

Flatland: There's Always a Better Way - IO



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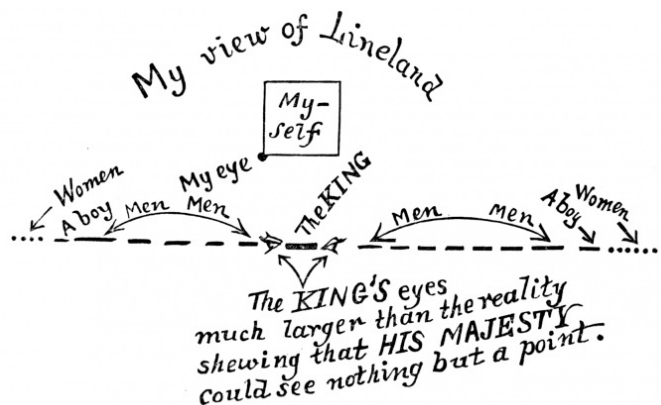
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Flatland: There's Always a Better Way

July 10th, 2013 / Troy Rutman / 0 comments

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Does anyone else remember reading **Flatland** by Edwin Abbott? My 9th grade geometry teacher, Mr. Charm, started off our class with this thin novel. At the time, we all thought, “A novel? In math class?” But we went with it, because it seemed better than doing actual geometry. We were

only half right—it was an easy read, but it actually made our study of geometry a lot more interesting, because it put things in *context*.

Many years later, I still call upon this book on a regular basis; I don’t do geometry very often in my 40s, mind you, but it turns out that Flatland is actually a book about *philosophy*.

On its surface, Flatland tells the story of a two-dimensional world occupied by geometric figures. Women are lines, men are polygons and the narrator is a square who guides the reader through life in a two-dimensional universe. The Square has a dream about a one-dimensional world called Lineland, inhabited only by points. He attempts to show the King of Lineland that a second dimension exists, but cannot convince the king to see beyond his eternally straight line. The Square is then visited by a three-dimensional sphere, a shape he cannot comprehend until he is transported to Spaceland. His mind opened, the Square tries to convince the Sphere of the likelihood of a fourth dimension and beyond. Amazingly, despite all the evidence from Point-, Line-, and Spaceland, the Sphere doesn’t buy the Square’s logic.

In short, Flatland is a geekfest, and as in any Victorian novel, there is a great

deal of social subtext around caste systems and women's rights. Setting that aside, the key message in Flatland is, **"You don't know what you don't know, so be open to new paradigms."** This idea is fundamental to innovation and it's the creed of visionaries. What business could not benefit from this outlook, data centers included?

If no creature lifted its head out of the mud , nothing ever would have crawled ashore.

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