

Introduction to Art Deco architecture and its place in game industry

Introduction

This document covers the basics of Art Deco and its presence in the Game Development industry. The document will cover what Art Deco is, its emergence, its influences, its characteristics, its impact on the gaming industry, and provide examples of Art Deco architecture from popular games.

Essence of Art Deco

Art Deco itself does not possess a unanimously agreed-upon definition, as time after time it takes on a different meaning from other attempts to formulate its definition. From the perspective of Striner (1990), “I consider Art Deco to be a movement that drew on design ideas that emerged from the 1925 Paris exhibition and from the streamlining genre during the 1930s.” According to Gibson-Quick (1990), “Arts Decoratifs or Art Deco is the eclectic decorative style which dominated the period between the First and Second World Wars.” Allwright (1997) states, “To the art historian, Art Deco can be defined as the decorative style created by French designers between the two World Wars (Klein, McClelland, and Haslam 6).” Evidently, even when perspectives partially align on the origin, time period, or essence of Art Deco, they probably have something that conflicts with the other formulation in the same statement. Nevertheless, in order to proceed with the document, we will select one definition and use it as a foundation. For this, I suggest the formulation provided in EBSCO and produced by Hicks, Wendy L. (2023), “Art Deco is an eclectic design movement that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, characterized by its classical, symmetrical, and rectilinear style.” It provides a fuller definition by highlighting key characteristics, which better align with the paper’s topic.

History of Art Deco and its characteristics

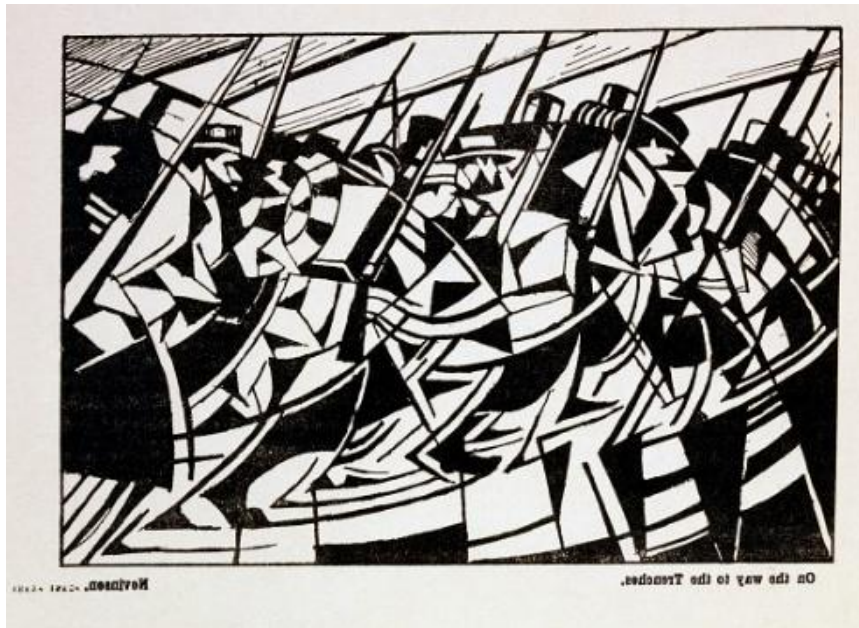
As seen from previous citations, many authors directly or indirectly associate the 1925 Paris exhibition with it being the source from which Art Deco, or at least an inspiration for it, emerged, and they wouldn’t be incorrect “It was at this exhibition that the new style was first presented to the world as something obviously new, if not yet fully formulated.” (Bewis Hiller, 1985, p. 11). But it would be unfair not to mention that the first steps on the way to the appearance of Art Deco were already made in the beginning

of 1900s, as stated by Bewis Hiller (1985), “There was a way out of the Art Nouveau tanglewood. Those who first took it - the Glasgow school in Great Britain, and the Wiener Sezession school in Austria - are the true pioneers of Art Deco.” (p. 18). This also reminds us of the fact that the inability of Art Nouveau to solve the problem that was presented before it caused the search for new styles, says Bewis Hiller (1985), “Art Nouveau and Art Deco are linked by this apostolic succession. But Art Nouveau failed to solve the central problem of how to reconcile art and industry.” (p. 16).



'Versöhnung', by Franz Marc, from Sturm, 1912

The 1910s were a pivotal period in the history of Art Deco, as multiple styles of this period had a profound influence on its development. First style that was critical for the formation of Art Deco was Cubism with its geometric forms and fragmentation, which was one of the key desires in design then according to Bewis Hiller (1985), “All these artists, then, hoped to establish an art expressive of their own time. ... Speed, dynamism, fragmentation, the influence of the machine.” (p. 26). Expressionism contributed its dramatic motifs and stylization of features to Art Deco, which were already drawn by Franz Marc in 1912: “Human and animal forms are dramatically stylized; and the sun-ray and rainbow motifs so typical of Art Deco are already here in 1912.” (Bewis Hiller, 1985, p. 27). Finally, both futurists and vorticists had their main aim at expressing motion in art, says Bewis Hiller (1985) “In Italy, the futurists-Severini, Boccioni, Carra, Russolo, Balla - made the capture of movement their first aim. ... Speed was almost tangibly incorporated into his work and that of other vorticists such as Nevinson, William Roberts and McKnight Kauffer.” (p. 30).



'On the way to the trenches' by C.R.W.Nevinson

In parallel with the development of Art Deco, multiple events and phenomena influenced the style and cultivated it into what we know it as. The first major source of influence was the Russian Ballet, with its rare and unusual colors “Before one could say Nijinsky the pale pastel shades which had reigned supreme on the walls of Mayfair for almost two decades were replaced by a riot of barbaric hues-jade green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet, and, above all, orange.” (Osbert Lancaster, 1948, p. 58). According to Bewis Hiller (1985), this was the most important impact of Russian Ballet: “These colours were the best and most lasting legacy of the Russian Ballet to Art Deco.” (p. 36). Another great influence came from the native Southern and Northern America with their exotic materials and shapes of temples, “But it was the stepped shape of Aztec temples which had the greatest effect on European art.” (Bewis Hiller, 1985, p.45). Finally, ancient Egyptian art had an undeniable influence on Art Deco, with the friezes, gold, and pyramids being actively used in the style as Bewis Hiller (1985) mentions, “The Egyptian influence is particularly noticeable in cinemas, with their elaborate friezes of ochre and gold. The shapes of the pyramid and ziggurat joined that of the Aztec temple as models for aspiring architecture.” (p. 52).

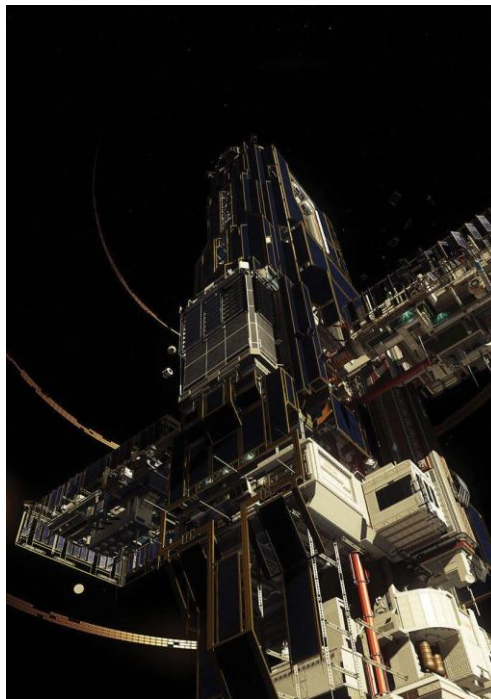
Art Deco architecture in video games

The first game we will examine is Prey (2017), developed by Arkane Studios and published by Bethesda Softworks. The art direction of this game is immaculate, to say the least. The design in the world of Prey has witnessed a third revival of Art Deco, evident in the interiors and exteriors of the space station Talos 1.



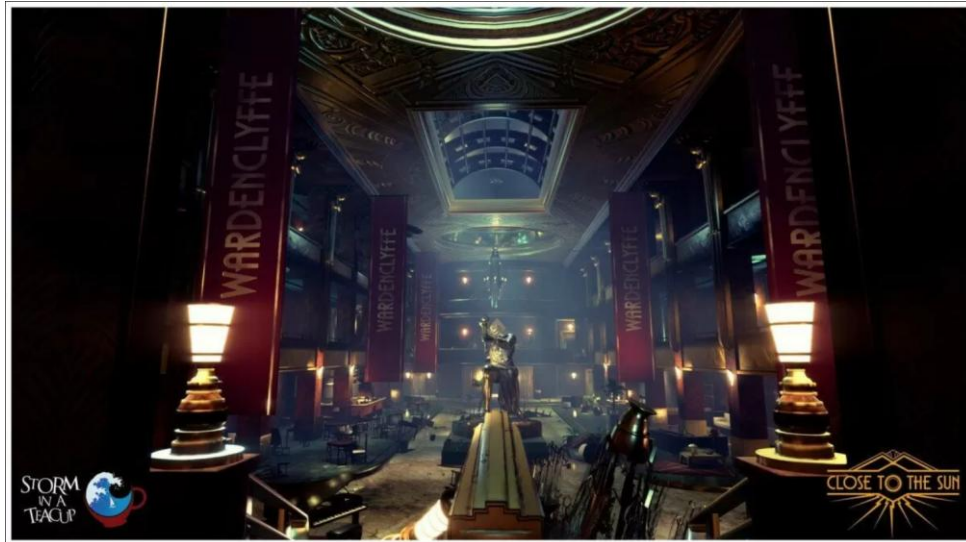
The Arboretum, from Prey, 2017

Talos 1, from Prey, 2017



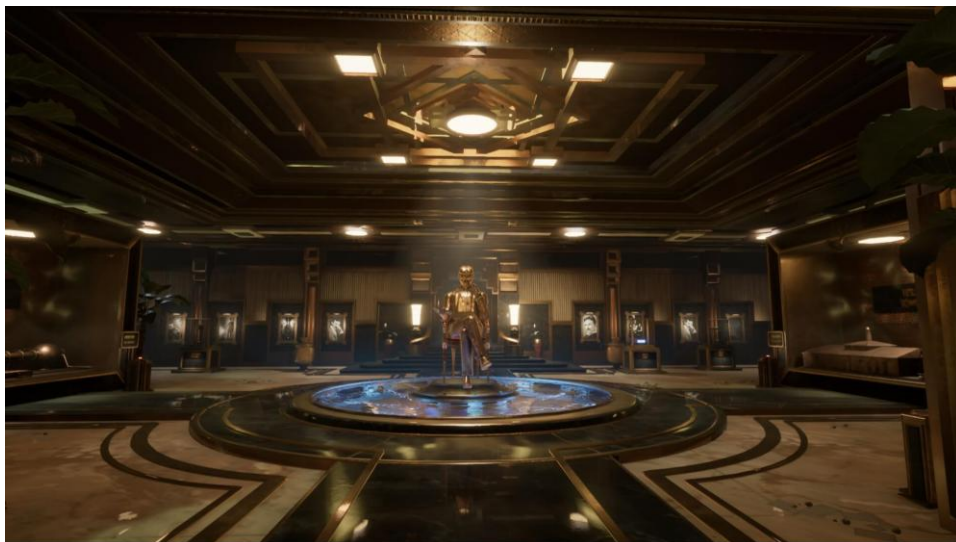
On the displayed images, we can see an extensive application of expensive and exotic materials, such as gold, marble, and obsidian, an all-around use of less valuable but defining Art Deco steel and glass, and all of those materials are used to create a streamlined design shaped in geometric and fragmented forms in the environments surrounding the player. Making this game's art design a great example of Art Deco.

The second game is Close to the Sun (2019), developed by Storm in a Teacup and Warp Digital Limited, published by Wired Productions. This game follows the world with an alternative flow of history, where at the end of the 19th century, a Cold War is brewing between Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla.



Closer to the Sun, 2019

Closer to the Sun, 2019



The story of the game takes place on the gargantuan sea liner “Helios”. The interior design of the ship is a perfect representation of Art Deco in the late 1930s. Brass, gold, steel, glass, and all kinds of marble can be seen being used to construct symmetrical geometric elements of decor. What stands out is the use of Russian ballet influence on

Art Deco, with its vibrant crimson colours used for fabrics. Another thing worth mentioning is the heavy ornamentation of the decorative elements with the motifs that came from Expressionism. Painting a fuller and more realistic depiction of Art Deco.

The final game that we will examine will be the one that first comes to mind when mentioning Art Deco in games: BioShock. Developed by Irrational Games and published by 2K Games in 2007, BioShock was the game that popularized Art Deco in the game industry, with its most accurate depiction of the design movement yet.



Closer to the Sun, 2019

Closer to the Sun, 2019



The art design of the surroundings in BioShock displays all the qualities of Art Deco that I have previously described in analyses: materials, forms, vibrant hues, and motifs. But the game has even more to show for it. Throughout the game, there will be many

dramatically stylized statues of people with their “perfect” forms, as if embracing human nature, which is actually another important part of Expressionism in Art Deco. Through interior design, BioShock also portrays an interesting period in Art Deco history, referred to as the cocktail period, which persisted through the 1920s, with alcohol storage in almost every apartment and many bars across the game. Attention to all details of Art Deco is what made this game the best depiction of the movement, and including those details that I just listed is great proof of it.

Conclusion

Art Deco is one of the most recognizable design movements, with its geometric forms, sunray motifs, exotic materials, and vibrant hues. Art Deco has a very rich history and important accomplishments behind it. Even today, people are fascinated by Art Deco. New media are still being created about and inspired by it a hundred years after its creation. Thus, Art Deco will remain to inspire for many centuries to come.

Citations:

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- Gibson-Quick, R. (1990). *Art Deco influences on women's dress from 1915-1925* (Master's thesis, The Ohio State University).
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