

# Ghost in the Dreamcast: Ludomusical Hauntology and Pleasures of a 90s Cross-Franchise Specter

**Milly Rose Gunn**

School of Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London  
New Cross  
London SE14 6NW  
m.gunn@gold.ac.uk

## Keywords

ludomusicology, sega, 1990s, hauntology, autoethnography, nostalgia

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s, *Sonic Adventure* (1998) emerged as a flagship title for Sega's Dreamcast, becoming a defining installation in the franchise's history. Yet hidden within the urban architecture of Station Square and its casino-themed pin-ball level was an uncanny echo of another Sega property: *NiGHTS into Dreams* (1996). This paper examines how a minor element of cross-franchise marketing gave rise to an unintended spectral presence, particularly through the level's musical backdrop. The result is not simply a cameo, but a musical and aesthetic rupture that lingers as a trace from another game world—an intertextual haunting embedded in the “wrong” context.

While previous readings of hauntology emphasise temporal disjunction, this paper argues that such ludomusical hauntings also reveal the pleasurable textures of misrecognition, ambiguity, and discovery inherent in 1990s gaming cultures. Framed by Derrida's hauntology, where “the time is out of joint” (1993, p.20), this research considers how a displaced soundtrack creates an affective space that is simultaneously both unsettling and enticing. As Robertson (2014) notes, hauntology dissolves clear boundaries of time and being; here, it also dissolves boundaries of franchise identity, platform familiarity, and player knowledge. *Sonic Adventure* becomes haunted by a pleasurable wrongness in the form of a sonic intrusion from a comparatively lesser known Sega lineage that generated friction and fascination in equal measure, when analysed through an autoethnographic lens of the late 1990s.

Drawing on ludomusicology (Cheng, 2014) and autoethnographic methods (Brown, 2015; Manning & Adams, 2015), this paper analyses the affective pleasures of encountering this misplaced music as a child of the 1990s with no context and no explanation. In a pre-Google, pre-YouTube era,

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

players lacked the informational infrastructure to categorise these fragments. As a result, the *NiGHTs* Casinopolis pinball level became a site of sensory estrangement, where misfiled sounds and images fostered moments of awe and unfamiliarity. One player recalls: “When I first played [*Sonic Adventure*] as a kid I had no idea what [*NiGHTS*] was, so this section of the casino area completely freaked me out. Felt like I discovered some magical shit I wasn’t supposed to find” (camerongranger6301, 2022). Such testimonies found within many player accounts of the level illustrate the messy, intersectional pleasures of play in such an era of time, encountering pleasures shaped by technological limitations, platform loyalties, and a lack of access to paratextual materials and emergent fandoms.

The haunting is intensified by the nature of the game’s music loop. Game audio is (oftentimes) designed to repeat seamlessly, but when a loop is borrowed from another title, repetition becomes a repetitive echo from elsewhere. Casinopolis encourages players to linger, particularly in the *NiGHTS* pinball machine, which offers one of the most effective methods for accumulating in-game currency, which is the overall goal of the level. As a result, players hear the displaced soundtrack repeatedly, its roughly forty-eight-second loop cycling far more often than Marks and Novak’s recommendation for composers that “the loop should be as long as possible” to avoid listener fatigue (2009). The brevity of the loop makes the intrusion even more noticeable, turning mechanical repetition into a sustained encounter with a musical fragment that feels both familiar and strangely out of place.

By reading this cross-franchise specter through the lens of intersectional pleasures, this paper foregrounds how seemingly marginal moments illuminate broader dynamics of 1990s gaming. These hauntings emerged amidst the meeting of sensory experience, platform politics, and player positionality. The textures of sound and space within this instance intertwine with Sega’s evolving brand identities and with the formative influences of childhood memory, nostalgia, and differing levels of cultural access. They reveal how pleasure in games is not always tied to mastery or narrative coherence, but often to ambiguity and the unresolved. This paper argues that the accidental haunting of *Sonic Adventure* by *NiGHTS* helps us begin to understand how players navigated the ludic and game-musical ecosystems of the 1990s, at a time where the unexplained remained so for a long time, and how these moments of confusion and lack of understanding became central to the affective and pleasurable fabric of play.

Beyond its immediate narrative or musical curiosity, the presence of *NiGHTS* within *Sonic Adventure* also points to the contingent nature of media circulation in the late 1990s. These were years in which branding experiments, half-formed corporate strategies, and the shifting fortunes of console manufacturers left behind traces that players would encounter only partially or accidentally. The Casinopolis level becomes a microcosm of this

wider instability: a space where the boundaries between franchises and genres could blur. In this sense, the appearance of the *NiGHTS* musical motif reflects not only an aesthetic decision but also the uneven pressures of a company attempting to position itself within an increasingly fragmented and competitive market.

This broader context helps explain why such a small fragment could become so affectively charged. When players encountered these misplaced elements, they often did so without the interpretive tools to situate them, leading to encounters shaped by sensory intensity rather than cognitive clarity. The Dreamcast itself, with its ambitious but short-lived lifespan, further inflects these experiences with a retrospective sense of fragility. Revisiting these moments therefore becomes a way of tracing how players produce meaning not just from what games communicate directly, but from what they leave unexplained. In exploring these residual elements, the paper highlights how cross-franchise traces become unexpectedly rich sites for thinking about memory, affect, and the uneven textures of 1990s play.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, A., 2015. Awkward: the importance of reflexivity in using ethnographic methods. In *Game Research Methods* (pp. 77-92).
- Cheng, W., 2014. *Sound play: Video games and the musical imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J., 2012. *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. Routledge.
- Janik, J., 2019. Ghosts of the present past: Spectrality in the video game object.
- Manning, J. and Adams, T.E., 2015. Popular culture studies and autoethnography: An essay on method.
- Marks, A. and Novak, J., 2008. *Game development essentials: Game audio development*. Delmar Learning
- Robertson, A., 2014. *Gaming with Ghosts: Hauntology, Metanarrative, and Gamespace in Video Games* (Doctoral dissertation, Carleton University).
- Sega (1996) *NiGHTS into Dreams...* [Video game]. Sega Saturn. Tokyo: Sega.

Sega (1998) *Sonic Adventure* [Video game]. Dreamcast. Tokyo: Sega.