

A Basic Prima In How To Get Into TableTop Gaming Online

(and why I went with Roll20 over Fantasy Grounds)

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The following article is the personal opinion, with some documented information.

It is NOT a complete analysis of the available platforms,
this is a basic prima into getting into a game on one of them,
and the process of HOW to find one, nothing more.

Any negative experiences you encounter are not my responsibility. Please check any information from any platform mentioned, and protect yourself as you go, to help get the best experience.



INTRODUCTION

Again, another FaceBook post has brought me to write another article. This article is one on some simple ways to get into online gaming for those new to it, and want to play while they are either stuck at home (like the COVID-19 has caused) or through other reasons are unable to attend a regular gathering around a table.

This article will firstly cover the basics of online gaming. What are the main options for playing online only. You can use these in conjunction with a group around a table, but I am not touching on that in this article. I will touch on the two major platforms for an online Virtual Table Top (VTT), and give you an impression of them. Lastly; I will also cover how to post and find a game, with some detail of a few places where you can find a game, and how to find one.

BASICS

The simplest thing, is that online gaming IS different from table top, and at the same time, is almost the same. TTRPGs all have different mechanics, and tools for you to use them, around the table or not. VTTs take the place of some of the physical elements of those mechanics, while using the others.

With this I mean things like character recording, character sheets and things for the player are handled in the VTT software. Rather than a piece of paper. Dice rolls, token movement and all the mapping are done in the software as well. These however are just the mechanical elements of the game. Everything else (theatre of the mind, and suspension of disbelief) are all still there in the same way.

When starting out, the first question is almost always "What platform should I use?". In my opinion there are two that are the main platforms. While there are VR tables in Steam and other places, they are kludgy at best, and often lacking. They can certainly be difficult to manage with any kind of speed, so games can slow, but the cost of them is THE major factor. As I write this, an entry level VR headset is nearly \$2,000 AUS.

The first platform, is NOT the one I use. But I wanted to basically get to what I know better, so I can detail it a tad more. One thing to note, is that which one YOU choose, comes down to YOUR preferences. Nothing more. This article gives a starting point for you to get up and running with an online game.

The first application is *Fantasy Grounds (FG)*. This is an application that download onto your device. It has a couple of different subscription plans in the classic options, with a free sub as well. Prices top out at \$9.99 USD a month. Which is pretty good. A lot of MMOs are \$14.99 for a month. So; in comparison to them, it's decent. Though that value also comes from how often you use the application, and HOW you use it as well. The second application is *Roll20*. This is an online platform using a web browser to access, and my personal favourite of the two. *Roll20* is also a subscription based platform, with the same costs as *Fantasy Grounds* on a monthly basis.



So, what are the differences? Well, I am NOT going to write them all out here. Each has its own things it does, some better than the other platform, most the same. You can look at pricing tables on both sites (linked below) to figure out if they have what you want, for the cost. But I will touch on the highlights that made me pick Roll20.

I looked at what I could do on a Free account. On *FG (Fantasy Grounds)* a free account can't make a campaign. Like at all. Seems to be a major flaw in the platform. So, if you were unable to pay, you are unable to make your own campaign. That seemed (and still does) a massive no for me.

While I do pay for my sub, other players do not, and if they want to run a game, they can not do it easily on FG. On *Roll20* however I can. *Roll20* is fully usable on the free version, where some fundamentals are not available in FG at the same price point. You can not in fact even play in a game of someone with an "Ultimate" subscription on FG if you play for free. *Roll20* has no such restriction. So; FG force you to sub to play with those paying for the "Ultimate" sub. THAT to me is a major point for NOT using FG. I have friends whose game I could not enjoy, let alone join, if we used FG.

When you start to Sub, both give you additional features, and removes ads etc as well. Both give access to more and more, so check which one works for you, and which has what you need in it feature wise, and go with that.

I am not going to touch on the PROs and CONs of each platform. There are others that have done that, but what I will do instead, is comment on those things that you as a player and a GM need to know before making that choice. Just some points that I think need to be pointed out clearly, so you as the reader and player can make educated decisions.

Apart from the subscriptions meaning free players are limited on what games they can play in FG; the one other major thing, is that it is a downloaded software. If you want to play at someone else's place, you would have to take a computer, and/or the software, with you to another house, or hotel (whatever) and try and get it running, installed, configured, and then access information (if you only took software). *Roll20* is an online platform. If you have a modern web browser it works from anywhere. Though I will note, the phone and tablet versions need some loving, they DO work.

One of the big things I found, as I did try FG when it first came out; was that it was not very stable. Program issues, horrible (for ME anyway) controls and a few other minor things forced me to look to *Roll20*. *Roll20* without noting some of its issues, has mainly been available, and working, every time I needed it to be.

The screenshot displays the Fantasy Grounds interface during a game session. At the top, player avatars for Cedric Finalrest, Namaru, Garsome Cinderheart, and Milo Nimblefeet are visible. The central map area shows a forest scene with a large spider encounter. The left sidebar contains chat messages and initiative rolls: Milo Nimblefeet (Spot +12), Namaru (Spot +2), Cedric Finalrest (Spot +5), Garsome Cinderheart (Spot +1), Garsome Cinderheart (Initiative +6), Milo Nimblefeet (Initiative +5), Namaru (Initiative +3), and Brando (Garsome Cinderheart) (oh boy. The standard spider encounter). The bottom section features character sheets for 'Monstrous Spider, Large' and 'Monstrous Spider, Huge', and a combat log table.

Name	Init	HP	Wounds
Garsome Cinda	20	84	5
Namaru	15	42	5
Cedric Finalrest	8	66	5
Milo Nimblefeet	6	47	5
Monstrous Spid	22		10
Monstrous Spid	22		10
Monstrous Spid	22		10
Monstrous Spid	52		15

Figure 1- Fantasy Grounds Interface

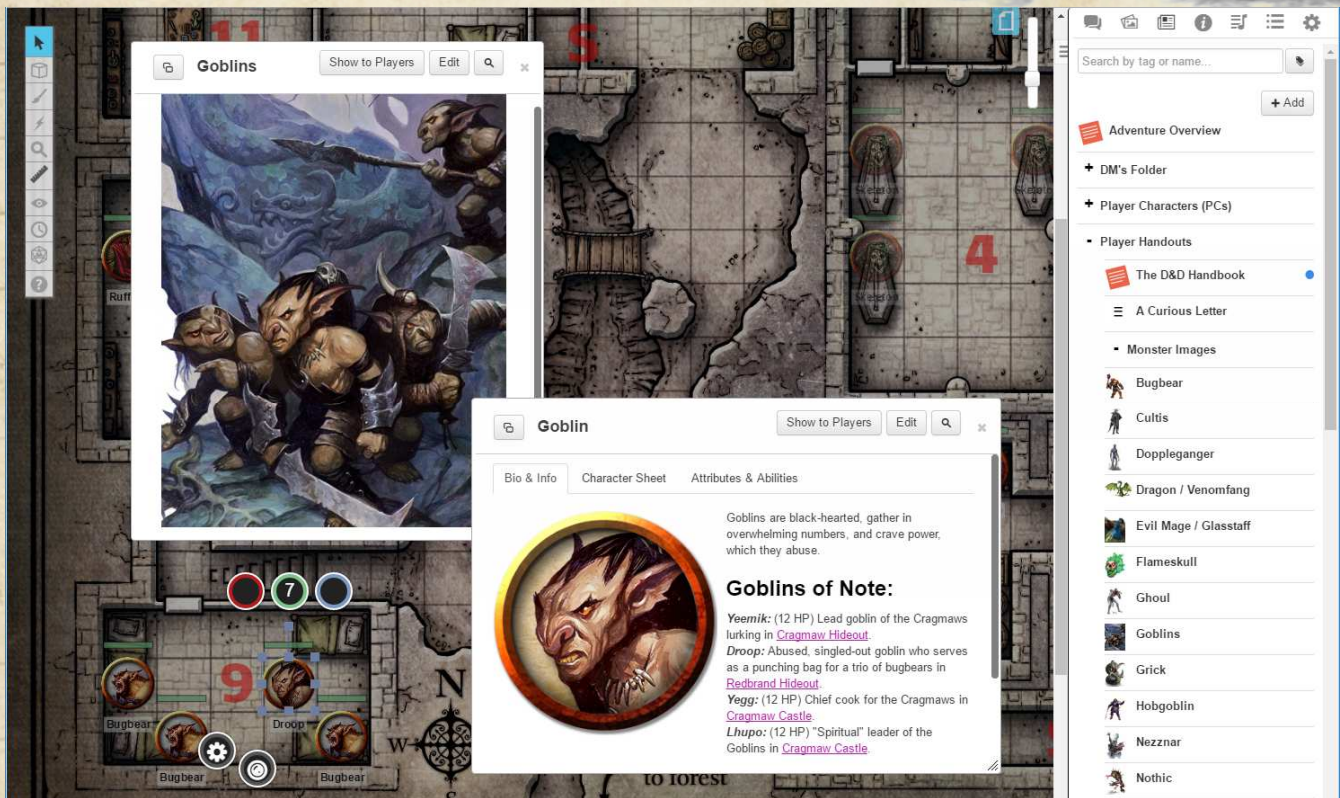


Figure 2- Roll20 Interface

MORE THAN VTT

So, the game table platforms above are only the tables. While Roll20 has camera and mic options built in, they are (honestly) not the greatest, certainly weren't in early days. Most of the groups I have seen online playing using one of the above, also use something else to talk to each other rather than text. WotC (when I did some testing as part of AL) used *Google Hangouts* initially. Most however use a game voice server like either *TeamSpeak* etc; or more likely these days, *Discord*.

Discord is also good, as you can add a few bots to make the game even more dynamic and immersive.



Hardware wise, the best is any computer with a modern web browser, and a headset with a mic. Even the cheap ones will do, as this is conversation, not game audio from WoW etc. So, a cheap one from almost anywhere will do, so long as you can hear alright, and everyone else can hear you. In *Roll20* I disable both the mic and the camera from the platform, and suggest everyone else does too. Especially if you have any kind of memory leaking browser.

There are loads of tutorials on how to use BOTH platforms, so check them out as part of your expanding information about the platforms. HOW they are used is often (I find) as important as the platform itself. For example, I make use of the *Roll20* options for API usage and all the macro functionality. The API only lightly, but I do use it.

One of the other reasons I went with *Roll20* was because of the sharing element. I buy a sourcebook, I can make it available to all the players on my table, so when they are making a PC they have access to everything. Also, Roll20 has a thing called a *Charactermancer* where you follow the steps to make a full PC in a few minutes. Drag and drop, uses all the compendiums I have, and share. Meaning characters have the full options, in a simple follow the bouncy ball setup.

Sharing my information (compendium) is limited on the free account, but it IS available. It's available with limits in the "Pro" tier of subscription, but those limits are pretty decent. I know I have never needed to go past them.

WHAT NEXT – THE SEARCH

So, now we have a platform, and voice (and camera if you want). How now do you go about finding a game to join? There are a few options. *FG* and *Roll20* both have forums for people looking to start or join a game, for all the supported platforms they run at least.

Facebook is another place to look for a group to join, or start one. I would however caution when looking for groups. You are going to find really bad games. I mean terrible TERRIBLE games! But you will if you keep at it, find a game with people like you, that work. Then the platform(s) become irrelevant. Or start one yourself. Just as easily to advertise for a DM/GM as well.

When you post in a group, I would ask you do one thing to keep it easy. This is a simple concept people either ignore from being selfish inconsiderate dicks, or they are just dicks. When you place your post, make sure it has as much info in it as you can, so the readers can clearly and easily find the details they need, without multiple threads and conversations because the OP was lacking some detail. Some groups have requirements to post as well, so make sure you at LEAST meet them. The following however is what I would use, and do, as a base template for what needs to be put in the post:

- Your TZ (time zone)
- Your available day(s) of the week.
- Your available time(s) of the day(s).
- What system(s) you want to play (most groups are multi-game supporting).
- Are you DM/GMing it or do you want to play.
- What voice platform(s) you can use.

Those 6 things will give most DMs/GMs or players enough information to know what, when, when and how. Anything less (IMO) is a waste of everyone's time.

The way I see it, is if you as a player can't be bothered to provide the BASICS of the information required to make a decision, then me as a DM/GM will just pass you by. Why? Because if you show that can't even be bothered to let us know simple information, how shit are you going to be as a player? I have seen those players who are too lazy to post moderate levels of information, let alone detailed posts, be lackluster in creating their character, getting into roleplaying, or even the basics of showing up. And many of those also don't let you know they won't show. I have seen games (ie players waiting to start a session) sit for a while waiting to start, and then a few weeks later the whole game folds, because players can't be arsed to show, and don't care to advise the fact.

You as the originating poster are actually causing yourself issues otherwise, and making more work for everyone, including yourself, that nobody needs.

CONCLUSION

So, let's do a quick catchup. To this point, I have mentioned and touched on the two top used platforms. Made some points about them, to hopefully help you make a decision. Discussed the ability to talk to each other while playing. So; you have a platform for game and talk, and a way to find a group to join. But this is a QUICK intro.

Both *FG* and *Roll20* have PROs and CONs. Both are good/bad depending upon who you talk to. That's why this is my opinion, based on available information and experience. It comes down to how YOU want to use them, if at all! All the platforms out there are the same, they all have PROs and CONs, and the same is said for the voice and video options as well.

At the end of the day though, it comes down to what you need out of the platform, what you can get out of it, and if it suits as many of your needs as you can. Hopefully this helped you.

As a note, I also am happy to take people through how to use Roll20 personally as well. I do it in small groups, and end up running a single one-shot adventure. If you are interested, contact me through Discord (linked below).

References & Links

Roll20

Subscription Plans

<https://www.roll20.net>

<https://app.roll20.net/why-subscribe-to-roll20>

Fantasy Grounds

Subscription Plans

<https://www.fantasygrounds.com>

<https://www.fantasygrounds.com/home/FantasyGroundsClassic.php>

Discord

<https://discord.com/>

Tutorials and Guides

How To Use Roill20 – The Basics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svG0RmlGBPU>

Fantasy Grounds for Beginners (A complete tour)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW2Y45Bjwpo>

Other Links

The Fractured Bear

<https://www.fracturedbear.com>

My Discord

<https://discord.gg/RfFsC4q>

