

[Whatever You Do, Don't Push the Beautiful, Shiny, Jolly, Candy-Like Button](#)

by Vesperae

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Two decades ago, Canadian animator John Kricfalusi dreamed up the brilliantly funny, but all too short lived [The Ren & Stimpy Show](#). While originally picked up by the American children's network Nickelodeon, it became quickly clear that the various and sundry misadventures of the title characters were much too dark and sophisticated beneath the slapstick for young audiences, although it quickly found a diehard cult following among adults with an offbeat sense of humor on MTV and countless home-grown VHS compilation tapes, and I was most definitely one of them.

The show used a diverse assortment of settings, each one almost never having anything to do with any of the others, aside from the continuity of the main characters themselves. Ren, an "Asthma Hound Chihuahua" with serious anger management issues, and his best friend Stimpy, a lovable, dim-witted cat (think Laurel and Hardy), appeared in a variety of vignettes, ranging from warped rewrites of classic fairy tales, to brief advertising parodies, to sci fi, and regardless the situation, the early episodes invariably cracked me up. (Unfortunately, John Kricfalusi was let go following the show's initial run, and the episodes that follow his departure are nowhere near as good as those that he had a hand in.)

One of my all time favorite John K. (which he often goes by) episodes, and one shared by many fans of the show, is "Space Madness," which originally aired in August of 1991. It was the first of several quasi "Star Trek" type parodies, and in this installment, Ren and Stimpy are trapped together alone in a ship in deep space, and are rapidly losing their minds. Ren takes on the role of Mission Commander, and Stimpy takes on the role of his Cadet / subordinate, and the conclusion of the episode is one of the most hilarious moments of the show to me, because it's such a perfect little sketch of fundamental human nature:

REN: "Eeee...eh...I'm hurting." [Ren collapses.]

STIMPY: "You poor crazy kid!" [Cradles Ren, a tear comes to his eye.]

REN [Later, alone on bridge, dictates into log]: "Captain's log. I'm tired. So tired. I can't believe my own partner attacked me. Maybe...if I occupy his MIND with more DUTIES, I can control his..."

[Ren's voice becomes suddenly unearthly]

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SPACE MADNESS."

REN [Later, addressing Stimpy in the "button room"]: *"Now, listen Cadet. I've got a JOB for you. See this button?"* [Stimpy reaches for the button.] *"DO*

N'T TOUCH IT! It's the HISTORY ERASER button, you FOOL!"

STIMPY [Looks at button with growing curiosity]: *"So... what'll happen?"*

REN [Increasingly manic]: *"That's just IT! We don't KNOW! Maayyyybeeee something bad...? Mayyyybeeee something good! I guess we'll never know! 'Cause you're going to guard it! You won't TOUCH it, will you?"* [Stimpy salutes. Ren begins to laugh menacingly as he turns and leaves the "button room." Stimpy marches back and forth, repeatedly staring at the button.]

ANNOUNCER: *"Oh, how long can trusty Cadet Stimpy hold out? How can he possibly resist the diabolical urge to push the button that could erase his very existence? Will his tortured mind give in to its uncontrollable desires?"* [Announcer steps into frame, grabs

Stimpy, forces him closer to button] *"Can he resist the temptation to push the button that, even now, beckons him ever closer? Will he succumb to the maddening urge to eradicate history? At the MERE...PUSH...of a SINGLE...BUTTON! The beeyootiful SHINY button! The jolly CANDY-LIKE button! Will he hold out, folks? CAN he hold out?"*

STIMPY [Overwhelmed with temptation]: *"NO I CAN'T!!! EEEEEYAAHHHH!"* [Stimpy pushes button. Alarms go off. Ren rushes back in, and Ren, Stimpy, and Announcer stand around staring at the button.]

ANNOUNCER: *"Tune in next week, as..."* [Flash, explosion, they all disappear.]

On December 9, 2010, the U.S. Surgeon General's office released the [30th Report on Smoking & Health](#)

nearly 47 years after the first installment was issued in 1964. The report was widely summarized by news outlets with the sensationalistic headline that

"Inhaling

one

puff from a cigarette could kill you."

That's right, in case you missed it, talking heads across the country looked right into their teleprompters and read those words with a completely straight face, sending that exact message out across the airwaves over and over without a trace of irony or skepticism. It was one of those surreal "through the looking glass moments" for me, when it really fully sunk in just how warped the reality about smoking has become for so many people. It's so far beyond funny that I can't even begin to wrap my head around it.

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Now, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that routinely smoking cigarettes at any level of consumption is bad for the human body. And I also believe that anyone who believes otherwise is completely deluding themselves. Period. But just *how* bad, and *how* deadly, depends on so many variables of genetics, long-term levels of smoking consumption, environmental toxin exposures, other lifestyle considerations, and on and on, that it is nearly impossible to predict the outcome of smoking from one individual to the next in anything other than the broadest statistical terms.

And since the outcome is so far from certain, and especially, since it typically takes many, many years of smoking to arrive at that outcome, whatever it might be, the idea of the Risks of smoking becomes an enticing little moment of excitement for many smokers, because that Risk is something that they can enjoy indulging in one dirty little naughty puff at a time. It's a unique little head trip that they can experience again and again and again over the course of up to hundreds and hundreds of thousands of puffs, while still clinging to the comfort of entirely plausible denial that they'll either beat the odds, or quit before anything really bad happens. I believe that the psychological appeal of smoking is not unlike what happens for someone who experiences a gambling "addiction" – it just happens on a much more private, smaller, repetitive scale, with many more little "hits" of pleasure, since smokers can obviously smoke much more frequently than gamblers can gamble.

I found myself imagining what sort of person would accept at face value the "one puff can kill you" headline widely reported in response to the latest Surgeon General's Report. I got this mental image of your average 20 mpg luxury SUV owner belching hydrocarbons, soot, and greenhouse gases into the air day in and day out while driving around solo running trivial errands one at a time, utterly oblivious to what they're preferred mode of status transit is doing to the air that they and their precious children breathe every day. And all the while deeply smug in the belief in their superior status as non-smoking anti-smokers who would never dream of exposing themselves or their families to the smallest quantities of secondhand cigarette smoke. The things that people will believe when they want to, and the blindness that people are capable of, will both never cease to amaze me.

But it's just part and parcel of the politics of smoking, and the extreme ends which the polarization surrounding it has reached following nearly a half century of demonization, and during a time when there is so much social and economic upheaval in the world that "the powers that be" are desperate to find something...anything...about which they'd like to appear to be doing something to benefit the human beings who they seem to be so poorly serving. (Please read non-partisan criticism in this comment, since I absolutely believe that there is equal culpability on both ends of the political spectrum here.)

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Another surreal "through the looking glass" moment that we're all about to face, and that will be much harder to dismiss and laugh off than the latest Surgeon General's Report is the impending mandate by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) to require graphic warnings on all domestically sold cigarette packages. Here is a small sample of some of the proposed designs:



These warnings would be required to be displayed over 50% of the front of the pack:



You can view and comment on all of the proposed designs individually in a special gallery that the FDA has set up on [flickr](#). The FDA will also be accepting direct public input on these designs until **January 9, 2011** (act quickly, if you want to comment), either via snail mail:

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Management (HFA-305)
Food and Drug Administration
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Room 1061
Rockville, MD 20852

Or fax:
301-827-6870

I sent a letter to the FDA at the end of November, and if you're interested, I posted a copy of the text at my forum, [here](#) .

Now, I realize that graphic warnings on cigarette packages have been mandated elsewhere in the world for a number of years, but the notion has always struck me as being so insipidly pointless that I suppose I've always wanted to believe that we'd never jump on the bandwagon here in the U.S. And while it seems like the longest of long shots, if enough people flood the FDA with faxes and letters before the deadline, maybe they'll get the point and back off. Probably not, but if we all sit around and whine and moan to ourselves and do nothing, then there's no question that it'll happen, so if you care about this, set your cynicism aside for 20 minutes and *do something*. Even if you read this after the FDA's deadline for public feedback, you can still write and fax them, as well as your other publicly elected officials. There's never any deadline on your opinion, or on your ability to express it, so again, *do something*.

In my case, my reaction to this proposed mandate falls on four different levels.

The first level is simply as an intelligent member of society, and as a taxpaying U.S. citizen. These graphic warnings are incredibly pejorative and insulting, and in my opinion, this is just plain old dumb, bad, moralizing, overreaching government, and should be set aside in the midst of so many other tremendously more pressing issues that I'd like to see my tax dollars spent on instead – like working to end this stubborn recession and stimulate the economy for everyone, not just Wall Street types, hedge fund managers, and executives of massive multinational corporations.

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The second level is as a smoker. As I said in my comments to the FDA, I believe that this proposal is bad for smokers in several ways. First, the premise of the addiction messages is profoundly flawed, and just reinforces the notion that smokers are powerless to quit, and prevents them from understanding the psychological reasons why they smoke in the first place. There is no doubt in my mind that if we were able to set aside the "nicotine is the most addictive drug in the universe" meme for one second, it would allow smokers to understand the profoundly personal reasons why they smoke, and would greatly increase the ability to quit of anyone who wants to do so. Second, I believe that shoving the proposed death and disease imagery in the faces of smokers everyday could actually make some of them *sicker* as a result of the power that our minds have over our bodies. And third, I believe that this campaign will just make anti-smokers that much more rabid and crazy, and will thus serve to punish and marginalize some smokers in social contexts even more than they already are, in turn damaging their self-esteem even more that it already is, and also ultimately potentially making them even *sicker* in this way as well. (I should also note that I'm still making my own cigarettes, so the new mandate won't directly affect me personally, since my "pack" will still be the same lovely engraved 100mm antique silver case that I'm using now.)

The third level is as a member of the SF Community. I obviously did my best to set all Fetish interests aside when I wrote to the FDA, since no one involved in government or public health would understand or care about this, and would in all likelihood dismiss me as "crazy" were I to raise the issue. But actually, my concerns as a member of the SFC largely coincide with my concerns as a smoker, with one additional consideration – the new graphic warnings will obviously seriously diminish the aesthetics of all of our favorite pack designs, which is an essential part of so many of our individual personal SF "Mythologies." Although, there is the inevitable likelihood that the new graphic warnings will result in an explosion of cigarette case sales, so if that's your thing, you might actually be pleased by this potential indirect outcome of the new regulation.

But the fourth level is actually a complete departure from the first three; it's as someone who's consciously in touch with my Dark Side when it comes to the pleasure that I take in smoking, and in my SF. The *Darker Desires* that are very much a part of me and my SF find a lot of the imagery and the thought of that imagery appearing on a pack of cigarettes that an attractive woman purchases, carries around with her, and handles whenever she lights up very appealing. It actually gives me a special little tingle that goes right to the core and roots of my SF. I still think that this proposed mandate is moronic, counterproductive, and pointless, which is why I took the time to make my opposition known to the FDA, but there is absolutely a part of me that does find the whole thing to be erotic at the same time. And not just the symbolic implications of the omnipresence of the warnings themselves, but the whole dynamic and discussion behind them and surrounding them.

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It seems so obvious, and yet, clearly it isn't to so many people who imagine that they're qualified to attempt to dissuade people from smoking. Maybe in order to become enough of a bureaucrat to function in a bureaucracy you have to be utterly lacking in imagination and the ability to grasp the most basic essence of human behavior. If you suggest that someone not do something in a calm, rational, respectful way, most of the time, people will listen and take the advice to heart. But once you inject even the smallest amount of dominance, irrationality, or hyperbole into the expression, you will invariably elicit the exact opposite of the response that the expression sought to achieve. "Reverse–psychology" is a concept that even most children can grasp, but that seems utterly elusive in the public health community when it comes to understanding the appeal of smoking to smokers and to potential smokers. Forbidden Fruit will *always* be the most appealing fruit of all, and the more Forbidden you make it seem, the more appealing it becomes.

So welcome to the real life cartoon in which we live, where the equivalent of a chorus of deranged "Rens" want to manically scream at us over and over and over again to "*NEVER...NEVER...NEVER...push THAT button*"

in front of us, lest we unleash armageddon on ourselves and everyone around us. It's almost a wonder that we don't all smoke like chimneys and have SFs with clearly defined, open, conscious DS ideation.

But maybe the FDA is about to create a whole new generation who does.

[Email Vesperae](#)

Vesperae's discussion and DS multimedia forum: [The Sublime Desire of Cigarette Smoking](#)