

# Getting musical on a Friday night: The effects of *Friday Night Funkin'* on undergraduate students' musical phrasing ability

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## Abstract

*Research has shown that video games allow players to informally learn through self-direction and agency. Many of these studies focus on increasing skills like rhythm, matching-pitch, and the transfer of direct instrumental skills. However, there is little research on musical phrasing, which is how a musician separates successive notes to create groupings, similar to linguistic phrases. This study examines if playing music video games can increase the musical phrasing ability of amateur musicians. Study participants were divided into two groups, with the experimental group playing *Friday Night Funkin'*, a popular music game visually showing phrasing, and the control group playing *Sparebeat*, a similar game without the visual representation of phrasing. Participants were administered a pre-test to measure their current phrasing ability, and a post-test after playing their assigned game for 3 weeks to measure whether their musical phrasing ability had increased due to the game or not. Because of the small sample size, no decisive conclusions can be drawn; however, initial observations reveal that participant scores on the pre- and post-tests lowered as the examples became longer. Further research needs to be done with a larger sample size and using the same questions in the pre- and post-test.*

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## Introduction

The informal learning that draws many players to music video games has been well-researched. Many of these studies focus on potential improvement of musical skills like rhythm and matching pitch after playing

music video games. However, other vital musical skills like musical phrasing are often left out of the discussion. This study examines the effect of playing the music video game *Friday Night Funkin'* on the

musical phrasing skills of amateur undergraduate musicians.

### Literature Review

Informal learning is any learning that does not take place in the classroom or with specific instruction (Park, Li, & Luo, 2021) which is evident in the self-directed nature of video games (Cassidy & Paisley, 2013). Informal learning is also seen in music when students have agency in what they play and who they play with (Wallerstedt & Lindgren, 2016). Video games that feature either matching (e.g., rhythm matching, artist-matching), mixing (arranging pre-existing musical samples), music-making (composition of melodies), or metonymy (themes involving music) can be defined as music video games (Austin, 2016). Current research explores the change of musical skills through informal learning due to casual or guided playing of rhythm music video games (Cassidy & Paisley, 2013), and much of the research is conducted on undergraduate students with amateur musical ability (Paney & Tharp, 2021). Most skills tested throughout the literature are rhythm (Sakkal & Martin, 2019), matching-pitch (Paney, 2015), and the transfer of similar skills in video games to traditional music instruments (Cassidy & Paisley, 2013).

This study examined musical phrasing as little-known research exists on the topic. A musical phrase is a complete musical thought, similar to sentences used to convey a complete thought in language, and it helps listeners hear distinct parts of a piece of music and performers create their own interpretations (Chew, 2001). *Friday Night*

*Funkin'* is a web-based rhythm-matching music video game with various levels where the protagonist must defeat other characters in rap battles to progress. The player is prompted to press a button along with visuals that are preceded on the computer opponent's side which creates a call and response that may make phrase segmentation clearer than other rhythm games. A call and response is a segment of a piece played by one instrument and then repeated by a different instrument (Kernfeld, 2002). The current study measured whether playing *Friday Night Funkin'* with its call and response structure has any impact on musical phrasing ability of musically amateur undergraduate students.

### Methodology

16 participants began the study, but as it was 3 weeks long, there was high attrition, causing only 5 to complete the entire study and have viable data. Participants (N=5) were Millersville University non-music major undergraduate students with prior musical experience. The sample included male (n=1), female (n=4) and non-binary (n=1) participants with varying levels of previous video game experience. Participants were administered a musical phrasing pre-test with folk song examples from Ottoman's *Music for Sight Singing, tenth edition*. Each question had rows of dots, representing notes in which participants drew a line between dots to show the beginning and ending of phrases in each question. Participants were then randomly assigned to a control group (N=1) that played *Sparebeat* and an experimental group (N=4) that played

*Friday Night Funkin'* on their own time twice a week for 20-minute sessions. They submitted their play time and high score for a pre-selected song each week. Three weeks after the pre-test, the control and experimental groups met to be administered the musical phrasing post-test. Participants then completed a questionnaire which assessed their previous video game, musical, and phrasing experience.

### **Findings**

While the sample size is too small to state any conclusive findings, an independent samples t-test was run on the post-test scores, and it was found that playing *Friday Night Funkin'* had no effect on participants' phrasing ability. However, a Spearman correlation on prior videogame experience of the participants and their post-test scores found that participants who spent more hours per week gaming outside of study had higher post-test scores. This could mean that musicians who are very familiar with video games may derive a musical benefit from them, if not specifically an increase in phrasing ability from *Friday Night Funkin'*. Interestingly, one common error between participants in the pre- and post-tests was including one or two note phrases in the examples. This is likely due to the written and verbal instructions for the pre- and post-test that told participants to draw a vertical line at the beginning and ending of musical phrases. This influenced the perception of some participants to believe that phrases begin and end at separate

places in music when they actually begin and end at the same point.

### **Conclusion**

While the sample size is too small to make any definitive conclusions, the results imply that amateur musicians who regularly play video games may improve their musical skills by playing music video games. Future studies could focus on what aspects of video games could possibly be increasing the musical abilities of players and use a larger sample to further validate the results. Further research must be completed to understand why, in music video game studies specifically, the control group is regularly significantly smaller than the experimental group and how to retain these participants. On a broader level, research could also be done investigating the effect music video games that show phrasing like *Friday Night Funkin'* have on the pattern recognition abilities of non-musicians. The research could be expanded to find benefits for both musicians and non-musicians interested in music video games.

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**Recommended Citation**

Walters, T. (2023). Getting Musical on a Friday night: The effects of *Friday Night Funkin'* on undergraduate students' musical phrasing ability. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/music>