

Tech-Themed Costumes

By Jeremy Greenberg, Special to MSN Tech & Gadgets

(And other fun ways to add state-of-the-art spookiness to your Halloween.)



Halloween is a time when we dress up to scare away the bad spirits. However, it doesn't have to be just about sending goblins back to the pumpkin patch. The right costume may also protect us tech- and gadget-minded mortals from ghoulishly buggy software, evil cell-phone reception and devilish device-driver compatibility issues. Additionally, we can use technology to improve candy yield and give our front-of-house displays some modern fright. Let's look at some fun ways to tech up our trick-or-treating

Costumes that say, "Yes, I did assemble my own computer."

Here are some unique, tech-inspired costumes that are sure to turn heads (if only out of bewilderment). Ironically, those cardboard boxes in which your flat-screen TV, computer monitor and laser printer arrived are the building blocks of the tech costume. You'll also need some markers or a drafting plotter, whichever you have handy.

Binary code: Your friend may think he's nifty because he's pinned his ears back for his Lord Voldemort costume, but how many people will come to a Halloween bash dressed as a "1" and "0"? The key to a good binary-code costume is staying in character. Every answer should either be "yes" or "no." All light switches should either be "on" or "off." Don't touch any dimmer switches—you aren't programmed for that.

Creating this costume requires a "Tron"-style unitard. (You can get one at a sporting-goods store. Of course, if you've been abducted by a computer from 1982, you might already be wearing one.) Then cut the numerals out of cardboard. Use a belt to hold the numerals to your body. This is also a great couple's costume, but let the woman dress as the "1." It's slimming.

Smart phone: Teens and preteens love PDAs. The ones who aren't too cool to trick-or-treat would much rather dress as a BlackBerry than a ballerina. To make their dreams a reality, follow this simple yet elegant design: Take a body-sized cardboard box and draw a QWERTY keyboard on the front. Then pop a straightened coat hanger out of the top for an antenna. Cut a hole for the screen—but don't make it large enough to view a Web page; that wouldn't be realistic. When someone asks your kid, "What are you dressed as?" she can say, "I'm a smart phone." If the person follows up with, "What kind of smart phone still has an antenna?" just have her say, "Hold on—you're breaking up."

The Jason 5000: Many of us wish we could in fact be computers. No one has ever accused a computer of not brushing its hair drinking too much Mountain Dew. This Halloween, you can indulge in your fantasy. Get your cardboard box and cut a hole for the screen. This will help your "search" feature (a.k.a. your eyes) find things such as curbs and mud puddles. You can either draw a keyboard underneath the screen hole, or tie one of your old keyboards around your waist with the cord. Then if you really want to impress, carry an hourglass. If too many people talk to you at the same time, turn it sideways and wait.

MP3-player skin: Sometimes we want a costume that tells the world, "I believe in taking care of my gadgets." Good news! You're just a cardboard box and a roll of wax paper away from simulating the neoprene protection of an MP3-player skin (this assumes that you opt for the white or opaque skins). You can even pretend to be the MP3 player itself, going from house to house in shuffle mode. When someone opens the door, you can say, "Trick or—Happy Presidents Day."

Mouse: For a mouse costume (think Logitech, not Mickey), you'll need some Rollerblades and a one-person tent. Assemble the tent, then cut a hole in the top where your head can stick out. (Don't worry about destroying the tent—the only place you camp outside Best Buy when a new video game is about to be released. If you want "Halo 4" bad enough, you'll get by with a sleeping bag.) Not only does this costume show your love of peripherals, but wearing Rollerblades will allow you to cover a lot more ground. Just be prepared for people to tell you that you'd skate faster using USB 2.0.

Traditional costume service pack

Now let's look at how to tech up some traditional costumes:

Skype-amese cat: Does your daughter insist on dressing as a cat again? There's no reason why this year's cat costume can't have wireless Webcams sewn into the ears. Not only will you be able to keep an eye on the houses she visits, but your nephew i Hong Kong can log on and join her for the journey.

Use the force: How often have we been disappointed that putting on a Yoda mask didn't give us the power to raise an X-Wing fighter out of a swamp? This year, your "Star Wars" costume is only a leaf blower away from giving you the Force. While not truly high technology, strapping a leaf blower under your cape with the hose sticking through one of your sleeves will give you the power to knock the hat off a witch or blow a fake parrot off a pirate's shoulder. Some even come with a "suck" feature, so you can use the force for vacuuming up mass quantities of candy.

Creating a candy database

This year, your kid won't collect just candy, she'll collect data. Teaching your kid the power of spreadsheet software isn't just fun but it'll help her improve her candy yield for years to come. Here's what you do: Take several freezer bags, and label each with the name of a street where your child will be trick-or-treating. As she goes from house to house, have her place the candy she receives in its respective bag. When she gets home, have her rate each piece of candy on a 1-10 scale, with 1 being a box of raisins and 10 being her favorite full-sized candy bar. Have her enter the data into a spreadsheet, and soon she'll know which streets and houses are worth visiting (and which are worth egging). Next year, replace the low-yield streets with new, yet-to-be trick-or-treated streets that may have a higher payoff.

Not only will this allow your kid to corner the neighborhood candy market, when she's older she can sell her data to a younger brother or sister. Just be sure she has a disclaimer on the data about childhood obesity. Nothing ruins a holiday like facing a class-action lawsuit.

Front-of-house displays

The reason we convert our front yards into graveyards or other frightful scenes is to give the youngsters a really good scare. However, with video games and movies being what they are, these effects don't have the shock they once did. To give your front-of-house display the ability to strike terror into modern trick-or-treaters, you've got to go after what really scares them. You can still have a spring-loaded ghost-mummy bursting from a casket. But this year, instead of it saying, "Boo!" have it say, "Ohmygod My phone can't text message!" Scariest words have never been spoken.

Another spooky and fun way to scare (or at least befuddle) trick-or-treaters is to install an automated voice-recognition/candy-dispensing system (CDS) like the ones we encounter when calling Information. Here's an example:

CDS: Thanking you for ringing the doorbell at 459 Elm Street. Please state what kind of candy you'd like.

Trick-or-Treater: Snickers.

CDS: Three Musketeers. Is this correct?

Trick-or-Treater: No, Snickers.

CDS: Skittles. Is this correct?

Trick-or-Treater: I said Snickers! Where did you learn to recognize voices, on the back of a motorbike?

CDS: OK. Please take your Mike and Ikes. Thank you and happy Halloween.

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