Trade Show's Skin Policy Prompts Quick Coverups

But some models at the video game convention manage to skirt its new costume regulations.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Times Staff Writer
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At daybreak Wednesday, with just hours to go before the Electronic Entertainment Expo's fashion police hit the beat, their effect was already being felt: alterations.

In a conference room above the exhibit floor, a model named Jackie assessed the Greek tunic-like costume she was supposed to wear to promote THQ's video game "Titan Quest." It was red, see-through, skimpy and, according to the new rules of the video game trade show known as E3, out of bounds.

"We're like, there's no way we're going out there," Jackie, who does not use her last name, and another model recalled telling the seamstress who was on hand to help address this type of sartorial snafu.

But when E3 opened its doors at 9 a.m., Jackie was at her post at the THQ booth — saved by a quick-thinking seamstress who had made her outfit more demure by piecing together a lining out of white tablecloths.

Costumes at this year's annual trade show at the Los Angeles Convention Center were more sedate — at least by E3 standards — because of tougher enforcement of an existing ban on sexually explicit or provocative booth materials. New rules impose a maximum $5,000 penalty for exhibitors whose models are nude, partially nude or wearing bathing suit bottoms.

And to make sure the rules were followed, there were enforcers whose job it was to roam the aisles making sure "booth babes" didn't reveal too much.

But rules, of course, are made to be bent. And it turned out E3 has provided a way to do just that. In short, models are allowed to show more skin if they are embodying a particular provocatively dressed video game character.

THQ seized on this loophole Wednesday to dress model Dionne Hudson as a prostitute who appears in its "Saints Row" game — complete with a short, black leather skirt, fishnet stockings and tank top.

"Last year, I was more covered up," Hudson said.

Show organizers refused to discuss the costume crackdown or permit a reporter to watch the wardrobe patrol in action.

A nonscientific survey of the models on the floor Wednesday revealed some newfound modesty.

Meriah Nelson, a model at the Funcom booth, said she was instructed to wear "booty shorts" — undergarments that provide more coverage — to ensure against southern exposure. And before she and another model, Tiffany Selby, were allowed to don their lace-up sandals and Xena Warrior Princess-like tunics, the seamstress stitched their necklines to guard against too much cleavage.

And it was a good thing, too, Selby said, "because my [breasts] were coming out."
Not everyone was happy about the outbreak of relative tastefulness. Outside the convention center, Roisin Taylor and Niki Nicholson — both dressed in short skirts and white midriff T-shirts that exposed their navels — were protesting the new rules, holding placards that said, “Booth Babe Protest: I’m Rated ‘E’ for Everyone.”

But inside, another model applauded E3’s sudden restraint.

"I'm glad they're drawing the line," said Brittany Evans of Redondo Beach. "As a trade show model you're kind of at the mercy of the booth you're booked with. It can get out of control."

Evans was dressed as a character from Webzen's Huxley video game — a futuristic shooter in which women are clad in decidedly retrograde skin-tight black vinyl dresses that expose lots of leg and cleavage, fishnet stockings and knee-high boots. But she has worn less. She said auto shows are notorious for putting their models in "pasties" and skirts "so short their butts hang out."

"You leave it to men to costume, and this is what you end up with," Evans said of those auto show gigs. "If I'm supposed to be carrying on conversations with people, give me some clothes, please."

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