

Monster Hunter: World is Capcom's best-selling game – and it's about to get even bigger

In the early '90s, *Street Fighter II* was everywhere. It dominated arcades and became a best-seller on home consoles like the Super Nintendo. It was this overwhelming success and cultural impact that made Kaname Fujioka want to work at Capcom. He got his wish a few years after *SFII* launched, and during his early years at the company he witnessed yet another breakout hit with the original *Resident Evil*, which went on to spawn a massive entertainment franchise.

Fujioka eventually shifted his focus to the *Monster Hunter* franchise, which historically had been one of Japan's biggest game series, but also one that failed to garner much global attention. But that all changed with last year's *Monster Hunter: World*, which to date has sold more than 12 million copies, making it Capcom's best-selling game of all time. "To be honest, it still doesn't feel like it's real," Fujioka told *The Verge* last week at E3 in Los Angeles. "The fact that, all these years later, I've made this game that goes beyond all of those, at some level it feels unreal to me."

His next task is to make that experience even bigger. In September, Capcom will launch *Monster Hunter World: Iceborne*, the first major expansion for the game. As the name implies, *Iceborne* introduces a new arctic region, which developers say will be the largest locale in the game so far. The original *World* introduced a number of changes to make the experience more approachable – namely offering a huge world to explore and launching on consoles and PC instead of handhelds – and *Iceborne* looks to build on that template.

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According to Fujioka, the *Monster Hunter* team originally designed the base game with the intention of adding an expansion later down the line. It's something of a tradition for the series, which typically adds new "G-rank" areas and monsters to give players a greater challenge after finishing the main game. But even though they knew an expansion was a possibility, the team really didn't start thinking about the finer details until after *World* launched and became a hit. "We didn't want to get too far ahead of ourselves because *Monster Hunter: World* was a big challenge for us," explains Fujioka, who served as both executive director and art director on the game.

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When it came time to plan out the expansion, an arctic region made sense for a few reasons. For one, it was vastly different from any of the biomes in *World*, making it look immediately distinct for returning players, and the frigid nature of the region made it a good fit for more challenging gameplay. Fujioka had also always wanted to put areas with really deep snow into a *Monster Hunter* game – he says he loves the atmosphere this creates – but technology hadn't really allowed it before. Once the decision was made, the rest of the expansion grew organically, in particular the monsters. "We don't design a world for them," Fujioka explains. "We make a world, and then we put monsters in there, and we design them to be convincing in terms of the ecology."

Iceborne features a number of new beasts, including a gigantic horned creature called Banbaro, and a snake-like monstrosity called Beotodus, which tunnels underneath the snow for surprise attacks. And with *World's* holistic approach to design, new monsters mean more gear. Since everything you can craft in the game comes from the monsters you hunt, the introduction of new beasts means new winter-themed armor and

weapons to go along with them. There are even some adorable new outfits for your cat-like Palico companion, including one armor set that looks like puffy snowboarding gear. Gameplay-wise, perhaps the biggest addition is a new grappling hook tool that lets you latch on to giant enemies. You can then cling to their bodies and attack, as if you were playing *Shadow of the Colossus*.

There are also a number of changes based on feedback from players. *Iceborne* will feature new three-player hunting options, as well as a difficulty level that will scale to correspond to the number of people in your party; so if someone has to leave early, the monsters won't be too hard to take down. One of the most impressive things about the original *World* was its massive city-like home base, which felt like a real, lived-in place. But it was also perhaps too huge: players complained it took forever to run errands in between hunts. *Iceborne* will alleviate this with a smaller, more condensed camp – but one that still feels appropriate to the game. “It still fits with the storyline, because you’ve only just arrived at this new frontier, and it’s cold,” says Fujioka. “So it’s natural to start off with a small base.”

Iceborne is launching in September 6th, and for brand-new players it'll also be available as a bundle with the original *Monster Hunter: World*. (A beta for PS4 users launches this Friday.) It'll be the latest release in a growing resurgence for Capcom, which started with *Resident Evil 7* and continued with games like *Devil May Cry 5*. Fujioka says that there's a real sense of collaboration at the company that's led to this golden period, where the various game teams share ideas and technology. When I spoke to *DMC5* director Hideaki Itsuno earlier this year, for instance, he said he played a lot of *World* to pull ideas from. (When I told Fujioka about this, he sounded both flattered and surprised, saying “I guess [Itsuno]

could've come and spoken to us.")

But beyond that, the expansion is also the latest step for *Monster Hunter* as a franchise in its continued quest for global domination. Soon it'll even be a live-action Hollywood movie. "It's difficult to say when we achieved our mission," says Fujioka of the game's success, "because that would make it seem like the job is done."

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