

Monster Hunter Now strips the MonHun experience down to its very basics

There are few game titles more literal than *Monster Hunter*. This is a world filled with monsters, and your job is to hunt them. But what makes the series so engrossing is the gameplay loop tied to those hunts: the way you prepare by collecting the right gear, weapons, and potions; how you spend time studying your target before heading into battle; and finally, using the downed monster to craft better gear so you can take on even more challenging beasts. It's a long and involved process but also one that feels so satisfying when you pull it off.

Monster Hunter Now, a collaboration between Capcom and *Pokémon Go* developer Niantic, attempts to take that formula and streamline it into something that works in short bursts on your phone. In a lot of ways, it's successful: the hunts in *Now* are quick little battles that you can mostly complete in under a minute while waiting in line for coffee. But while the game feels good in those sessions, it is missing much of the strategy and planning that *MonHun* uses to get its hooks into you. *Monster Hunter Now* has a lot of potential, but in its current form, it's more of an introductory *MonHun* than something that will satisfy existing players.

The game actually has a story, which is about the *MonHun* realm bleeding over into our world – a bit like the *Monster Hunter* movie starring Milla Jovovich – but it's mostly just an excuse for you to walk around killing monsters. *Now* is a location-based game from Niantic very much in the same mold as *Pokémon*

Go and its less successful successors. That means that you'll have to go out into the real world to find locations for mining resources or to seek out monsters. The game doesn't count your steps – there's always *Pikmin Bloom* for that – but getting out of the house is a big part of the experience.

What really makes *Monster Hunter Now* different is its battles, which are the main focus. Initially, combat is pretty straightforward. When you first get into a battle (which you do by tapping a monster near you on the map), the controls are very simple: you tap on the monster in front of you to attack and swipe right or left to dodge. It's very easy and, at least at first, I was able to win basically every battle just by quickly tapping on the monster in front of me. But as you level up and progress through the story, the combat expands quite a bit.

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Most importantly, you unlock bigger and more dangerous monsters to fight. Not only do they look great, with detail and animations that rival the console *Monster Hunter* games, but also they add some much-needed challenge. The larger beasts require heavily upgraded gear and well-timed dodges to succeed. No matter what, the battles are over very quickly – in fact, if you don't finish a battle in 75 seconds, you'll fail – but it's impressive how much action is packed into that short timeframe.

In addition to more creatures to fight, you'll also steadily unlock more weapons and, with them, abilities. You have to forge all of your own gear and, eventually, you'll be able to craft a number of weapon types that all feel very different, from devastating but slow greatswords to ranged weapons like a bow and arrow. As you level up those weapons, you can also

unlock special attacks that charge up during a battle, and soon, you'll be able to target specific parts of a monster, just like in the mainline *MonHun* games. Yes, you can still chop off a Barroth's tail.

The problem is that, while the combat gets more challenging over time, the strategy never changes all that much. No matter what gear I have equipped or what beast I'm up against, the battles always play out the same: spam the attack button until the monster flashes red (a sign they're about to attack), dodge until I'm safe, and then repeat. Maybe I'll have to down a potion if my timing is off a bit, but otherwise, things mostly play out the same. Whenever I do die, it's usually because my gear is too weak, not because my strategy wasn't sound.

What's missing is the "hunt" part of *Monster Hunter*. I don't have to learn anything about my prey to be successful or master a specific style of fighting, and there's simply not enough time in a battle for there to be much differentiation between the beasts. They look different, but defeating them is pretty much the same across the board. And outside of combat, there's not much to do besides mine for resources at real-world points of interest, which you can use – along with monster parts you get from battle – to improve your gear or make new stuff.

All that said, the skeleton of a solid *MonHun* mobile game is here. *Now* looks great, has a slick battle system tuned for a smartphone, and even includes some very clever quality-of-life features, like paintballs that let you mark monsters in the field so you can battle them later from home. There's a lot of room to grow – and considering the way *Pokémon Go* added key features years after launch, *Monster Hunter Now* could follow a similar trajectory if it's successful.

But that's a big if. While *Pokémon Go* remains a success, it's otherwise been a rough road for location-based mobile games,

and not only those from Niantic. And while *Monster Hunter* has a strong portable pedigree, that's no guarantee of long-term success here. Right now, the game nails the monster part of the experience – I'm just waiting to finally feel like a hunter.

Monster Hunter Now launches on September 14th on iOS and Android.

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