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Lamorinda Struck with Pokemon Fever

By Adam Blake



A Golduck relaxes in the Rheem Valley Pet Shoppe. Photos Jaya Griggs

Whether it's at the Lafayette Park Plaza, the Orinda Library, or the Moraga Commons, herds of gamers can be seen roving the community in pursuit of virtual creatures on their smartphones. The Pokémon Go craze has hit Lamorinda along with the rest of the nation as players of all ages feel they "Gotta catch'em all!" as the old Pokémon theme song declared.

The app is being hailed as the first large-scale augmented reality game, and uses the smartphone's camera and GPS to bring fantastical monsters into the player's actual environment.

Different physical locations serve as "Pokéstops" where players can collect items they can use to capture more Pokémon.

Unlike conventional video games, the app draws players outside of their house and into the real world as they explore and engage their surrounding environment.

"It definitely has me going places I don't normally go. I barely ever go to the reservoir but I actually made plans to go there to play," Lafayette resident Sam Stack said.

Pokemon started out as video games for the original Game Boy in 1995, and quickly expanded to trading cards, television shows and movies. In the alternate universe, humans catch and tame little monsters called "Pokémon" and then train them to battle each other.

San Francisco-based developer Niantic is responsible for the new game, which has toppled records for downloads and activity and sent Nintendo stocks skyrocketing. With the media franchise's tremendous comeback, many players are experiencing a wave of nostalgia as their childhood dream of catching Pokémon turned into a reality.

"I actually wished something like this would happen because when I was little I'd always play around with my friends and imagine catching Pokémon so this is basically a part of my youth come to life," Stack said.

Businesses across the nation are scrambling to find ways to profit off the phenomenon and draw players into their stores. Though the impact of Pokémon Go on many Lamorinda businesses is unclear at this point, employees have certainly noticed its popularity in public.

"Customers pretty regularly come up to me and ask me if I know anything about nearby pokéstops," Lafayette Whole Foods employee Chris Mickas said. "I'm not sure that it affects our business very much, but it does seem like some people come into the store just to look for Pokémon."

As the game trailblazes the nascent realm of augmented reality technology, it has exposed major concerns following a slew of troubling incidents resulting from the game. From a distracted player driving off a cliff in Southern California to robbers using it to lure victims in Missouri, the game has come under fire.

Though nothing to this degree of severity has been reported in the suburbs of the East Bay, qualms about distracted, disruptive players wandering around have surfaced. Police across the nation have issued statements warning players to stay alert and exercise caution as they catch Pokemon. Even PG&E recently issued a warning to players to stay a safe distance from gas facilities and equipment.

"The game is starting to pose a little bit of a security risk for the Camp Galileo campus in San Ramon as many nearby residents enter the school searching for the nearby pokéstops during camp hours," said camp instructor and Lafayette resident Jared Ericksen. "I have to talk to at least eight different people a day, asking them to leave the camp so that the safety of our campers is ensured."

Acalanes student and avid player Peyton Li has caught over 100 Pokémon all over the Bay, including downtown Lafayette, Walnut Creek, UC Berkeley and UC Davis. He says that the stigma about distracted players does not reflect his experience with the game.

"The game is convenient because it doesn't require a person to be staring at his screen while walking," Li said. "Instead it vibrates when a Pokémon appears so people can be aware of their surroundings until a Pokémon appears. Overall I don't think the stereotype that everyone is distracted and walking around causing chaos is true."

Time will tell if the novelty will wear off, but in the meantime, don't be surprised if someone with their eyes glued to their smartphone bumps into you exclaiming, "Charizard escaped my pokéball!"



A wild Eevee was recently spotted at Orinda Theatre Square.

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