MIT pranksters transform Harvard statue into video game superhero

By Linda K. Wertheimer, Globe Staff
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Under the cloak of darkness, MIT students slipped into Harvard Yard this week and transformed John Harvard into a video game superhero. The image did not befit the 17th-century Puritan minister.

The students, carrying out a time-honored tradition of pranks, or hacks as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology calls them, stuck a helmet on the head of the famed statue of Harvard, tucked a toy assault rifle into the crook of his arm, then bragged about their handiwork on the hacks.mit.edu website.

"John Harvard Plays Halo 3," they wrote. For less than 24 hours, to mark Tuesday's release of the XBox game "Halo 3," John Harvard, the benefactor for whom the university was named, was Master Chief, genetically engineered soldier and savior of the universe.

MIT's student body president, Martin Holmes, laughed while describing the statue's short stint as Master Chief. "It was hilarious and creative," said Holmes, and, he acknowledged, very nerdy.

"MIT pranks a lot of times are characterized by their . . . geeky spirit," he said.

To make sure the pranks remain harmless, MIT officials are working with students and faculty on guidelines,
Holmes said.

Last school year, three students were charged with breaking and entering and trespassing after they broke into the MIT Faculty Club. The students said they were hackers engaging in "late-night exploration," a longstanding school prank.

As early as next week, MIT plans to announce ground rules on what makes an appropriate prank. The school says it does not want to mess with tradition, however.

"We're not trying to get rid of hacking," said Phillip Clay, chancellor. The latest Harvard prank, he said, is in the "playful category."

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