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Solitaire skills draw \$25,000 payday

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"You can win money playing Solitaire?"

Even Amy Demerath wasn't convinced she should take it seriously. But if competitive hot dog eating can be profitable, then yes, there's also money to be made by playing online Solitaire.

Having walked away with \$25,000 at the FUN Technologies' W3games last weekend, Demerath, of Pittsfield, can vouch for the value of casual games as more than a simple time waster.

The 26-year-old earned first runner-up honors at the casual games world championship in Los Angeles by outlasting 68 other finalists from around the world.

"It takes a lot of skill," Demerath said. "It's not as easy as people think ... because of the speed."

The head-to-head tournament consisted of six rounds of strategic game play in three of the most popular casual games on the Internet: Bejeweled 2, Solitaire and Zuma.

Demerath and other participants in the W3Games qualified by playing online tournaments at FUN Technologies' casual games sites, WorldWinner and SkillJam, or at any of FUN's partner sites including GSN.com, MSN Games and Real Networks.

The contestants, ranging in age from 20 to 63, represented 22 states and six countries.

While she couldn't top million-dollar winner Kavitha Yalavarthi of Odessa, Tex., Demerath said it was a nailbiter.

"We were forced to play tiebreakers," she said. "In the end, I think she only beat me by 50 points. It wasn't much, that's for sure, and I did better than I thought I would."

Demerath said she's supposed to get her winnings after the W3Games final round airs Dec. 3 on the Game Show Network. She plans to put the money toward a house.