

## "World's Best Casual Gamer" wants to be a lawyer

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By Lisa Baertlein

LOS ANGELES, Dec 8 (Reuters Life!) - The video game pro circuit is a man's world, but the \$1 million jackpot of the year went to Kavitha Yalavarthi, who used her piano-trained hands to pound rivals for the title of "World's Best Casual Gamer."

A "newbie" to the competitive game scene, the 21-year-old aspiring lawyer brought out the testosterone-fueled game crowd's envious side in September when she took home the giant check from FUN Technologies' first WorldWide Web Games competition in Hollywood, California.

"I think a lot of people don't think I deserve to have won this much money because I'm not a professional gamer," said Yalavarthi, who dominated the contest's three games:

"Solitaire," "Bejeweled 2" and "Zuma."

"I think I deserve it," she said, noting that she was the competition's top-seeded player and overcame intense pressure to grab the crown.

Casual games focus on skill and memory and appeal overwhelmingly to women in their 30s. Still, they account for a fraction of the nearly \$30 billion global game market and are overshadowed by the console games favored by men in their late teens and early 20s, where shooting, racing and sports are dominant themes.

Elite male professional gamers such as Johnathan "Fatal1ty" (eds: cq Johnathan and Fatal1ty) Wendel and Tom "Tsquared" Taylor collect winnings from various tournaments and boast six-figure annual earnings.

Yalavarthi, who lives in Austin, Texas, said the journey from the days when her mom was her fiercest competitor and her game winnings came in at around a dollar or two has been a trip in more ways than one.

She questioned the legitimacy of the contest, even after she won the qualifying round.

"I didn't really believe it until my travel documentation came in. I figured, if I don't get a million dollars, at least I'll get a trip to L.A.," she said. Those doubts should completely dissolve in January, when she is slated to receive the first of 10 annual payments of \$100,000.

She said her father, who is protective of his only child, still has reservations: "I think he's still a little bit skeptical, but he's getting better about it."

On the other hand, her mother likes to point out that she introduced her teenaged daughter to gaming.

The champion pegs her to success to years spent tickling the ivories, saying all that time on the piano bench gave her a leg-up in the competition -- coverage of which aired last Sunday on GSN, a gamer-focused U.S. television network owned by Sony Pictures Entertainment and Liberty Media Corp.

"My fingers are really fast. I've played piano since I was 3, it is so good for hand-eye coordination," said Yalavarthi, who is engaged to her long-time sweetheart, a medical student who encouraged her to enter the contest.

She said there hasn't been a lot of downside to winning -- aside from numerous calls from "investment groups" offering a lump-sum payment of around \$750,000 in exchange for her interval payments and an overzealous admirer who prompted her to change her telephone number.

Meanwhile, she's hoping her unique standing in the video game world will make her a standout with law school admissions officers.

"I'm not sure if they'd see that as a positive thing or not," she said.

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