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Feed the hungry with virtual chess? Your move, sport

By **Lisa Fernandez**
Mercury News

Article Launched: 11/13/2008 05:27:57 PM PST

Bob Burkhalter of Sunnyvale wants to host the biggest virtual chess game in the world and donate half the prize money to hungry children in Silicon Valley.

If the 62-year-old Web programmer can pull it off, judges from Guinness World Records are standing by, ready to put the feat in the history books.

"I'm excited," Burkhalter said. "I'd love to put a dent in world hunger with this chess game."

Registration kicked off on Veterans Day and information can be found at chessfordollars.com/game.

It costs \$2 to play. Burkhalter said 75 cents of each entry fee will go to the prize pool of the round-robin tournament and broken down into first, second and third prizes; 75 cents will go to Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. (Burkhalter will earn 15 cents from each participant and PayPal will get the rest.)

The winning chess players likely won't be known for about eight weeks. But Burkhalter said he'd cut the check to the food bank just before Thanksgiving.

"I think it's great someone in the community is taking the initiative to do something like this," said Second Harvest spokeswoman Lynn Crocker. She added it's especially nice when people come up with creative ways to help the hungry. For example, Crocker said sometimes people donate \$1 for every pound they lose.

Second Harvest collected and distributed 34.6 million pounds of food last year, and the food bank typically feeds 170,000 people a month. Crocker said every \$1,000 donation buys 2,000 meals.

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Playing chess to help ease hunger is high on Burkhalter's priority list.

And he dreams that thousands of chess players would sign on to play and jubilantly shout "Checkmate" at their coffeehouse laptops. Of course, he's open about wanting to turn a profit too, after several years of being mostly unemployed and raising two children on his wife's salary.

To get the word out about the game, Burkhalter connected with Quentin Turner of ChessUSA.com. Turner sent out an e-mail to 7,500 customers this week, asking them to play the online game that utilizes Burkhalter's software program.

"I've played about 20 games on the system," said Harold Johnsen, 60, a certified public accountant in Pleasant Hill and Burkhalter's former roommate at Concordia College in Wisconsin. "It works. It was fun. I played one guy in Italy, people on the East Coast and several people from the Bay Area."

Burkhalter's interest in chess blossomed when he was a member of his high school chess club more than 40 years ago. But the idea for the virtual game didn't start forming until 2001. That's the year Burkhalter was laid off from his computer programming job at FedEx. For a time, he dabbled in wedding photography. But he missed computer

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Bob Burkhalter sits next to a black knight, a giant chess piece at the... (KAREN T. BORCHERS)

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programming.

Sipping coffee with a friend three years ago, Burkhalter decided it would be great if he could blend his programming skills with the game of chess. Sometime after, he added the charity component.

It's taken Burkhalter two years to create software that would enable large numbers of people across the globe to play cheat-free, 30-minute blitz chess games. There are other virtual chess sites like this out there, but Burkhalter said his program allows the users to negotiate their own mutually agreeable start times. Most other chess sites set fixed start times that all the players must agree to, which Burkhalter said is difficult to arrange in a global tournament.

Contact Lisa Fernandez at lfernandez@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5002.

THE ONLINE GAMES

When: Registration began Monday and ends Nov. 25. The games will run for about eight weeks.

Where: chessfordollars.com/game

Entry fee: \$2. Of that, 75 cents of each entry fee goes to the prize pool, and Second Harvest Food Bank also gets 75 cents from each fee.

More information: E-mail info@chess-for-charity.com.

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