Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Brink

Author: Frank Bosman
Author: Archibald van Wieringen
Published: 21st March 2023
Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Introduction

Brink (2011) is a first-person single- and multi-player shooter game developed by Splash Damage and published by Bethesda Softworks for PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. The game was a commercial success, selling over 2.5 million copies and generating around €120 to 140 million in revenue. A free-to-play PC version was released in 2017. *Brink* relates the post-apocalyptic story of the earth in the 2040s which has been flooded as a result of an eco-apocalypse—the sudden rise of the world's oceans. Originally designed as a self-contained, emission-free city of the future, the Ark, an artificial floating island, is the last and only safe haven for climate refugees from all over the world, forcing the once ideology-based island to harbour ten times as many people as it was designed to accommodate. The result is overpopulation and civil unrest. The game allows its players to choose to align themselves with either the Security Forces or the Resistance but refrains from forcing a normative judgement upon either of the factions, indicating the real-life complexity of international climate refugees vis-à-vis the communities having to receive them.

The game's narrative begins somewhere in the 2010s, the decade in which the game was released, with the construction of the Ark positioned just off the coast of San Francisco as a five-star eco-resort. The Ark was created to be self-sustaining in terms of food and drink, independent of natural landmasses, and CO_2-neutral, its energy generated from the ocean's waves. The material of the Ark was based on a genetically modified type of coral, dubbed 'Arkoral,' hence the name of the project. However, when the level of the oceans and seas quickly rose, probably—but implicitly—because of global warming, the island became the only safe place on the surface of the planet. The original owners-cum-inhabitants of the Ark, the majority of whom were wealthy eco-enthusiasts dubbed 'the Founders,' relocated the island to an undisclosed location out of fear of a constantly growing influx of climate refugees. Despite this effort, a large group of refugees managed to find the Ark in the 2020s. The refugees, euphemistically dubbed 'the Guests,' were located in emergency housing on the fringes of the Ark. This housing was constructed from empty sea containers and other material picked up out of the ocean.

In the 2030s all contact with the outside world was broken off, reportedly because there was no one left to have contact with but secretly because the Founders had again relocated the Ark in order to prevent even more refugees from reaching it. The relocation was done with the help of a secretly installed nuclear

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink
Downloaded: 24-02-2026

engine, betraying the initial eco-friendly intentions of the Founding Fathers. In the 2040s, the decade in which the game takes place, the population of the island increased from its intended 5,000 to 45,000, urging the Founders to ration food, drinks, medicine, and energy. This rationing is received with anger by the Guests, who demand a larger portion of the island's supposed wealth partially because they have been increasingly employed in the Ark's maintenance of the Ark, a job considered unbefitting for Founders.

Founders versus Guests

At the beginning of the game, a female narrator summarises the situation:

> *Forty years ago, we started building the Ark. Back then it was an experiment. A dream. A self-sustaining city of the future. But then the seas rose. We were forced to relocate, but still our floating Ark became a refuge for tens of thousands. To maintain order, the Ark was divided and now we're out of time. The Ark is wearing out. No new ship or plane has been seen in 20 years. The new 'guests' live in slums, disease, thirst. Some form a resistance that vows to seize power and search for life outside the Ark. Our security force says we must have order to survive. So will you save the Ark or escape it?*

The player is tasked with choosing between two factions: the Security Forces, established by the Founders to maintain order and discipline on the Ark while adopting an isolationist position, or the Resistance, stemming from the Guests demanding a more equal distribution of the Ark's assets and supplies while trying to contact the outside world. The Resistance is led by Brother Chen, a Founder-turned-Guest, who rallies his followers by saying: "If we stay here we die. To save our people we must escape the Ark." His opponent is Captain Mokoena, the leader of the Security Forces, who instructs his men as follows: "Men, for the Ark to survive, we must have order. We must save the Ark."

The leaders of both factions have secret knowledge that they do not share with their compatriots. The player only learns those secrets later on in the game, while playing as one of the two factions. As a former engineer of the project, Chen knows that the Arkoral becomes sterile after a certain period of time and simply breaks off, putting the whole project in serious danger in the long run. Consequently, he is desperately trying to contact the outside world; without any outside help, all of the Ark's inhabitants will eventually drown. Mokoena, on the other hand, knows that there is an outside world. However, he wants to keep secret from the world the position of the Ark and even its very existence because earlier attempts at contact by the Ark's airplanes only resulted in the capture, torture, and subsequential murder of the Founders' pilots. The missions of each faction are usually a mirror of one another's. For example, if one faction has to safeguard a scientist, the other faction has to try to abduct him; if the Security Forces have to guard the nuclear engine, the Resistance has to take it over. The game itself refrains from leaning toward one of the two factions; there are no good guys or bad guys in this game, only 'grey' people trying to do their best. If the player ends the Resistance's narrative line, while the Ark is shrouded in clouds of warfare the narrator summarises:

> *Chen's resistance is victorious and they hope he will soon bring help from the outside world.*

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 24-02-2026

> *Probably. But with all the violence, Chen's popularity is not what it was, even among the guests. Still the Ark survives as does the fight for a better tomorrow.*

If the player ends the game on the side of the Security forces, the narrator states:

> *The security forces have triumphed and Chen's resistance movement is defeated. Well, for now. Captain Mokoena knows that the guests will avenge their martyrs. Well, for what it is worth, well done. There is still an Ark to fight over. And that means there is still hope.*

If, by playing the game at least once as the Resistance and once as the Security Forces, both endings are eventually reached, the narrator has a different story to tell:

> *So, now you have seen it all, the resistance triumphant and security victorious. More or less. Well, life on the Ark staggers on. We fight. We scream. We pound our fists. Apes returned to the sea. And things keep falling apart. Always have, always will. Who knows what they'll have to face next.*

And while she is relating this, the camera zooms out revealing that the mock-up of the Ark, used previously in narrating the beginning and the two endings mentioned above, is actually onboard a yacht setting course for the burning Ark; its purpose and crew are veiled in mystery.

The Interconnectedness of Climate Change and the Refugee Crisis

Brink's post-apocalyptic narrative offers four different, but interlinked, commentaries on ecological, social-political, moral, and theological issues. Firstly, the game comments on the rapid climate change humankind is witnessing in the present day, especially the rising of the global sea levels caused by global warming, which in its turn is caused by humanity's heavy polluting of the atmosphere with CO_2. The game mentions the effect (the rising waters) explicitly but leaves the cause (human actions) implicit, thus preventing the climate change narrative from becoming obtrusive. Nevertheless, the temporal proximity of the game's predicted disaster intensifies its feel of urgency and realism. In other words, the scenario presented in the video game is not unrealistic for the real world in the coming decades.

The second comment the game provides relates to the international refugee crisis, and especially its interconnectedness with the aforementioned climate crisis. Refugees have many reasons for fleeing their hometowns and/or countries to seek refuge in unfamiliar and often hostile foreign territories: (civil) war, human rights violations, famine, natural disasters like floods or earthquakes, and economic hardship. Nevertheless, in many cases, climate change has played at least a minor role in pushing people out of their own countries. The euphemistic term 'Guests' used for the refugees aboard the Ark is reminiscent of the linguistic game played by both advocates and adversaries of a more open refugee policy in the West.

Interestingly, while the game is ethnically diverse, featuring Caucasian, African, and Asian player avatars

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 24-02-2026

and team members (as the Chinese name Chen and the South African name Mokoena make clear), it is also androcentric; everyone in the game, with the exception of the unseen voiceover, is portrayed as male. This is either an oversight of the development team—which seems unlikely in this day and age—or it is a deliberate move to stress the dominance of men in the world's conflicts and crises. It would not be the first time that conflict is exclusively associated with masculinity.

Another notable narrative detail is the fact that Chen and Mokoena, the leaders of the factions, do not engage in the conflict personally. They plan, direct, and decide what happens, but their subordinates are the ones doing the actual fighting. As leaders they can afford to keep their hands clean, like generals behind a desk; the Resistance Members and Security Forces do not have that luxury.

Between Good and Evil

Brink is a video game about morality and choice in an extreme, post-apocalyptic context, even though it does not feature morality systems, either implicitly or explicitly. Games that do include such systems are, for example, the *Mass Effect* (2007–2012) series or the *Metro* (2010–2019) series. A morality system is an in-game system that morally judges certain actions and choices of the player against a presupposed ethical framework, usually resulting in alternating game sequences and/or game endings. In the case of *Brink*, however, the player gets to choose the faction he/she will be fighting for: the Resistance or the Security Forces. During the rest of the game this choice is fixed, leaving the player only with options concerning play styles.

When the player has finished both narrative lines, the overall moral blurriness of life on the Ark becomes particularly apparent. Both sides of the conflict have valid points to make and honourable causes to fight for. The Resistance fights for equality for Guests and Founders alike and wants to break the isolationist policy of the Ark in general, both positions being defendable from a moral point of view. The Security Forces, however, can argue the same: they want to maintain order and discipline on the Ark to ensure that the scarce supplies and assets last as long as possible for everyone aboard, and they want to prevent even more refugees finding the location of the Ark to avoid the already overstretched logistics of the island finally collapsing. As explained above, the leaders of both factions have their own personal motives for taking the stance that they have which stem from knowledge available only to them.

The game's moral commentary is one of ethical modesty. In the muddiness of everyday life, especially under the stressed circumstances of a post-apocalyptic society on the brink of collapsing under its own weight—hence the name of the game—'good' and 'evil' become nothing more than abstract notions while the majority of people are just a mixture of good and bad decisions, inclinations, and motivations. There is no ideal solution to the situation of the Ark; it is a wicked problem, the solving of which necessarily involves 'rolling the dice' to see what will happen.

Noah's Ark Revisited

The name of the artificial island in *Brink*, the Ark, and the quick rising of the oceans' waters clearly refer to the biblical story of Noah, known as the story of the Great Flood or the Deluge (Genesis 6–9). In the story,

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 24-02-2026

God decides to flood the world with water to ‘reboot’ his creation. There are two reasons for God’s decision: firstly, humans are mixing up earth, their dwelling place, and heaven, God’s dwelling place, creating mixed beings, the Nephilim (Genesis 6:1–4); secondly, humans are only engaged in wickedness (Genesis 6:5–8). God instructs Noah to build an ark, which is not a ship (although the ark has become a ship in the reception of the Great Flood story), but a box—in fact, a kind of a coffin—to be closed from the outside by God himself in order to save Noah and his family (Genesis 6:19–21; 7:2–3) along with the animal world.

After the rains have stopped, Noah sends out a dove to check for dry land (Genesis 8:8–12). The first time the dove returns to the Ark in vain; the second time it returns with an olive branch; on its third flight, it does not return to the Ark. Both the dove and the olive branch it brings have developed into autonomous symbols of peace in the Western world. When Noah, his family, and the animals have set foot on dry land again, God enters into a covenant with Noah. To mark this occasion and stress God’s promise never to destroy his creation again, he places a “bow in the clouds,” traditionally interpreted as a rainbow (Genesis 9:13).

In *Brink*, neither God nor a modern-day version of the biblical Nephilim appear, but the wickedness of humankind is strongly hinted at. The evil of humankind in *Brink*’s case is clearly of an ecological kind: ‘we’ have destroyed the world we live upon. Although the box that Noah is tasked with building at God’s command in Genesis is purpose-built for surviving a deluge, while the Ark—the human-made island of Arkoral—of *Brink* only happens to function as such, the two nevertheless mirror one another. In both cases, the world is (almost) destroyed by rising water resulting from either continuous rain or melting icecaps.

In Noah’s case, ‘peace’ is reached: the waters subside, the dove finds its olive branch, and Noah and his family find dry land again. In the case of *Brink*, however, peace is not found; conflict between the two factions, each claiming moral prevalence, remains. There is no promise of a new life, just a continuation of conflict for the foreseeable future and potentially beyond. “Well, life on the Ark staggers on,” the narrator ironically states.

By combining the story of Noah with contemporary issues like climate change and the worldwide refugee crisis, *Brink* reinterprets the Deluge theologically in terms of original sin, or, to be more precise, from the perspective of a socio-political version of original sin. In *Brink*, humankind has brought upon itself a Deluge-like apocalypse because of its inability to break the cycle of the century-long pollution of the planet and the social injustice this has caused. The younger generations have inherited the earth as moulded by their predecessors, just as the latter received it from their predecessors. The climate and refugee crisis of contemporary times, *Brink* seems to suggest, is not our fault alone but part of a dangerous and sinful inheritance from our ancestors which, if we cannot change, we are doomed to passing onto our children.

While in the reception of the story of Noah, the Great Flood becomes a prefiguration of some kind of apocalypse (e.g., in biblical texts like 2 Peter 2) after which peace finally breaks through, *Brink* uses the image of a modern-day ark for both an escape from the eco-apocalypse and the continuation of struggle and violence.

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 24-02-2026

A Metaphor for Earth

In conclusion, *Brink* presents us with an interesting metaphor: the Ark represents planet Earth as a whole. Just as the Ark in *Brink* is the only place for humankind to survive, Earth is the only planet we currently have at our disposal. And just as the Ark seems to survive nearly every time, so too does Earth continue to survive in spite of humankind's efforts to destroy the only place it can live on. *Brink* presents its players with a thought experiment, a glimpse into the nearby future, where climate change and the refugee crisis coincide. Just like the Ark, humanity is always on the brink of its collective destruction because of its inability to act responsibly in regard to human rights, equality of wealth and assets, and hospitality for refugees.

Bibliography

Baumgart, Norbert C. 1999. *Die Umkehr des Schöpfergottes: Zu Komposition und religionsgeschichtlichem Hintergrund von Gen 5–9*. Freiburg: Herder.

Berchin, Issa Ibrahim, Isabela Blasi Valduga, Jéssica Garcia, and José Baltazar Salgueirinho Osório de Andrade Guerra. 2017. "Climate Change and Forced Migrations: An Effort towards Recognizing Climate Refugees." *Geoforum* 84: 147–50.

Bosman, Frank G. 2014. "The Lamb of Comstock: Dystopia and Religion in Video Games." *Online* 5: 162–82.

Bosman, Frank G. 2022. "On the Brink of the Ark: Video Games and the Deluge." In *Creation – Transformation – Theology: International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology (August 2021 - Osnabrück / Germany)*, edited by Margit Eckholt, 479–93. Münster: LIT.

Good, Edwin. 2011. *Genesis 1–11: The Tales of the Earliest World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Montanari, Frederico. 2021. "From an Uncertain Border. Double, Existential and Discursive, European Crisis: Changes of Glance, Between Migrants Crisis and Climate Change." In *Images of Europe: Law and Visual Jurisprudence* 4, edited by F. Mangiapane and T. Migliore, 167–82. Springer: Cham.

Pleins, J. David. 2009. *When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wieringen, Archibald L. H. M. van. 2022. "Creation, Transformation, Reboot and the Great Flood: A Biblical-theological Assessment of the Great Flood." In *Creation – Transformation – Theology: International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology (August 2021 - Osnabrück / Germany)*, edited by Margit Eckholt, 199–209. Münster: LIT.

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 24-02-2026

Article information

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen. 2023. "Brink." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 21 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brink

Downloaded: 2026-02-24

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0