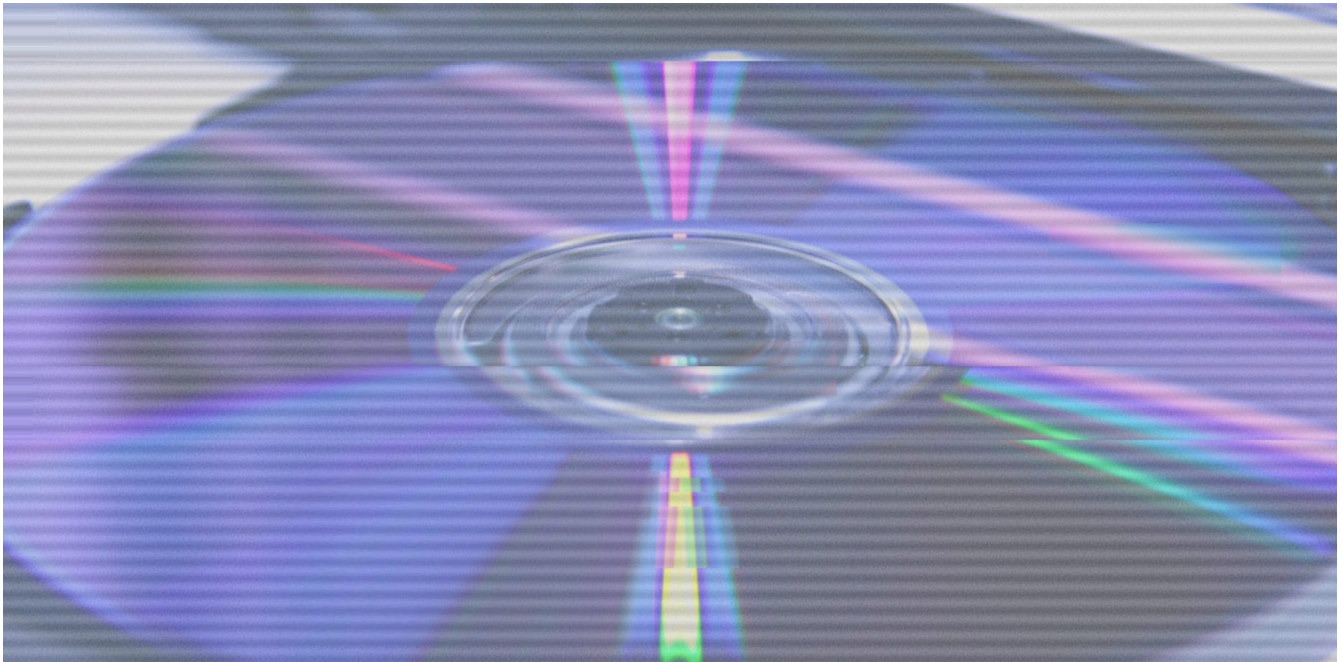




## STAY ON TRACK

by [Alex J. Tunney](#) | Jun 12, 2023 | [Creative Nonfiction](#), [The Attic](#)



For a series whose mainline games were all about speed, a Sonic the Hedgehog racing game should have been a no-brainer. Now, with adult eyes, I can tell you *Sonic R* (Sega, 1997) is an appetizer platter of a game that was often more frustrating than it was fun. It attempts to combine the exploration of Sonic's platformer origins with the structure of a racing game. It paled in comparison to *Mario Kart 64* (Nintendo, 1996), the game's direct competition, which was larger in scale and all but perfected the genre the year before.

As a kid, however, my sole thought process was that it was a game with Sonic in it. Because of this fact, I wrung enjoyment over multiple sessions through sheer force of will. Playing it over and over again on my family's home computer, the cartoonish skidding sound of every character making a sharp turn has etched a groove in my brain.

But I don't cherish *Sonic R* for its gameplay, I cherish it for its soundtrack.

Music from early games in the Sonic franchise could be considered to fall within the electropop genre with some house and techno influences of the early-to-mid 90s being brought in following years. It's hard put a definite genre label on the music as much of it was composed to match the locales and biomes of the zones themselves and digitized so that the Sega Genesis' hardware could play it.

*Sonic R*'s soundtrack would continue to stay within the realm of pop and dance music. However, there would be two major differences. One, the Sega Saturn could play CD quality music which allowed for vocals. Two, with British composer Richard Jacques and British singer TJ Davis, the soundtrack fit right in with the European pop and dance music popular during the late 90s.

The lyrics of the songs didn't always lend themselves to being about racing as, outside of "Super Sonic Racing," the songs are loosely about romance, escapism and being a part of a community. For example, "Can You Feel The Sunshine?" the theme for the Resort Island track, asks the listener the titular question while encouraging them to look towards brighter days in dark moments. Saccharine as they were, the songs were full of energy and had a high enough BPM to keep players like me racing.

In my memories, the late 1990s and the music that played during that time, are characterized by feelings of joy and are full of energy and motion. Radio stations Z100 (WHTZ) and WKTU provided the background music of the bus rides to and from the pool during summer day camp as a preteen. The lyrics of these songs

were either intentional nonsense or they were wrapped in metaphors that I didn't fully comprehend as a kid. But it didn't matter as they were bombastic and exuberant all the same. The pop and dance music on the radio made me want to move my body and the Sonic songs made me want to run around, either in real life or as Sonic in the games.

The first two CDs that I bought for myself were: *Spiceworld* (1997) and *Backstreet Boys* (US Version, 1997). The third was *Californication* (1999). Now, I liked the Red Hot Chili Peppers, at least the music they put out in the nineties and early aughts, and my music tastes did change and expand as I became a preteen and, later, a teenager.

But because of long-lasting notions of about what adulthood and masculinity looked like and the general melancholic miasma of being an American teenager in the aughts, I adopted the idea that getting older and being a man meant adopting an air of seriousness. *Californication* became one of many pop-cultural smokescreens to disguise my emerging sexuality. The first two albums I mentioned prior became guilty pleasures that I would disavow in music discussions with my friends. With it, the *Sonic R* soundtrack became something to mock, not celebrate.

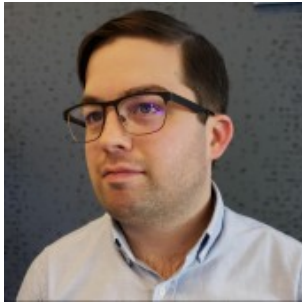
Real adulthood, not the pretense of it, is understanding there is artifice in all creative work. It is realizing that art is not more authentic just because it makes you feel negative emotions. It is understanding that complicated doesn't always mean more interesting. Yes, while simplicity can signal shallowness, it can just as equally be a sign of sincerity. Songs for a video game can create some real feelings and creating music people want to dance to is a worthwhile artistic endeavor.

I am now a distance away from my teenage years and the stifling ideas that typified the dour decade of the 2000s for me. With a fuller understanding of myself, I can return to the adrenaline rush and the unabashed joy that the *Sonic R* soundtrack had brought me. At the very least, it keeps me motivated on my daily walks.

*Sonic R* is a game about running in circles (oddly shaped loops, really) as most racing games are. Sometimes going around and around can be limiting or confining. But sometimes you do need to return to where you began to see how far you've come. Very often, the finish line is just the other side of the start line.

*Photo* by [Jonathan Weatherill-Hunt](#), used and adapted under [CC](#).

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Alex J. Tunney is a writer in New York. His writing has been published in *Lambda Literary Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Pine Hills Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *First Person Scholar*, *Fauxmoir*, *Complete Sentence*, *The Inquisitive Eater* and *The Billfold*. An essay of his will be included in the upcoming collection, *Where To Hang The Hat: Storytellers on Sondheim* (Alternating Current Press).