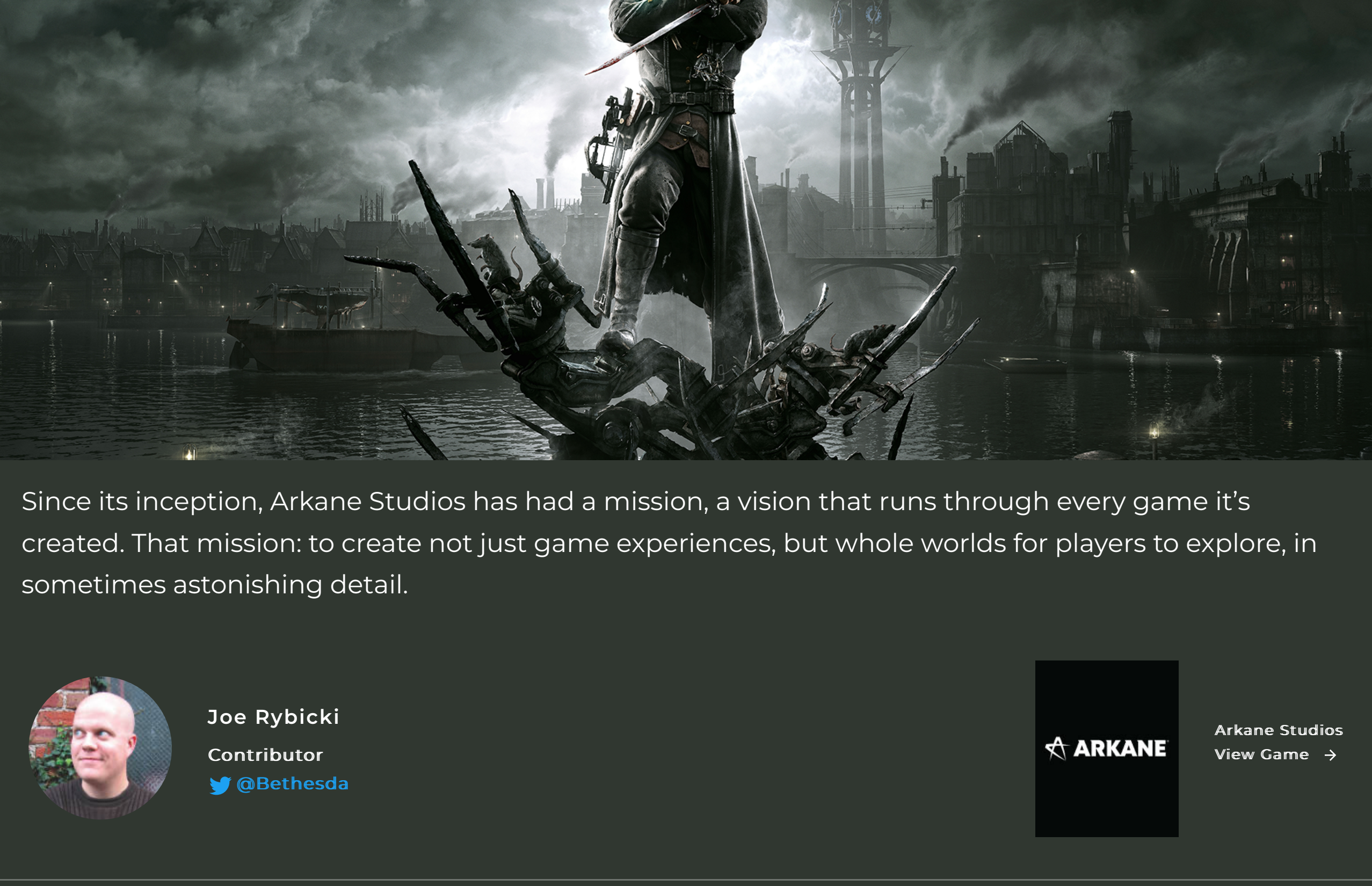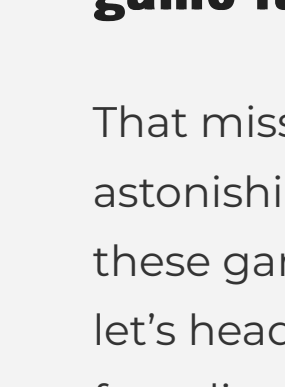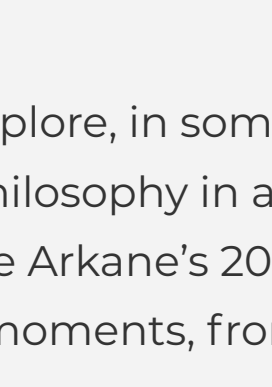# 5 KEY MOMENTS IN ARKANE HISTORY

MAY 28, 2020

Since its inception, Arkane Studios has had a mission, a vision that runs through every game it's created. That mission: to create not just game experiences, but whole worlds for players to explore, in sometimes astonishing detail.

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ARKANE
Arkane Studios
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Since its inception, Arkane Studios has had a mission, a vision that runs through every game it's created.

That mission: to create not just game experiences, but whole worlds for players to explore, in sometimes astonishing detail. If you've played the Dishonored series, you've seen that philosophy in action – but these games are recent developments in the studio's long history. So as we celebrate Arkane's 20th year, let's head all the way back to the beginning, and take a look at the studio's biggest moments, from its founding to today – and beyond
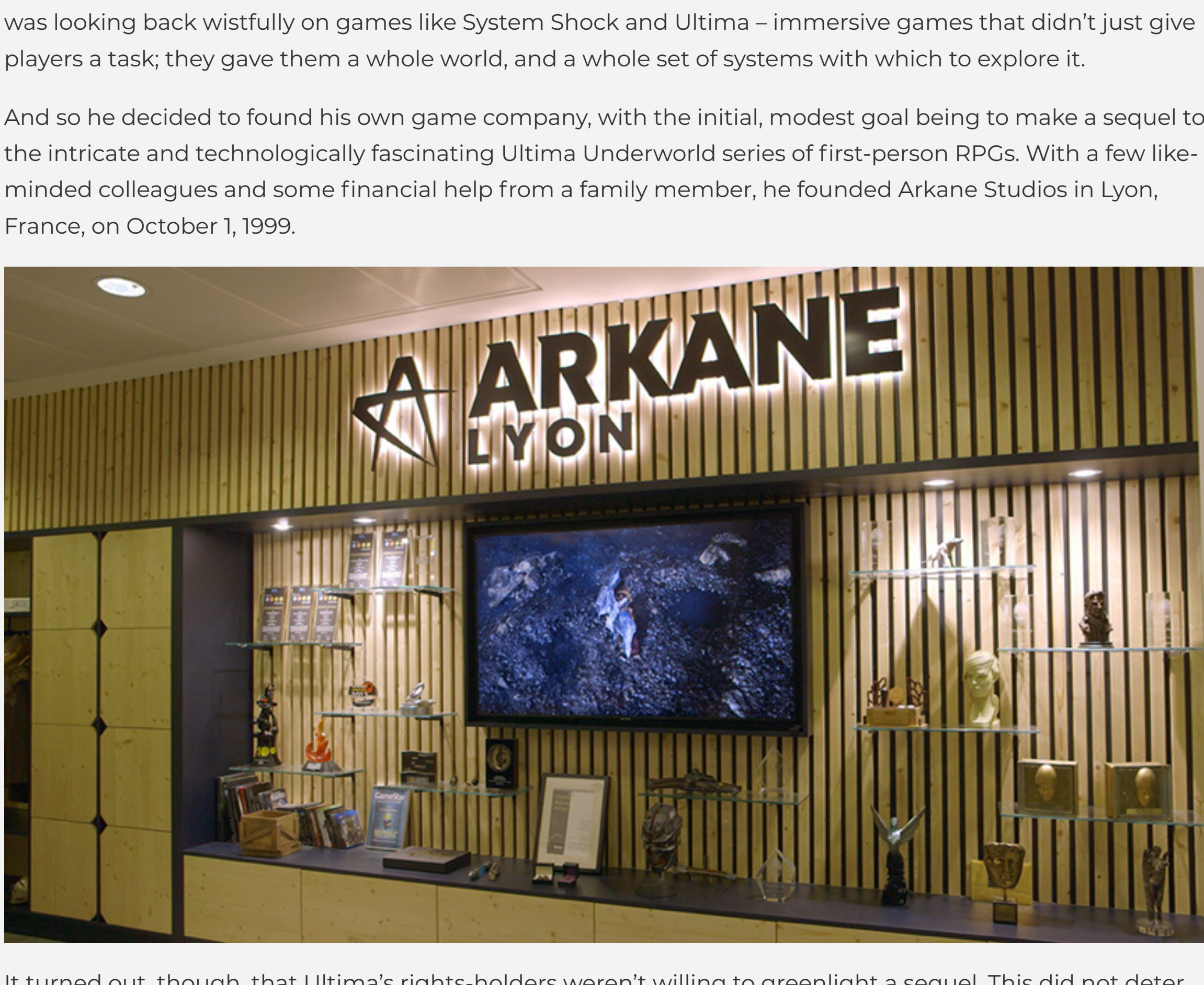

THE FOUNDING(S)

The year was 1999. Dot-coms were booming, Y2K was looming and a game designer by the name of Raphaël Colantonio was growing restless. As the big players of the game industry seemed to be moving ever-more inescapably toward by-the-numbers sequels, licensed properties and sports games, Colantonio was looking back wistfully on games like System Shock and Ultima – immersive games that didn't just give players a task; they gave them a whole world, and a whole set of systems with which to explore it.

And so he decided to found his own game company, with the initial, modest goal being to make a sequel to the intricate and technologically fascinating Ultima Underworld series of first-person RPGs. With a few like-minded colleagues and some financial help from a family member, he founded Arkane Studios in Lyon, France, on October 1, 1999.

It turned out, though, that Ultima's rights-holders weren't willing to greenlight a sequel. This did not deter Colantonio and his associates, who decided to create their own take on the first-person RPG in the form of Arx Fatalis. The 2002 release garnered widespread critical praise, and although sales didn't match the critical reception, the strength of the product made Arkane a studio to watch for those in the know. As investors took interest, it was clear that the studio needed to expand, so in 2006 Colantonio moved to Austin, Texas, to open the doors of Arkane Austin.

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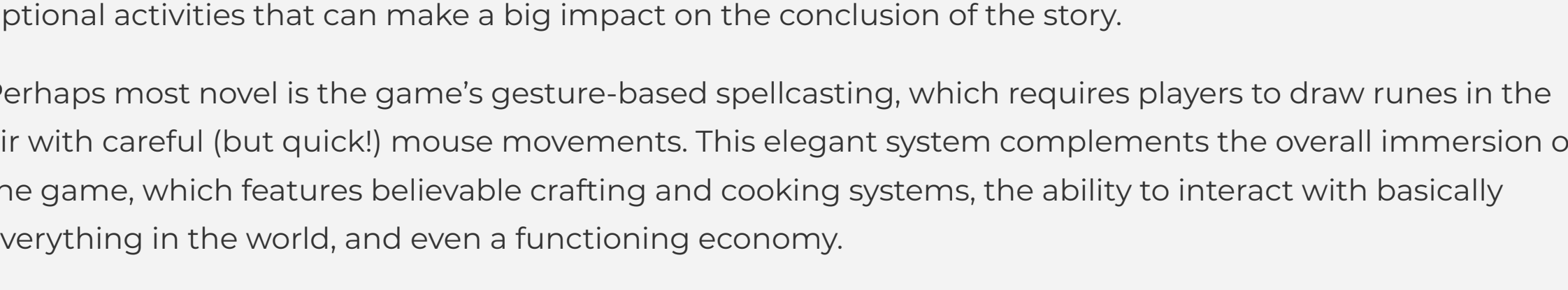
As part of the thriving Austin game-development scene, Colantonio soon crossed paths with Harvey Smith, Lead Designer on the legendary Deus Ex, and the two quickly realized how closely their design philosophies matched up.

GOING UNDERGROUND

But let's back up for a moment, because Arx Fatalis, Arkane's first release, deserves much more than a passing mention. It's true that the game was inspired by a love for the Ultima Underworld series, but Arx Fatalis diverged in some major ways.

Set in a massive underground civilization in the wake of a solar disaster, Arx features some familiar fantasy themes, including a medieval-like setting and some well-known races like dwarves and goblins. But its vast, complex setting and novel gameplay mechanics made the game feel fresh to critics of the time.

For one thing, the underground world is simply massive – and unlike most previous first-person RPGs, the whole thing is interconnected in organic and believable ways. This makes the game, structurally speaking, much less linear than many games of the day, so much so that it's possible to travel to areas far beyond your character's current ability. In a similar fashion, the story is also less than strictly linear, with a number of optional activities that can make a big impact on the conclusion of the story.

Perhaps most novel is the game's gesture-based spellcasting, which requires players to draw runes in the air with careful (but quick) mouse movements. This elegant system complements the overall immersion of the game, which features believable crafting and cooking systems, the ability to interact with basically everything in the world, and even a functioning economy.

The depth of Arx Fatalis – depth that permeates its entire structure – earned the game critical raves and more than a few "Best of the Year" awards. A sequel was all but guaranteed.

DISHONOR AND GLORY

The trouble was, while Arx Fatalis earned near-universal praise, it had trouble reaching consumers, so the planned sequel wasn't able to generate enough publisher interest to move forward. Instead, Arkane would adapt the engine to another company's franchise, releasing Dark Messiah of Might & Magic in 2006. This was followed by a few rough years for the company: 2007 through 2010 saw the cancellation of three promising projects – Return to Ravenholm, The Crossing and "LMNO" – all backed by some of the biggest players in the industry, and the studio's other work during that time was largely providing a support role on other companies' projects.

Did Arkane lose hope? They most certainly did not. Instead, they drew headfirst into the design process for the game that would make them a household name. That game, of course, is Dishonored.

Released in 2012, Dishonored fused the lessons learned from Arx Fatalis with the philosophy of Deus Ex-style player freedom brought to the table by Smith, who had joined the studio in 2008. And it did so on much more technologically advanced hardware than either of those games had enjoyed, creating a strikingly beautiful experience that remained faithful to the concepts that had made Arkane's first game so interesting: intricate gameplay, an immersive world and a fascinating story. Its advanced Victorian-inspired setting (dubbed "whalepunk" by fans, referring to the term "steampunk" to a society fueled by whale-oil) was a far cry from pseudo-medieval fantasy, making the game stand out even more starkly.
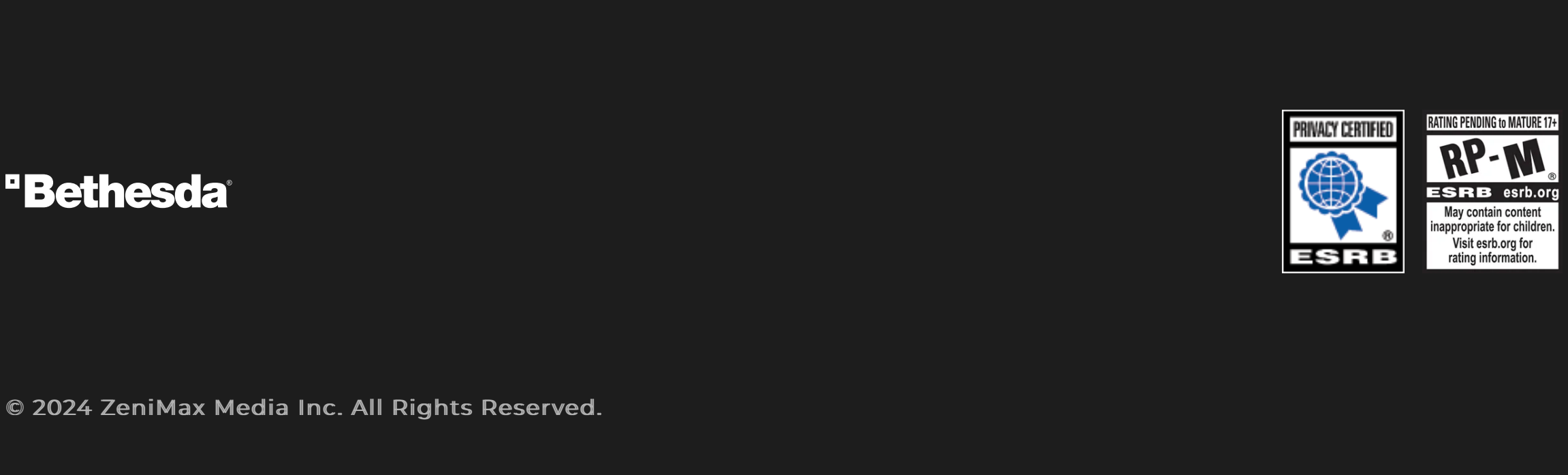

And as with Arkane's first game, critics adored Dishonored – but this time, it found its audience among consumers, as well, and in a big way. Between downloadable content, a 2016 sequel, and a 2017 expansion, Dishonored launched what would go on to be one of the most beloved franchises of the decade.

WING AND A PREY-ER

That success allowed Arkane to spread its wings a bit. While Dishonored was developed by both the Lyon and Austin offices working in tandem, now each team could take on its own project. So as the Lyon studio began primary development of Dishonored 2, the Austin studio embarked on a very different journey.

That journey, interestingly enough, took them back to the beginning. By reexamining the rockmaze, interconnected structure of Arx Fatalis, the team realized that this same approach could work beautifully in a space station setting, with different floors and wings branching off and joining back together in new places. Oh, and what if that space station were being overrun by aliens who can shapeshift into any inanimate object?

That idea, of course, became Prey, released in May of 2017, and while the game does share some design philosophies with Arkane's first release, it is so very much its own thing. With a story that teases almost as many twists and turns as the space station itself, the game is a supremely confident, engrossing adventure with a gorgeous setting that's practically a character in its own right. Once again, critics celebrated the intricate, immersive world and wide-ranging story, and the game made appearances on loads of Best of 2017 lists.

And as if the story's many different endings didn't already provide enough replay value, Prey's release would be followed by two major expansions in 2018: the "roguelike" Mooncrash and the multiplayer-focused Typhon Hunter. Mooncrash offered an experience like no other Arkane game – an infinitely replayable mystery where procedurally generated obstacles and hazards meant no two playthroughs would ever be the same. A daunting task for the Arkane team, but one that many of Prey's fans latched onto instantly and fervently.

LIVE AND LET DIE

And so, what's next for this storied studio? The answer is DEATHLOOP, a combat-focused game being developed by Arkane Lyon that pits two otherworldly assassins against one another in an "eternal struggle." Set on the beautiful but brutal island of Blackreef, the game tasks players with tracking down targets in order to put an end to the "endless" cycle, using the outside-the-box thinking and player freedom that has marked each of Arkane's releases.

DEATHLOOP
OFFICIAL GAMEPLAY TRAILER

Now, beyond that, much of DEATHLOOP is still shrouded in mystery, and we're not here to lift that shroud at the moment. (Check back soon for more details!) What we can tell you is that, even though the premise may seem very different from the studio's previous projects, the game is Arkane to its very core.

Which, when you think about it, is already pretty high praise.

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