway, Dom calls for Marcus to take cover. Locust grubs (low-level soldiers) are at the end of a long, open walkway waiting to attack. A firefight ensues. Taking cover and shooting out of cover is necessary as even the weakest Locust shots deal a lot of damage. Head shoots are critical in any firefight and the reticule turn red to indicate that the sights are on-target. There turns out to be a single enemy on the walkway and once defeated the game provides another text prompt for Marcus to learn the “roadie run”. By holding ‘A’ down, the character ducks down and runs. This is the only form of running in the game (walk and stroll are determined through pressure on the left joystick). Although, the roadie run is not taught while freezing action, it is necessary to learn the mechanic as when the roadie run is not engaged then the door at the end of the walkway closes. Marcus must return to the button at the other end of the walkway to open the door once more and this time roadie run to get passed it in time before it closes again.

Up to this point, many of the core mechanics of gameplay and combat are covered, however, there is no focus on weapon types, “wall-bouncing” or “active reloads”. The storyline progresses through dialogue between Marcus and Dom as well as through radio com-link interactions with the pilot of the King Raven and the Headquarters liaison, Anya Stroud. Marcus and Dom have now reached the next prison room that is also the room reached when deciding to avoid tutorial training. There are sets of fragmentation grenades on the ground and Dom provides a verbal cue for the player to pick them up. The verbal cue is reinforced with an online icon indicating a ‘point of interest’ on the frags. The game reinforces a lot of the early lessons in game mechanics by marrying narrative information with gameplay tutorial instructions.

In this main room before getting outside the prison, enemies appears and a text display provides a clue to the player that they have the option to switch weapons using the Directional-pad. There is a good opportunity to use the frag grenade, but the player will have to figure out how they work on their own. There is also the option to use the snub pistol for more accurate headshots than the main rifle. The two new enemies at the beginning of this last interior area are on a level below Marcus and Dom, therefore, the player can take time to get adjusted to aiming and shooting. Once the enemies are disposed of, Marcus and Dom move forward. If Marcus has not been downed yet by enemies or by throwing frags at his feet, then the player will soon learn how downing and death is played out in the game. The door to the outside is broken down by numerous Locust grubs. Taking cover is critical as Dom is instantly downed. Dom is issuing that Marcus take cover the entire time. When a teammate has been downed the icon that is used to locate them with left bumper is now featured in red in the middle of the screen.

The player should help revive their teammate, but has the option to fight the Locusts solo. The downed teammate icon will remain onscreen until Dom is helped up while if the fight goes on too long and the enemies reach Dom, they can kill him leading to a reloading of the checkpoint. The game action freezes to make it clear through a text prompt what the stakes are for leaving Dom injured as well as instructions on how to revive him (‘X’ button when standing over him). I choose to help up Dom because the three Locust grubs are very aggressive and move forward quickly. When they are on top of you they will melee which can be quite devastating. With Dom back in the action, some of the Locust will target him further. The game does not yet teach the useful mechanic (and technique) of shooting from cover. When in cover, the player can avoid damage while also shooting at enemies, however, the reticule is not available, so accurate shooting has to be finessed. Exploring this final interior environment for the opening chapter of the game reveals a large ammo crate, leftover clips from enemy rifles as well as another collectible cog-tag. Dom’s verbal instructions match game objectives, so the player has the choice to use left-bumper or to pay attention to Dom in order to know what to do next.

There are enemies in the courtyard but lots of cover. In fact, there is an opportunity on either side of the map for Marcus to get behind enemy lines. Once these enemies are taken care of, the King Raven comes about. It is planning on landing to pick up Marcus and Dom. No action must be taken by the player other than to get to the far end of the map. A cut-scene begins to end the chapter and begin the next. On the King Raven, Dom and Marcus meet up with Minh and Anthony Carmine. These four become the new “Delta Squad”. Their mission is to locate the missing Alpha Squad. Before beginning the second chapter of the first act in Gears of War, the player has been taught most of the core mechanics of the game, however, some of the more nuanced and useful techniques have yet to be discovered. The game teaches enough for the player to successfully survive and the player is not overwhelmed with instructions. There is a good balance in the tutorial level and the player can feel competent while still realizing that the game will become increasingly challenging.

The beginning of the next chapter reveals Anya and hints at her being a love interest for Marcus. General Hoffman is also in the scene instructing that Delta Squad need to find Alpha Squad who had intelligence data on mapping the Locust catacombs. The humans of Sera have developed a “light-mass” bomb that they hope will wipe out the Locust Horde once and for all. The battle in this cut-scene is dynamic and all of the characters shoot from cover helping to encourage the player to value the cover mechanic. The characters are also using a new rifle – the Lancer rifle which has a chainsaw bayonet. The cut-scene ends and there is a familiar audio chime that indicates that an area has been completely cleared of enemies. This is intuitively learned by the player. As Delta Squad move out, they are confronted by Locust grubs. The game provides a new text to teach the mechanic of active reloading. A slider scale much like the one in most golf video games is displayed horizontally in the upper right-hand corner of the HUD under the graphic display of the equipped weapon. When the player hits right bumper, a dash on the scale is activated moving up and down the scale. If the player hit right bumper again in a small white area on the scale, then the bullets reloaded into the gun clip are said to be active rounds and they deal much more damage than standard rounds. The player could fail to notice the text prompt and thus never learn active reloading. This would make the game much more difficult to beat but not impossible. The game developer’s choice to not freeze action to teach the player about active reloading is an interesting one as the feature is so critical to success in the game. In the ensuing battles, the next point of interest worth noting is for “emergence holes” – holes in the ground where Locusts emerge from to attack. The text prompt teaches the player that the holes can be closed with a well-placed frag grenade.

The game has become more difficult by increasing the number of enemies the player will face, however, the game provides a tactic for controlling that flow. At this point, all of the major player mechanics have been taught to the player and only the finesse movement of wall-bouncing is learned through experience. Alpha Squad is located and Delta Squad has to work through a building to get to them. The city is deserted apart from soldiers from both armies. The game provides all the information through text and dialogue so that the player knows what to do next and how to do it well, however, there is no way to play Gears of War without taking a considerable amount of damage. This situation makes the game exciting but also non-realistic. It is Minh and other NPC that hack doors and use codes indicating that the player must focus purely on combat tactics and weapons mastery.

In some ways it would seem that the game developer, Epic Games, was interested in helping players learn Gears of War without major frustrations. Mechanics and features are parsed into digestible activities and freezing action allows for the player to process the information. However, there are moments where the game level is designed to somewhat mock the noob player. For example, the first good opportunity to shut an emergence hole is met with a crumbling pillar falling into the path of the grenade. Even a well-thrown grenade will not make it to the E-hole nine times out of ten. Also, teammates can be downed and revived, however, the same amount of damage to down a teammate will kill Marcus. Perhaps, the game developer was encouraging the player to not ‘cheese’ explosives or taking cover as a means for clearing areas. It is difficult to know for sure. Some very enjoyable elements of the game are also not taught through text or dialogue instruction, such as using the chainsaw bayonet to cut enemies in half. Perhaps, the game developer felt that only a prone enemy could be used effectively for this lesson and therefore learning the feature would be done through a cheap shot, as it were.

Once Alpha Squad is discovered, Delta Squad moves forward to look for survivors. Heavy weapons, such as Troika turrets are introduced. There are many opportunities to practice reviving teammates, roadie running, active reloading and shooting out of cover. The game punishes exposed players and lazy shooters. There is nothing that objectionable with this mandate as Gears of War is certainly not a game designed for kids – it is extremely graphic, vulgar and bloody. Later, in the in game, more enemy types are introduced that use unique weapons, such as the shotgun (gnasher), bazooka (boom shot) and sniper rifle (longshot). The weapons can be used by the player and more text prompts give information about the weapons and their utility. Gears of War, does not rush the player to learn how to master the game which is fortunate given the high-pace of action and toughness of enemies. Mechanics and features are taught sequentially from the basic to the expert and the narrative as well as user interface is employed to teach the player effectively. Gears of War is not a difficult game to learn, but certainly one of the harder games to master.