

Guide to Choosing a Virtual Tabletop Program

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What is a Virtual Tabletop?

Virtual tabletop software (sometimes referred to as VT or VTT) is designed to enable one or more users to play games on their computer that are traditionally played on or around a table. In the case of multiple users, players, or participants, this is generally done online. A VT is like a shared whiteboard, but with features that are specifically geared to facilitate gaming in particular.

VTs come in many shapes and forms, and it might surprise some readers to learn that there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 VT apps available for the various platforms. Some programs are sold commercially for a one-time fee, some use a subscription-based model, and a great many are free or donation-ware. Some are apps that you download, others run in a browser.

A comprehensive list of virtual tabletop software suitable for playing RPGs (which is what this article will focus on) can be found on the following web page:

<http://www.battlegroundsgames.com/links.html#anchor6>

A similar list of virtual tabletop software suitable for playing other sorts of games can be found here:

<http://www.battlegroundsgames.com/links.html#anchor7>

VTs are not for everyone. VTs are also *not* a replacement for playing RPGs face-to-face. They *are*, however, a viable alternative for people who have moved away from their regular gaming group. And some VTs are also useful in face-to-face game sessions, where they are used primarily as a digital battlemap.

The Holdouts

A lot of people still use a chat client (e.g., MSN), VOIP client (e.g., Skype) or an IRC client with die rolling scripts to play RPGs online. To these people, I ask: Why not step up to a virtual tabletop that is more full-featured and was designed from the start to play RPGs with? Even if you don't need a tactical battlemat, your game can probably benefit from other common VT features, such as turn sequencing, built-in graphical die rollers, etc.

So, which VT is the best?

Quite simply, none of them are. *There is no single, "best" VT program.* Which program is "best" is entirely dependent on each person's (or groups') particular needs. Nearly every VT has some feature that it pulls off better than most other VTs, and every single VT can be found lacking in one way or another when compared to another VT.

For some, cost is the deciding factor, and most people gravitate to the free offerings, for obvious reasons. Others realize that the cost of the commercial VTs is practically negligible if the VT in question has features (and/or pre-made content) that will save them hours of their valuable free time or otherwise make their game sessions more enjoyable. Most commercial VTs cost less than a single RPG book (exception: with subscription-based VTs, the cost can add up to much more, over time).

The Quandary

Choice is generally a good thing, but since there *so many* VTs, it can be extremely daunting to try to evaluate them all. Not only is it time-consuming, but often your experiences with a new VT will feel tainted because it doesn't work the same way as another VT that you've already tried. You must unlearn what you know and approach each new VT with a fresh slate.

Narrowing the Field: The Contenders

The following is a short summary of what I (and probably most VT users) consider to be the VTs that are worth a close look, because they see a fair amount of usage and have a sizable userbase. They are presented in alphabetical order.

Battlegrounds: RPG Edition (aka BRPG)

Pros: Well-rounded featureset that supports many types of games; no scripting or XML editing required

Cons: No support for shared interactive character sheets (bitmaps only)

d20Pro

Pros: Supports d20-based RPG systems very well

Cons: Not ideal for anything not d20-based

Fantasy Grounds

Pros: Visually-appealing interface; 3D dice; many feel that this VT best captures the feel of face-to-face gaming

Cons: Windows-only; limited map and Fog of War features; rulesets sold separately

Gametable

Pros: Reputedly has the lowest learning curve

Cons: Relatively few features due to its "just the basics" approach make this VT easy to outgrow

iTabletop Pandoren

Pros: Built-in audio chat and video conferencing features

Cons: Some claim that this VT is still too buggy and not quite ready for prime-time

KloogeWerks

Pros: Powerful automation

Cons: Steep learning curve, has been criticized for being visually unappealing

MapTool

Pros: Line-of-sight-based Fog of War; powerful macros for automation; frameworks (rulesets) are available for a number of RPG systems

Cons: Steep learning curve if macros and/or frameworks are used

OpenRPG

Pros: Has a large, established userbase; well-regarded chat interface

Cons: Can be difficult to install, won't win any awards for interface design

ScreenMonkey

Pros: Free for players, only the GM must purchase client

Cons: GM client is Windows-only; seems to be falling into disuse; many might consider this abandon-ware, despite the fact that it is still being sold

Up-and-coming VTs to keep an eye on

(these are currently in alpha or beta status)

D&D Virtual Table

EpicTable

Infrno

Scene Grinder

Compare the features side-by-side

You can find a Feature Comparison Chart that compares a number of VTs here:

<http://www.battlegroundsgames.com/links.html#anchor8>

Factors to consider when choosing a VT

These are some of the things you should ask yourself as you evaluate each VT.

- If the VT is a downloadable application (rather than one that runs in a web browser), how easy is the VT to install? Keep in mind that if it is a difficult process or requires above-average computer proficiency, this will likely escalate to become a major source of frustration in cases where there will be a lot of players.
- Does the VT require additional software be installed (e.g., Java, Flash, Silverlight, Shockwave, DirectX, etc.) in order to run? Will installing additional software present a problem for you or others in your group?
- Is the VT easy to use? Also, how easy is it to *learn* to use?
- Documentation? Is there any? If so, what form does it take? A Wiki? A downloadable PDF? A built-in Help feature? Video tutorials? How thorough and up-to-date is the documentation?
- Is the VT cross-platform? If not, do I have friends who will be left out because their platform/OS of choice is not supported?
- Is the VT still being actively developed and improved, or is it abandon-ware? How long has it been since the VT last had a meaningful update? Does the developer respond to user requests and bug reports in a timely manner?
- Check out the VT's support forums (if any). Are there major bugs or issues with the VT that have gone unaddressed for years? What seems to be the average response time for a support request? Hours? Days? Weeks? Months? Never?
- How stringent are the VT's system requirements? Will *all* of your players have computers that meet the minimum requirements?
- Is the VT suitable for use with the particular RPG system/s that you plan to use it with? Not everyone plays d20-based RPGs, but some VTs are strongly geared towards those systems, and may be lacking necessary features if used with another RPG system (for example, no support for hex grids, or character facing).
- Does the VT come with maps and tokens, or are you left entirely to your own devices for procuring these?
- If it is a commercial VT, is a free demo available, so that you can try it out to evaluate it before making a purchase? Does the demo serve to give you a good idea of what the full product is like?
- If it is a commercial VT, how flexible is the licensing scheme?
- Does the VT provide for an immersive environment that helps promote role-playing?
- Does using the VT feel like work, or is it fun to use? Is there a lot of data entry involved?
- How easy is it to add your own custom content to the program?
- Does the program allow you to implement your own house rules? If so, is this an easy thing to do?

- If you like to play music and/or sound effects to enhance your RPG sessions, does the VT have support for audio?
- Most VTs have some sort of “Fog of War” system that enables you to gradually reveal the map as the players explore. Does the VT offer enough power, automation, and flexibility to suit your needs? Are things like light sources, special vision types, and line of sight supported?
- Most VTs have some form of built-in dice rolling function. This can range from a text-only randomly-generated number, to 2D images or photographs of dice, to 3D animated dice with real-time physics. Does the VT support dice macros (for frequently-used die rolls)? Can the VT handle custom dice (e.g. Fudge dice)? Are the dice rolling mechanics that you need supported? (for example, open-ended rolls, counting successes, cross-referencing die rolls against a game chart or table, etc.)
- Customization and automation: Does the VT allow for it? If so, does it require you to learn scripting or XML editing in order to customize your gaming environment or to automate functionality?
- Support/accountability: Is there anyone to turn to if things go wrong or don’t work the way they are supposed to? Is the developer accessible?
- What additional content is available for the VT (e.g., adventures, artpacks, rulesets, games, other freebies)? If yes, is this content professionally produced, or is it fan-created content? If the additional content is for sale, be sure to factor it into your price/value analysis.
- Does the VT feature built-in voice chat and/or video-conferencing? (If it doesn’t, you can easily run a VOIP or video conferencing app in the background.) If so, is the sound quality acceptable? If the VT has video-conferencing, are the picture quality, video size, and frame rate acceptable?
- Do you play other types of games besides RPGs (e.g., board games, card games, etc.)? If so, you might want to consider a VT that can pull double-duty as a general gaming VT.
- If you are going to use the virtual tabletop in face-to-face game sessions rather than for remote gaming, does the VT have features that make it well-suited for displaying it on a large TV or LCD screen, or with a projector? Does the VT work offline, or is an internet connection required in order to use the program?

Parting Thoughts

Very important: If you try out one particular VT and don't like it, do NOT assume that all VTs are the same and give up on *all* VTs. You could be doing yourself a disservice.

Multiple VTs

Have you considered having/using more than one VT? Perhaps even running them simultaneously?

Stay Current

Many VTs are constantly being improved. If there was a VT you liked but was lacking a particular feature you needed, check back on it every once in a while (perhaps every 6 to 12 months) to see if the feature has been added.

Provide Feedback to the VT Developers

A feature is unlikely to be implemented if no one (or very few people) asks for it. If there is some functionality you want or need, or some other issue you would like to see addressed or improved, make sure you let the developer/s know.

Stay Flexible

Perhaps you've already chosen a particular VT to game with. Great! But keep in mind that this doesn't mean it has to be the *only* VT you will *ever* use (especially if you chose your current VT without knowing that there were other well-regarded VTs available). If someone comes out with a VT that you think is better, don't feel like you can't just switch. Maybe finish up the current adventure, then switch VTs. Keep the VT developers competing with each other. Competition is good, and leads to better products.

I hope the above-mentioned criteria will help you choose the VT that is best for you and your group's gaming needs. Happy gaming!