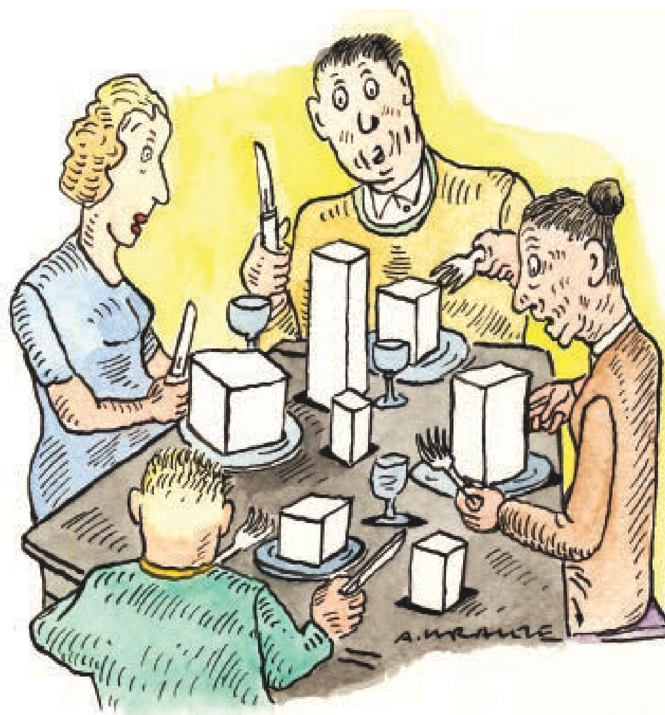
# The plain truth

The tobacco industry claims uniform packets are just the start and the food industry will be next. Not so, says **Marion Nestle**



ANTI-SMOKING advocates are eagerly awaiting a vote on uniform packaging for cigarettes in the UK. That plain wrappers will undoubtedly further reduce smoking, especially among young people, is best confirmed by the tobacco industry's vast opposition to this government proposal and positive evidence from Australia, the first country to adopt it.

Along with lobbying and appeals to the World Trade Organization, the tobacco industry, when under attack, inevitably wheels out well-worn arguments about the nanny state, personal freedom, lack of scientific substantiation, and losses in jobs and tax revenues.

So to perk up its tired and thoroughly discredited campaign, the tobacco folks have added a new argument. Requiring plain wrappers on cigarettes, they say, is a slippery slope: next will be alcohol, sugary drinks and fast food. This argument immediately raises questions. Is it serious or just a red herring? Should the public health community lobby for plain wrappers to promote healthier food choices, or just dismiss it as another tobacco industry scare tactic?

Let me state from the outset that foods cannot be subject to the same level of regulatory intervention as cigarettes. The public health objective for tobacco is to end its use. So for cigarettes the rationale for plain wrappers is well established. Company logos, attractive images, descriptive statements, package colours and key words all promote purchases. Plain wrappers discourage buying, especially along with other measures such as bans on advertising, smoke-free policies, taxes and health warnings.

Australia's pioneering law specified precise details of pack design, warning images and statements. The result: cigarette brands all look much alike. Most reports say plain packaging boosts negative perceptions of cigarettes among smokers and increases their desire to quit. Australia expects plain packaging to further reduce its smoking rate, which, at 12.8 per cent, is already among the world's lowest. Along with the UK, New Zealand and Ireland are well on the way to adding plain packaging to their anti-smoking arsenal. More nations are considering it.

Which is all bad news for the tobacco industry. So it ramps up the slippery slope argument, hoping the food industry will support its fight against plain wrappers. It cites examples such as the regulation of infant formula in South Africa, where pictures of babies on labels are forbidden; that's a big problem for the Gerber food brand – Gerber's company logo is a smiling baby.

But those peddling the slippery slope idea ignore the fact that the health message for tobacco is simple: stop smoking. But beyond tobacco, it is more complex. For alcohol it is a little more nuanced: drink moderately, if at all. For food it is much more nuanced. Food is not optional; we must eat to live. Nutritional quality varies widely. Foods are spread across a spectrum from unhealthy to healthy, from soft drinks (no nutrients) to carrots or fish (many nutrients). Most fall somewhere in between. What's more, an occasional soft drink is fine; daily guzzling is not. So the advice is to choose the healthy and avoid or eat less junk, both in the context of calorie intake and expenditure.

**"Plain packaging boosts negative perceptions of cigarettes among smokers and ups the desire to quit"**

Is there any evidence that plain packaging for unhealthy foods would reduce demand? Research has focused on marketing's effect on children's food preferences, demands and consumption. Brands and packages sell foods and drinks, and even very young children recognise and desire popular brands. When researchers compare the responses of children to the same foods wrapped in plain paper or in wrappers with company logos, bright colours or cartoon characters, kids invariably prefer the more exciting packaging.

But the problem is deciding which foods and beverages might call for plain wrappers. For anything but soft drinks and confectionery, the decisions look too vexing. Rather than having to deal with such difficulties, health advocates prefer to focus on interventions that are easier to

justify – scientifically and politically.

We know that some regulations and market interventions – analogous to, if not the same as those aimed at smoking cessation – are essential for reducing the damage from harmful products. If not plain packaging, then what? Studies suggest small benefits from a long list of interventions such as taxes, caps on portion size, front-of-package traffic-light labels, nutrition standards for school meals, advertising restrictions, and elimination of toys from fast food meals and cartoons from packaging. Rather than dealing with the impossible politics of plain wrappers on foods, health advocates increasingly favour warning labels.

These first appeared on cigarette packs in the 1960s and have been considered for food products since the early 1990s. Heart disease researchers suggested that foods high in calories and fat should display labels such as: "The fat content of this food may contribute to heart disease." More recently, health advocates in California and New York proposed warning labels on sugary drinks. The Ontario Medical Association takes a similar view: "To stop the obesity crisis, governments must apply the lessons learned from successful anti-tobacco campaigns." It has mocked up examples of warnings on foods.

Although no warning label law has passed so far, such messages are the logical next step in promoting healthy food choices, in the same way that plain wrappers are the next logical step for all cigarette packages. Health advocates should recognise the slippery slope argument for the typical tobacco ploy that it is. ■

Marion Nestle is the author of *Food Politics* and *What to Eat* and is the Paulette Goddard professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University

ONE MINUTE INTERVIEW

# Life in a zombie apocalypse

## How would you behave in a real-life disaster? I'm exploring how we do it in virtual worlds to find out, says **Matthieu Guitton**

**PROFILE**
Matthieu Guitton is an associate professor in the faculty of medicine at Laval University in Quebec City, Canada. He explores human behaviour and social dynamics in virtual worlds, and develops interfaces between minds and artificial systems

**Why use online games to study our responses to catastrophic events?**
You can't go into the middle of a real-life disaster area and ask people: "What are you doing? How do you feel?" They're too busy trying to survive. And in the aftermath of an event, it's difficult to ask survivors questions like: "Did you betray other people or let them die so that you could survive?" Ethical considerations aside, you can't be sure they would tell you the truth. Immersive virtual worlds provide ways to test human behaviour in controlled "life-threatening" situations.

**What sort of games are you looking at?**
I've been studying how people behave in *DayZ*, an immersive game with over a million users. It's a survival game set in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-infested country. Players have to find food, weapons or medical supplies while their lives are under constant threat from zombies or hostile players. Unlike in a lot of games, when your character dies in *DayZ*, it stays dead. If you want to continue playing, you have to start from scratch in a random place with none of your previously gathered gear. When you've invested time in your character, you don't want it to die, so you don't mess around – just like in a real situation.

**How do you examine players' behaviour and feelings?**
We go into the game and look at what they're doing in real time, interview them, or read about their experiences in *DayZ*'s forums. Betrayal and selfish behaviour are common. Players sometimes express guilt, or ask on forums whether their actions were justified or ethical, leading to many conversations about ethics and behavioural norms. Say someone shoots their friend in the leg so that a zombie will attack them, giving the shooter the chance to run away. Later they may feel guilty, and if they spot a new person in the game they might give them food or weapons, even if this leaves them with less for themselves.

**Can "virtual anthropology" really yield broad insights into our behaviour?**
I think so. It's not the case that you have the real world on one hand, and virtual communities disconnected from any real-life concerns on the other. When I was studying virtual communities in *Second Life*, I interviewed a girl who'd just broken up with her virtual boyfriend. She asked me: "If it's all a game, why are my tears real?" People invest a lot emotionally in these games, so it makes sense to study them. It's not like you're playing *Super Mario* and just killing mushrooms.

**How would you rate your own chances, come the zombie apocalypse?**
I would like to think I'd be a hero, but I'd probably run like everyone else and try to save my own life. But that's why studying behaviour using virtual spaces is important: by understanding how people react to catastrophes, we can optimise ways of educating them about appropriate reactions. In Japan, people are trained from childhood on how to react to earthquakes, and there are fewer casualties as a result.
**Interview by Linda Geddes**