A bite-sized adventure that puts a wrench into the classic Zelda formula

There are a lot of games that try to emulate *The Legend of Zelda*, but few that manage to capture that spirit in such a small, concise package as *Ratcheteer DX*. The postapocalyptic game only takes a few hours to complete, but over that span it nails the classic *Zelda* vibe almost perfectly, offering a real sense of adventure along with the satisfaction of figuring things out on your own.

The game is set in a bleak future when most of humanity is hibernating beneath the Earth's surface in order to wait out an ice age. To keep things going, mechanics are awakened every so often to perform maintenance on all of the machinery that keeps everyone alive. But when your character wakes up, basically everything has gone wrong: facilities like the power plant and water treatment facility have broken down, and your mentor has gone missing. Fixing all of that involves navigating plentiful obstacles both below and above the surface.

When I say *Ratcheteer DX* is like *Zelda*, I mean old-school, NES or Game Boy-era *Zelda*. It's a top-down game made up of chunky pixels, and you're given very little information on what to do or how to do it. Things have been streamlined a bit, but the focus is really on figuring out how to solve problems and make your way through the world.

To do this, you'll slowly get your hands on new items, which can dramatically change how the game plays. You start out with a simple lantern, which lights the gloom and can be used to

power certain machinery (and annoy certain enemies), but eventually you'll get a wrench that serves as a weapon, the ability to jump, and more. Each unassuming item opens the game up in new ways, either making you more powerful or opening up pathways or, in some instances, both.

I never felt too lost or frustrated, but *Ratcheteer DX* is also challenging enough that it still felt satisfying when I made my way through a dungeon or a labyrinth of caves to find my next destination. I also found myself surprisingly invested in the story: it's told minimally through brief bits of dialogue, but you can dig into some optional texts that flesh out the world, and there's even a cryptic language you can decipher to learn more. The worldbuilding adds another layer that made me even more interested in exploring further.

Much like the oddball channel-surfing simulator *Blippo Plus*, *Ratcheteer DX* is actually an enhanced version of a game that originally launched on the Playdate. On Panic's handheld, *Ratcheteer DX* was a dark and cramped experience, which felt right with the mood of the world. The full-color upgrade makes it a more enjoyable game; it's easier to explore on a larger screen, and you don't have to do as much item-swapping in *DX*, which is a nice change. If you're still looking for that more lo-fi experience, the game offers three other visual options: black-and-white, Playdate-style grayscale, and "pea soup," which looks a lot like the original Game Boy display.

However you play it, *Ratcheteer DX* offers a delightfully streamlined version of *Zelda* that deftly balances challenge and approachability. And as the actual *Zelda* series continues to get larger and more expansive, games like *Ratcheteer DX* are a welcome throwback to a simpler time.

Ratcheteer DX *is available now on the Switch, PC, and Mac.*

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