

Review: Solid 'Gears Tactics' can't quite find an identity

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Gears Tactics Credit: Gears of War

To prove that tastes moves in cycles, tactical turn-based strategy games have seen a resurgence again. Sparked by the success of "XCOM: Enemy Unknown," more titles have tried to find their niche in the category.

Ubisoft adapted it to perfection in the crossover hit "Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle" and Sega has done well on the console with "Valkyria Chronicles." Now, Microsoft is offering its own take on the genre with "Gears Tactics."

Taking place years before the original "Gears of War," this entry follows Gabe Diaz, the father of current hero Kait Diaz, as he ends up on a mission to eliminate a Locust scientist named Ukkon. While following leads on the Locust leader, Diaz gains allies and ends up leading a squad of heroes, including Sid Redburn and Mikayla Dorn, and procedurally generated squadmates that they recruit into their convoy.

"Gears Tactics" doesn't have any of the base building that games such as "XCOM" has. Instead, it's laser-focused on combat. The heroes and the regulars fall in different roles: Support, Vanguard, Heavy, Sniper and Scout. They each can be leveled up via a skill tree and that allows players to fine-tune builds for certain scenarios.

With Gabe, players can focus the character on healing the squad or boosting teammates with his empower ability. Vanguards such as Sid excel at charging into battle or disrupting enemies using attacks and debuffs. Snipers like Mykala deal damage from afar while Scouts use their stealth ability to get behind enemy lines and flank adversaries. Lastly, Heavies are the best at covering allies as they move across the battlefield with the overwatch ability or they can hold important choke points on a map.

Because players can only use four people in a squad, they have to assess mission parameters and decide the best mix of classes. Some tasks will require the ease of movement of a scout as players race toward collecting valuable cases before bombs explode around them. Others will require the firepower of a heavy who can hold down an area while the squad gathers supplies.

As in the main entries, cover is important in "Gears Tactics." Players have to advance carefully and never leave themselves open. The goal in each skirmish is to outflank adversaries, but unlike "XCOM," this tactical [game](#) is more flexible when it comes to letting players switch

between characters and using actions.

That freedom lets players weaken tough foes by switching between several party members and letting the one who is closest finish off enemies with a melee attack. That in turn helps the rest of the squad because seeing that unchained violence apparently inspires the team to kill more. It's a way to increase the number of actions per turn, giving the squad an overall advantage.

Another area that makes the game more accessible is reviving fallen comrades. In other games, players must have the right character or healing kit and they'll have to run toward the fallen ally to help them. "Gears Tactics" handles this differently by giving the fallen soldier a chance to self-revive with only one action point. Or they can have a teammate help them to their feet and regain any action points they lost. It's more forgiving and it lets players take a little more risk in combat, while keeping the action challenging enough for veterans.

That's important because "Gears Tactics" doesn't have traditional save slots. Players must play through a mission from beginning to end. Players can't save the game, make a mistake and go back to the previous save. The best they can do is continue at a checkpoint. That could have raised the campaign's difficulty but because of the flexibility when it comes to reviving comrades, the missions are manageable. In addition, the missions are short enough that making a mistake part way through and restarting isn't too punishing.

For everything Splash Damage and The Coalition get right with "Gears Tactics," the game does suffer from being too reliant on its combat. Gabe, Sid and the rest of the crew don't stand out much as characters and the plot is fairly bland. Worse yet, the game tends to pad the length with mandatory Side Missions.

These procedurally generated tasks are a good way of getting extra gear to customize and strengthen troops, but there's not much diversity in the scenarios—it gets rote after three or four of them.

The biggest problem of "Gears Tactics" though is that it doesn't do enough to find an identity. It feels too similar to "XCOM," and at the same time, it doesn't borrow enough from the "Gears" world.

Chainsawing a Locust to death is fun, but other than that, the gameplay doesn't have the distinct quirks that make it feel like a cohesive part of the greater saga.

Even the boss battles—though grand—lose some of the epic scope when played from a top-down perspective. The bosses themselves become more burdensome with the added enemy reinforcements that enter into the fray.

Despite that flaw, "Gears Tactics" still has some value and fun. It feels like good first attempt at adapting that world into a new genre but the developers will have to come up with more innovative gameplay mechanics to separate the game from its peers.

- "GEARS TACTICS"
- 2 stars out of 4
- Platform: Xbox One, PC
- Rating: Mature

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