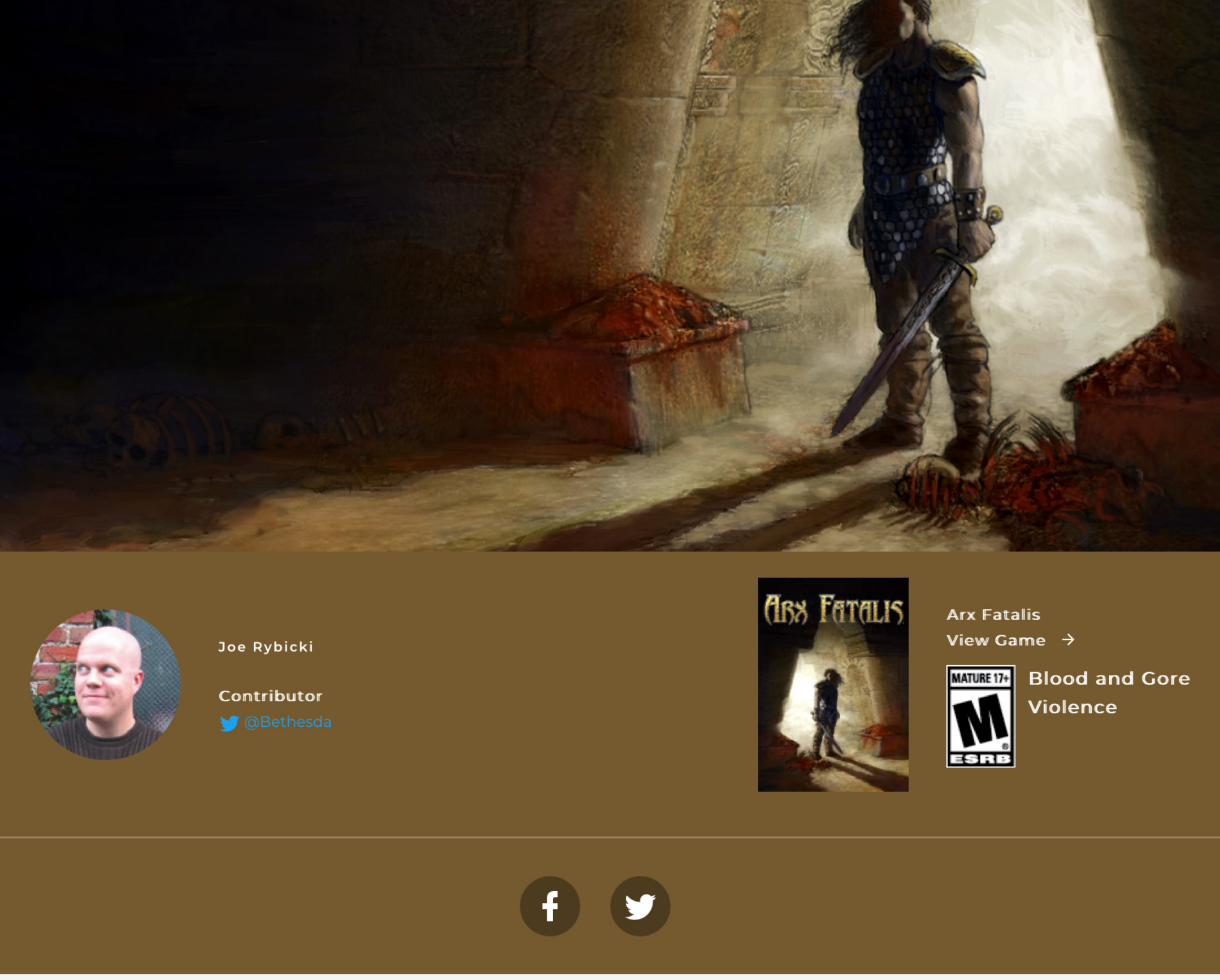



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ARX FATALIS:
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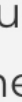
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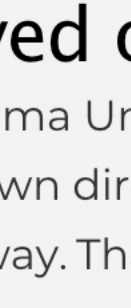
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Contributor

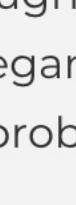
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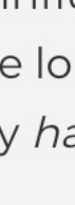


Arx Fatalis
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THE INFLUENCES

Arkane founder Raphaël Colantonio has a type. From his teen years, he found himself utterly entranced by complex, immersive games that presented not just stories but worlds, worlds with complex systems that operated independent of the player. The Ultima series, the System Shock series, and especially the Ultima Underworld series left an indelible mark. Something about the complexity and immersion struck a major chord: “I was so deeply touched,” he says, “right here in the chest.”

“It’s the space of possibilities,” he continues, “with a world that exists without the player, so it feels really real when you explore it. People have a schedule, they’re doing their own things.... You felt like you were actually interacting with something that was truly responding to what you were trying to do.”

Naturally, Colantonio decided he needed to try his hand at making his own mark on this rich and growing genre. So in 1999 he founded Arkane Studios, whose first game arrived three years later: Arx Fatalis.

THE GAME

Arx Fatalis is set on a world that has suffered a solar catastrophe; in short, the sun seems to have gone out. As a result, the many races of this world have headed underground, building vast, sprawling cities in seemingly endless caverns below the planet’s crust. The player’s character awakens in prison, without a shred of memory – not even a name – and must find a way to escape, to survive, and eventually to oppose a nefarious force bent on destroying this already fragile civilization...and in the process, discover his own destiny.

It’s a big story. But even more compelling than the story is the living world the player gets to inhabit. As in Colantonio’s beloved influences, the player can interact with the world in some astonishingly deep and complex ways – and the world carries on of its own accord whether the player is interacting with it or not. Furthermore, the physical structure of the setting is believable, organic, and complex, with its vast spaces interweaving and connecting in ways that would have seemed impossible just a few years earlier. And the story is similarly organic; rather than breaking up the game into discrete quests – which was the convention of the time – the game presents the player with tasks that can be undertaken in any order, sometimes simultaneously. It’s a common thing today, sure, but at the time it was noteworthy, to say the least.

So to the audience of the early ‘00s, Arx Fatalis was refreshingly novel and compelling. And the critics responded, with near-universal praise; the game would go on to top many Best of 2002 lists, especially within the RPG categories. It was a critical darling.

THE RECEPTION

But in the marketplace? The reception was almost as chilly as the surface of the game’s sunless world.

Colantonio has some theories as to why there was such a disconnect between the critical reception and that of the consumer, and it all comes back to the very nature of the immersive sim genre that Arkane was pursuing – a genre that in 2002 was relatively unknown to many gamers. “I think, first of all, at the time they were very hard to market,” he says. “It can be hard to explain what they are and why they’re so cool.” As Colantonio explains, a screenshot doesn’t do the job because it might look like just another first-person shooter or RPG. And it also helps to give examples of even some of the more basic systems like: You throw a rock and it makes a noise and attracts people. “That doesn’t have back-of-the-box value,” he says. “The game needs to be *experienced*.”

Getting people to try an immersive sim can be a hurdle by itself. “They’re stuck between two genres,” Colantonio says. “Like, if you’re really, really into RPGs, they’re going to be too light. If you’re really into action, they’re not going to be action-y enough.” So even players who made the commitment to try a game of the type may discover it’s not what they were expecting.

And to top it off: “They’re very hard to build,” he says. “It’s hard to both offer something that is so amazing in its possibilities, and at the same time something that is as polished as a game that is very linear, that is channeling you through an experience that the designers want you to have. We want you to have your *own* experience.”

These challenges didn’t stop Arx Fatalis from being a critical darling and a cult hit. The game’s freedom and complexity created an experience like no other, and beyond that, it opened the door for other immersive sims that followed. But without a strong enough market for a sequel, the studio went through a period of developing games for other franchises, while continuing to dream up new worlds and new ideas in the background.

THE LEGACY

Nevertheless, Arkane persisted. As hard as these games are to make, as challenging as the marketplace could be, Arkane simply refused to put aside their dreams, to take up a project that compromised their core values, no matter how popular it might be. “We didn’t want to lose our passion,” says Colantonio, “and turn it into a job. Immersive sims are the kinds of games that we like; sometimes they work and sometimes they don’t, but we were going to *make* them work.”

In other words, Arkane just kept being Arkane. And finally, in 2012, a full decade after the release of Arx Fatalis, that single-minded determination paid off – in a big way. The game was Dishonored, which would go on to kick off one of the most beloved franchises in the genre and helped introduce immersive sims to a new and bigger audience. Its success seemed to justify all the struggle that had come before. The immersive sim still might not have been as big as a typical first-person shooter. “But we brought that niche genre to something that’s way bigger,” Colantonio says. “Dishonored is definitely one of the biggest immersive sims in terms of sales and public awareness. But it’s just because, if you keep doing what you know how to do, you will do it better, and you won’t lose your passion. Because that’s the most important thing; how do you make anything that’s successful without passion?”

After Dishonored came Dishonored 2, Dishonored: Death of the Outsider and Prey – along with innovative add-on content for both series. All of these games share a direct lineage with Arx Fatalis, and with its predecessors at the dawn of PC gaming. They all have astonishing depth, complexity in both setting and story, a ridiculous amount of detail, and a focus on letting the player drive the story within a world that exists independent of anything happening onscreen. Those threads combine to form an experience that is uniquely Arkane.

Looking back, Colantonio – who left the studio in 2017 to focus on smaller projects – can hardly believe it all started with this underappreciated project from the dawn of the millennium. And even less believable is that Arx Fatalis is still part of the public consciousness. “I wish 29-year-old me could see that 20 years later, people still talk about that game,” he says. “And still purchase it! It’s mind-blowing to me. And I wish also that 32-year-old me – after Arx shipped – I wish that guy could know that everything that’s successful without passion?”


If you'd like to experience the dawn of Arkane for yourself, you still can. For a limited time, you can get Arx Fatalis for free through the Bethesda.net launcher when you join the Arkane Outsiders exclusive community and sign up for emails. Learn more in the [Welcome to Arkane 20](#) post.

#ARKANE STUDIOS


#ARKANE 20


#FEATURES

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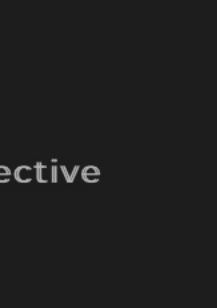
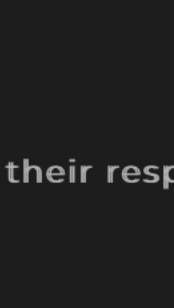
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