

# *THE ORIGINAL*



## *ROLE PLAYING GAME* *BY MARCUS L ROWLAND*

*ADDITIONAL MATERIAL BY T. CRAIG DRAKE & MATTHEW HARTLEY*

ALL OF THE AUTHOR'S INCOME FROM THIS GAME WILL BE DONATED TO  
MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES (DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS)

**BASED ON AND INCLUDING  
FLATLAND BY EDWIN A. ABBOTT**

# *THE ORIGINAL FLATLAND*

*ROLE PLAYING GAME*

BY MARCUS L ROWLAND

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FLATLAND ILLUSTRATION BY EDWIN A. ABBOTT

ALL OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARCUS L. ROWLAND

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Special thanks to Calle Dybedahl, "captainboulanger", Paul Dyre, "gonzo21", Gavin Greig, "jackwalker", Steve Glover, Matt Goodman, Bill Higgins, Chris Holliday, "raygun Gothic", Robert Prior, Don Sample, "sharikkamur", Alexander Shearer, Charles Stross, "Vodex" and other contributors to my Livejournal discussion of Flatland; to several of the above, Mike Cule, Ashley Pollard and Alex Stewart for play-testing; to Prof. Ian Stewart and Dr. Jack Cohen for scientific advice; and to Mike Sinclair for technical help with the production of this PDF.

Double sided printing: For best results print the front cover, this page, and the table of contents single sided, then print all even pages from page 4 (Introduction, numbered as 1) onwards with all odd pages from page 5 (numbered as 2) onwards on the other side of the paper. When assembled the odd-numbered pages should be to the right, like any other book.

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**MAGINE a world of two dimensions; a world in which length and width exist but the concept of height is a dangerous heresy, where the words “up” and “down” are almost meaningless and everything is based on plane geometry.

In 1884 Edwin A. Abbott introduced this world in *Flatland*, a novel and treatise on multi-dimensional geometry. But *Flatland* is much more than that – it’s a political and religious satire, a comedy of manners, and an exploration of the nature of thought. By modern standards it isn’t always the most gripping of works - Abbot’s style is sometimes a little turgid - but there is still much to enjoy. It was extraordinarily influential in its day, leading to several imitators, parodies, and sequels. Since then immense ingenuity has gone into solving the problems Abbot didn’t cover; the minutiae of two dimensional biology, chemistry, and physics, from the nature of two dimensional chemistry and atomic structure to electronics and the most complex and sophisticated forms of engineering.

In 1998 I was asked to contribute to the programme book for Baroquon, the 1999 British Roleplaying Society convention at New Hall in Cambridge. I’d been thinking about a *Flatland* game for some time, and took the opportunity to write the first (much shorter) version of this game as a way of exploring the possibilities of the setting. I based the rules on my earlier *Forgotten Futures* RPG (1993), making some simplifying assumptions and adding new rules reflecting the world I was describing.

The game wasn’t an instant runaway success, but I began to get feedback suggesting that the idea interested people. As a result I expanded and tidied up the rules, added another scenario, and eventually published it as part of the *Forgotten Futures CD-ROM*, a collection of games writing with supporting articles by Victorian and Edwardian authors. It has not previously been available as a separate publication.

In 2005 RPG writers were asked to contribute scenarios to a charity product in aid of victims of the 2004 tsunami. My contribution was a generic adventure based on this setting; *Flatlander, The Thickening*.

For various reasons the charity project was cancelled, and I eventually I decided to rewrite and expand the *Flatland* RPG, incorporating *Flatlander*... and some other new material, and sell it as a PDF in aid of charity. Since the original Tsunami appeal achieved most of its goals I’m donating my income from this game to Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), a charity

that will undoubtedly spearhead rescue work in any future disaster of this type.

Welcome, then, to *Flatland*; a world of length and breadth but lacking in height, in which geometry is the overwhelming natural force, and characters are actually *meant* to be two-dimensional. I hope that you’ll enjoy your visit.

Everything needed to play is in the first few pages and the adventures. The rest of the text covers use with some other games, recommended reading and sources, and some ideas on the science of the setting – background concepts that aren’t needed in play but may interest readers or suggest plot ideas. All of the science, especially the biology, is highly speculative. The appendix describes some of the problems and possible solutions, but you don’t need it to play the game.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**T**HE original version of this game would have probably never been written if the Baroquon ’99 committee hadn’t asked me to contribute to their program book.

Charles Stross suggested Médecins Sans Frontières as a suitable charity for this project.

Recently another *Flatland* RPG has been published, *Edwin Abbot Abbot’s Flatland (Inflated)*, Red Anvil Press (2005). Another game is in development from Polymancer Studios Inc., and some FUDGE guidelines for the setting have appeared on line. I hope that most of the material here will be useful with all of these systems. Finally, my thanks to T. Craig Drake for his notes on converting characters and scenarios between this game and *Flatland (Inflated)*, and to Matthew Hartley, who provided the wargames rules.



Edwin A. Abbott (1838 - 1926)

## WELCOME TO FLATLAND

**F**LATLAND describes a strange two-dimensional world, a plane section through a three (or more) dimensioned “multiverse” inhabited by geometric figures; sentient squares, triangles, etc., growing to a maximum of around eleven inches long. Most have no idea of the possibility of a third dimension, and anyone believing in such things is branded a lunatic.

Abbott describes one Flatland nation, The State, in detail. It’s a religious dictatorship with a huge and complex bureaucracy. Every aspect of life is regulated, and the status of citizens is determined almost entirely by the number of lines in an individual's body:

- 1 Females, needle-like straight lines.
- 2 Soldiers and peasants (sharp Isosceles triangles, there is actually a third line as base).
- 3 Equilateral triangles, tradesmen and merchants.
- 4-5 The professional classes.
- 6+ The aristocracy and priesthood.

Figures with unusually high numbers of lines, so close and regular that they approach the circular, are the religious caste. God is believed to be a perfect circle, the figure with an infinite number of lines.

Figures with three or more sides are usually equilateral to within a tiny fraction of a degree; irregular figures are treated as freaks and potential criminals, and often executed. Even Isosceles have two equal sides. Sons of regular figures usually have one more side than their fathers, so that the wife of a Square will give birth to Pentagons, who will in turn father Hexagons. Similarly, the children of Isosceles tend to be closer to regular than their fathers; if such a child is exactly 60 degrees at each corner it is ceremonially taken from the parents and fostered with a family of regular triangles.

---

A typical Flatland city scene as seen by its inhabitants  
Vertical scale is, of course, greatly exaggerated

Flatlanders see everything as horizontal lines of varying degree of brightness; the closer and more alive the brighter. Since they can't see “over” (“up” has no meaning except as a geographical dimension equivalent to North) or past any solid object, it is difficult for Flatlanders to discern the precise shape of objects; they must measure angles and infer the parts they can't see or feel. Criminals sometimes take advantage of this fact by moving as they are being examined, to pretend that they have more or less sides, or conceal irregularities.

Visibility is limited to around three feet by a fine omnipresent Fog, which paradoxically is a great help to the Flatlanders in estimating angles and shapes visually; it dims more distant objects, and a trained eye can use the angle of vision, plus the degree to which an object is dimmed, to determine true angles. This skill takes years to learn, and is mainly the province of the aristocracy.

At one time coloured paint was used to brighten the outlines of Flatlanders, but it was too easily abused as camouflage or disguise, which led to social unrest and ultimately an abortive revolution. It is now universally forbidden. It is possible that monochrome paints, which highlight or dim lines without adding colour, may be used for more subtle disguises.

Flatland has warm and cool regions, dry deserts, and other forms of “terrain”, including “mountains” (areas where Flatlanders have unusual difficulty moving) and “forests”. An unknown but relatively weak force pulls objects South; rain falls horizontally (there is naturally no other way for it to fall!) and always from the North. Houses are usually pentagonal with the two Northern sides as roof and openings in the other faces.

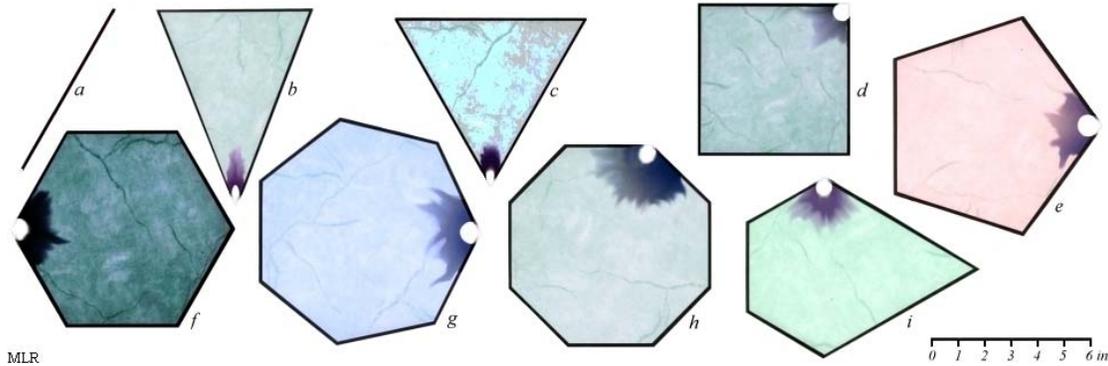
Flatlanders don't have heads; one of the angles contains the mouth and neural matter that functions as eye and brain. They are shown as a shaded area around a circular mouth in the illustrations on later pages. In Isosceles they're located in the sharpest angle. For more on anatomy see the scientific appendix.

Flatlanders can apparently manipulate objects by adhering to them and moving them, allowing (for example) a Hexagon to wield a sharp metal triangle as a weapon.

**Note:** No limbs are described or shown in Flatland, but referees may prefer to assume that Flatlanders have arms, allowing use of weapons, tools, etc. without complicated contortions. Possibly they exist but are considered vulgar, since they break up the lines of the body. They are not shown on illustrations of characters. Whatever the truth may be, the rules below do not restrict the use of tools.

Since Flatlanders are two-dimensional, anything that pierces their hard outer layer is likely to kill them; once it is broken the outer skeleton tends to fall apart, exposing the flesh underneath. This leads to uncontrollable bleeding, unconsciousness, and death. The best doctors can break the outer layer and reset it, to cure minor irregularities and increase the number of sides of the children of the higher aristocracy, without killing the patient, but this is a very risky procedure. Doctors may also be able to cure small injuries, if they are not instantly fatal.

# THE ORIGINAL FLATLAND ROLE PLAYING GAME



Typical natives of Flatland

[from left to right, above then below] (a) A girl of good family (her internal anatomy is so narrow as to be invisible) (b) An obvious member of the lower orders, probably a servant or artisan (c) A poor but honest tradesman (d) A Square, narrator of Flatland (e) Doctor Pentagon, the learned physician (f) Squire Hexagon, a wealthy landowner (g) Sir Sefton Septagon, baronet (h) Count Otto von Octagon of Polygonia (i) A sinister irregular figure. Note that the colours shown are invisible to Flatlanders and change according to the viewing angle – their bodies are thinner than the wavelength of visible light with density varying with their diet and physical condition; as a result they diffract light unpredictably. All of the anatomy shown, other than the external lines, is also invisible to them since it rapidly disintegrates if damaged. Flatland doctors have inferred some details but are often wrong.

Any sharp object is dangerous; females, being relatively stupid and extremely sharp, are a particular hazard and must give warning cries and undulate from side to side whenever they go outdoors, since they are very difficult to see from ahead or behind. They must also use special entrances to enter houses, leading to chambers where they cannot easily impale anyone.

**Note:** It may be helpful to visualise Flatlanders as being made of lengths of a straight, thin, and brittle material (like chitin) enclosing a film of organic material, thinner than the liquid in a soap bubble. If there is another opening - e.g. if a side is broken – the supporting frame falls apart, and unless the victim is very lucky the flesh underneath is damaged so badly death is inevitable.

Because of these risks, and a culture that emphasises Regularity above all else, Flatland society is hidebound and dull. Nevertheless circumstances can arise which call for boldness, wit, and the qualities of an adventurer.

## CHARACTER GENERATION CHARACTERISTICS

**E**VERYTHING that's important about any native of Flatland is determined by his or her number of sides. Women and the thinnest Isosceles under 5° are both counted as one side for game purposes. They and the higher aristocracy are best run as NPCs.

For a campaign emphasising action SIDES, the number of sides the character has, is determined by rolling 2D6+2, dividing by 3, and rounding up for a range of 2-5 SIDES with an average of 3-4 SIDES.

For a higher-flying campaign roll 2D6+1, divide by 2, and round UP for 2-7 SIDES with an average of 4-5.

Referees may instead assign SIDES arbitrarily; for example, in a military adventure it's likely that nearly all characters will be Isosceles triangles, with some higher ranks regular triangles or squares. In a political scenario at least one character will need to be an octagon or better to have any effective say in affairs of state – but may be accompanied by servants or underlings with fewer SIDES, who may have their own adventures. An effective team might consist of an Octagonal diplomat accompanied by lesser bureaucrats and some servants, bodyguards and spies.

As will become obvious high SIDES result leads to an impressive number of skills, low SIDES limits intellect and skills, but greatly improves toughness and combat abilities. It isn't fair, but Flatland isn't a fair place.

SIDES indicates status and determines MIND (intelligence) and BODY (innate toughness, speed and combat ability) as shown on the table below:

SIDES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10+
MIND	1	2	3	3	4	5	5	6	6	7
BODY	8/4 <sup>1</sup>	6	5	4	4	3	3	2	2	2

All characters have MIND+2 points to spend on skills. They may also spend them to buy advantages, or take up to TWO disadvantages to buy extra points.

<sup>1</sup> Women are sharp but otherwise relatively weak – they attack with BODY 8 but defend themselves and use strength- and speed-related skills with BODY 4. If you prefer female characters to have a more active role there's no reason why not – and there could be more intellectual and less robust women, using the MIND and BODY for a higher number of SIDES. Regardless of MIND society treats them as inferiors with SIDES 1, and BODY is halved for defensive and other purposes (round up) None of this applies to thin Isosceles.

~ CHARACTER RECORD ~

NAME: **Professor Hex**

QUOTE: **"With proper funding we're only five years away from a cure for irregularity!"**

SIDES

**6**

MIND

**5**

BODY

**3**

BONUS

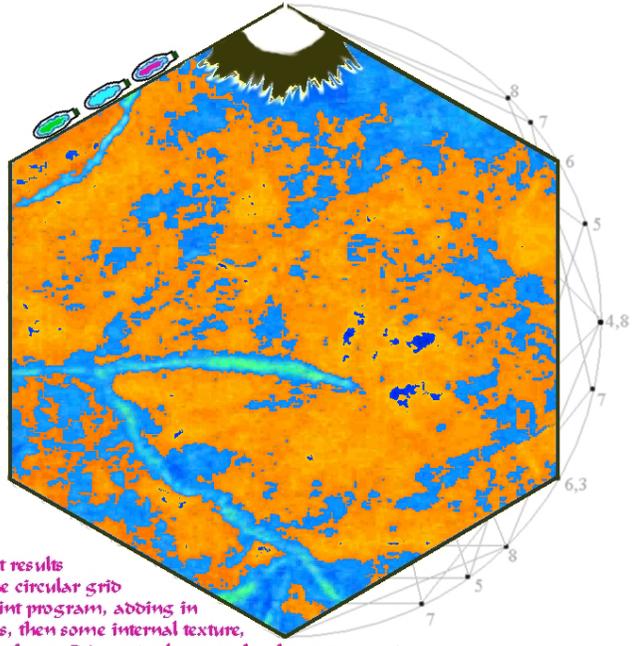
POINTS

~EQUIPMENT~

**Bottles of patent medicine. Surgical kit and first aid equipment, carried by an assistant.**

**Library of tablets on medicine and medical law. Laboratory and hospital ward for Isosceles patients.**

**Several assistants, at least one of them evil.**



For best results copy the circular grid to a paint program, adding in the lines, then some internal texture, the mouth, etc. Print and glue onto the character record.

~SKILLS~

	BASE	VALUE
ARTIST	M	_____
BRAWLING	B	_____
BUSINESS [3]	M	_____
DISGUISE [3]	M	_____
DOCTOR [4]	M	<b>7</b>
LAW [4]	M	<b>6</b>
MATHEMATICS [3]	S	_____
MILITARY ARMS	M	_____
RECOGNITION (FEELING)	M	<b>6</b>
RECOGNITION (VISUAL)	S	<b>7</b>
SCHOLAR [3]	S	<b>7</b>
SCIENTIST [3]	M	<b>6</b>
STEALTH	M	_____
THIEF	M	_____
WEAPONS	B	_____
OTHER: _____		_____
OTHER: _____		_____

~ ADVANTAGES [SIDES] ~

	COST	
SYMMETRY [3]:	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
OR PERFECT SYMMETRY [3]:	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
GOOD SIGHT:	1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
MILITARY HONOURS [2 ONLY]:	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
WEALTHY [3]:	1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
OTHER: _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
~ DISADVANTAGES [SIDES] ~	GAIN	
SON OF AN IRREGULAR FIGURE [4]:	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
OR MINOR IRREGULARITY [4]:	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
OR MAJOR IRREGULARITY [4]:	3	<input type="checkbox"/>
POOR SIGHT:	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
INVOLUNTARY MOVEMENTS:	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
SHARP [2 ONLY]:	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
ECCENTRIC:	1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
OR INSANE:	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
REVERSED:	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
OTHER: _____		<input type="checkbox"/>

NOTES: **Professor Hex is a member of the nobility, and a surgeon who specialises in treating Irregularity. He runs a free clinic for Isosceles, which his peers regard as eccentric altruism; he feels that by helping them towards Regularity he will ultimately benefit all Flatlanders. He charges Higher Figures steep fees for his services to pay for the clinic. He insists on treating Isosceles who fall outside the normal legal limits of narrowness and regularity, and has appeared in court to secure their release when they would otherwise be executed. He has a dark secret – years ago his botched surgery on an injured child turned an innocent pentagon to a life of crime. Today that child is Scarside Al Gebra, the notorious gangster. Hex hopes that Gebra doesn't remember him.**

## THE ORIGINAL FLATLAND ROLE PLAYING GAME

**King Euclid 416:** SIDES [416], MIND [7], BODY [2]  
Brawling [3], Business [9], Disguise [10], Recognition (v) [9], Stealth [8], Weapons [5]

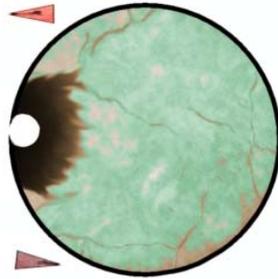
*Advantages:* Rich, Circle

*Disadvantages:* Insane (homicidal megalomaniac), Minor irregularity (one side is slightly shorter than it should be).

*Equipment:* none

*Quote:* "Ve are not Irregular. Ve perhaps have a small hunting injury, but it is not chentlemanly to mention such things."

*Notes:* Euclid is immensely fat, slow, and always accompanied by two "lap dogs" (BODY [1] versions of the "dogs" and "wolves" described above), which yap incessantly and will nip at anyone he dislikes without causing real damage. He is extraordinarily intelligent, compared to everyone around him, but pretends stupidity to lull his captors into a false sense of security. He claims that his irregularity (which is almost invisible but can just be seen in the right light) was the result of a hunting accident, but hates it to be mentioned and will do his best to arrange the death of anyone who does so, if he can get away with it. He also hates to be referred to as "Mad King Euclid." The high Circles of the State, with thousands of sides, view him with disdain.



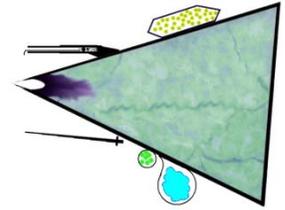
**Lieutenant Sharp:** SIDES [2], MIND [2], BODY [6]  
Brawling [8], Military Arms [5], Stealth [3], Thief [3], Weapons [5]

*Advantages:* Good sight, Military honours.

*Equipment:* Sword, musket, bayonet, loot

*Quote:* "Form up by the ranks and fill your weapons... main charge.. tinder.. shot.. more powder... and fuse. Now wait until you can see the gleam of their eyes..."

*Notes:* Sharp is an Isosceles and career soldier; his whole life is dedicated to the army and whatever loot he can get out of it, his hobby between campaigns is womanising.



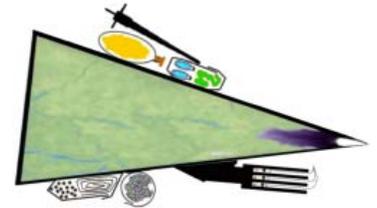
**Sergeant S'Harper:** SIDES [2], MIND [1], BODY [7]  
Brawling [9], Military Arms [3], Stealth [3], Thief [2], Weapons [4]

*Disadvantage:* Sharp.

*Equipment:* Spiked club, triple-barrelled musket, whiskey.

*Quote:* "Chaaaarrgggge!"

*Notes:* S'Harper is a career soldier; he's too stupid to do much else. He is totally fearless and loyal to Sharp, but despises most other officers. He drinks to excess. The "S" in his name is silent.



### SAMPLE ADVENTURERS

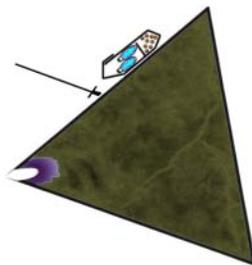
**Captain Trinity:** SIDES [3], MIND [3], BODY [5]  
Artist (camouflage) [5], Brawling [7], Doctor [4], Military Arms [4], Recognition (f) [5]

*Disadvantage:* Poor sight

*Equipment:* Sword, pistol

*Quote:* "Well, who are ye' and what do ye' want?"

*Notes:* Trinity is a reasonably good officer, and has even learned a little medicine to tend to the wounds of his men; wounds that he sometimes inflicts in the heat of battle since he is short-sighted and occasionally attacks the wrong target. He is generally liked by the men, who are mostly much more stupid and make similar mistakes in combat.



**Gunga Thin:** SIDES [2], MIND [2], BODY [6]  
Brawling [7], Stealth [5], Thief [5], Weapons [4]

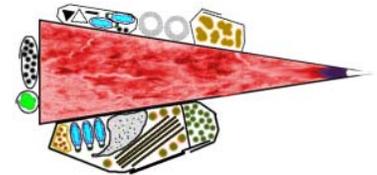
*Advantage:* Good sight

*Disadvantage:* Eccentric (constantly swearing)

*Equipment:* Lock picks, rope, water, food

*Quote:* "Ruby? What \*\*\*\*\* ruby?"

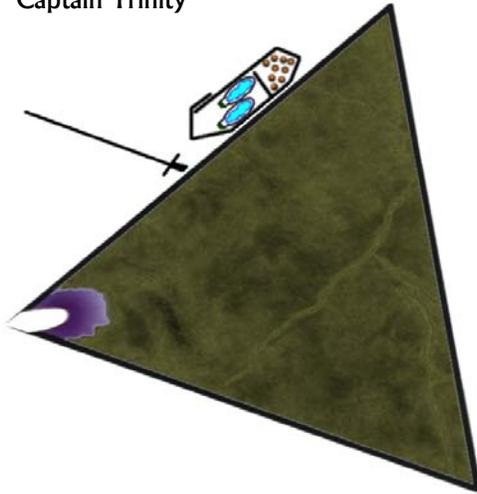
*Notes:* Gunga Thin is an Isosceles native bearer, originally from the Eastern border of The State, attached to Sharp's regiment. He is the servant for all the officers. He is reasonably loyal, but primarily interested in loot and other "perks" of army life. He isn't an official member of the army; his status falls somewhere between servant, mascot, and pack animal. And in a pinch he's probably edible...



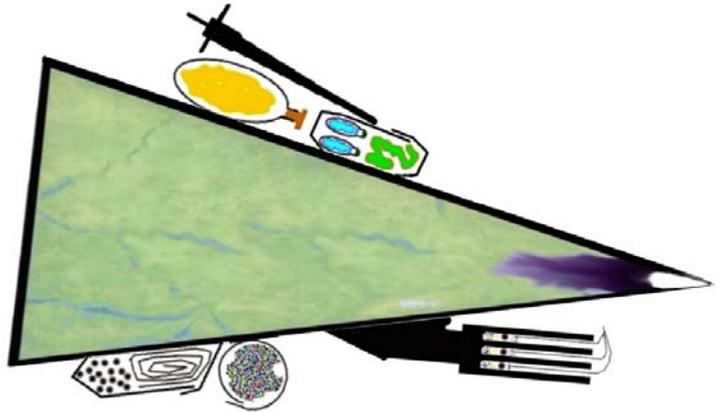
## Cut-out Characters

THESE are approximately 1:3 scale representations of some of the characters, animals, etc. described in earlier sections, for use as gaming miniatures. Permission is granted to make extra copies of these pages for personal use. For best results print in colour on OHP film, or print on paper, cut out carefully, and laminate the figures.

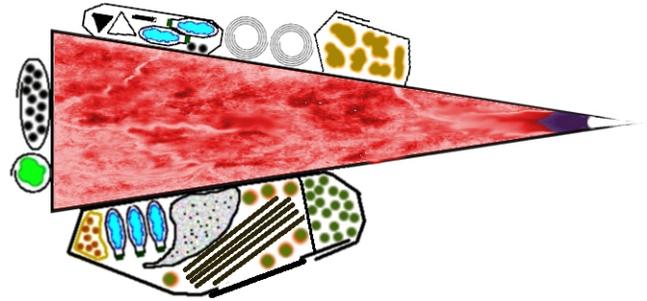
Captain Trinity



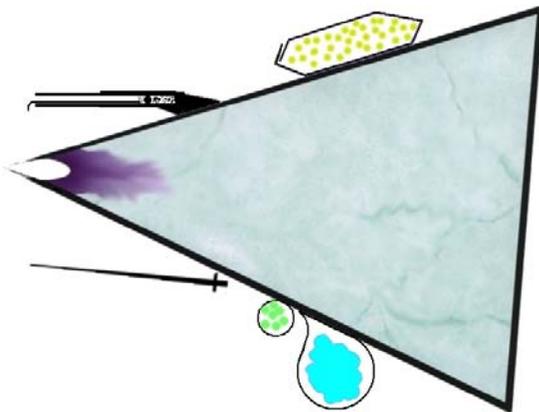
Sergeant S'Harper



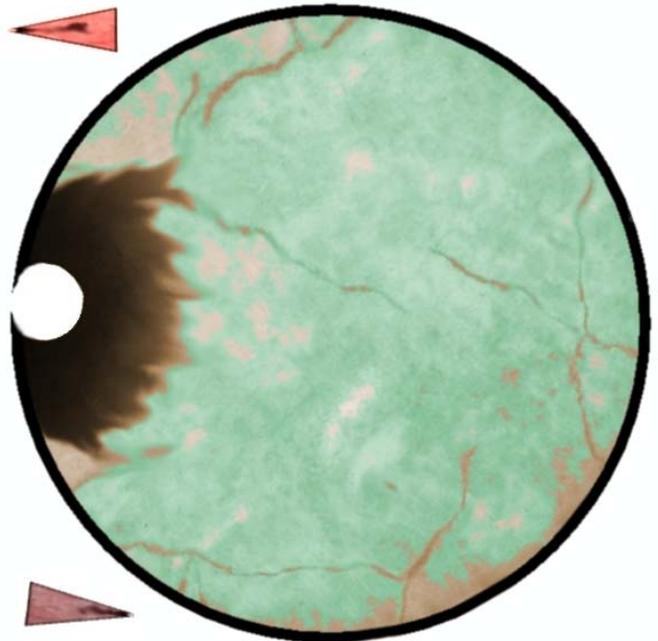
Gunga Thin and luggage



Lieutenant Sharp



King Euclid 416 (with pets)



Lotte Linear (the romantic interest)



## From the Creator of *Forgotten Futures* and *Diana: Warrior Princess*

Imagine a world of two dimensions and plane geometry, in which the very idea of height is considered insanity and the darkest heresy. Where the only thing that matters is the straightness of your sides and the regularity of your angles. Where the slightest deviation from the norm can lead to arrest, imprisonment, execution (and consumption by your peers) or a lingering death by starvation.

Welcome to Flatland. Enjoy your stay...



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**Action and adventure in a world where characters are *supposed* to be two-dimensional!**

Whether your adventures take you to the criminal classes of The State and an encounter with legendary gang leader “Scarside” Al Gebra, across the border to Polygonia and an attempt to rescue Mad King Euclid, or into the glamorous world of politics and diplomacy with the multi-faceted polygons of the aristocracy, there’s something here for you. Best of all, by buying this game you’re supporting charity:

**ALL OF THE AUTHOR’S INCOME FROM THIS GAME WILL BE DONATED TO  
MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES (DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS)**

THE ORIGINAL FLATLAND ROLE PLAYING GAME expands material originally published as part of the *Forgotten Futures* CD-ROM, completely rewritten and updated. It includes the novel, complete rules for the setting, three adventures and four adventure outlines, a complete wargame by Matthew Hartley (*Tusk*, *Aeronef*, etc.), full-colour cut out character figures, extensive background material, and much more. The PDF contains everything you’ll need to play, with the exception of six-sided dice and (optionally) playing cards and a chessboard for the wargame.

If you have any comments or suggestions about this game please send email to [forgottenfutures@ntlworld.com](mailto:forgottenfutures@ntlworld.com)

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