

THE ORIGINAL FLATLAND

ROLE PLAYING GAME

BY MARCUS L ROWLAND

BASED ON AND INCLUDING

FLATLAND BY EDWIN A. ABBOTT

FLATLAND ILLUSTRATION BY EDWIN A. ABBOTT

ALL OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS 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)

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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

IMAGINE 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

THE 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

FLATLAND 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.

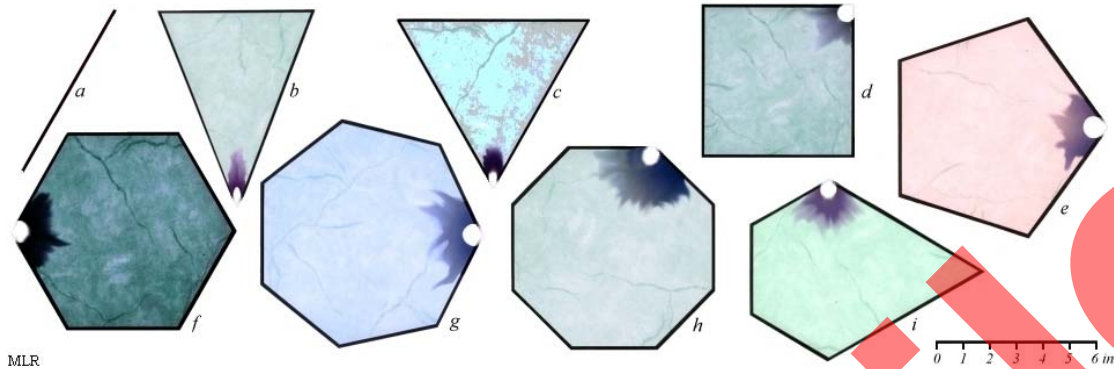
Flatlanders don't have heads; one of the angles contains the mouth and neural matter that functions as eye and brain. They are shown as a shaded area around a circular mouth in the illustrations on later pages. In Isosceles they're located in the sharpest angle. For more on anatomy see the scientific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

EVERYTHING 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 ¹	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.

¹ 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.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

FLATLANDERS may buy various advantages; if a number is shown, this is the minimum SIDES where the advantage is available:

- 1pt **Symmetry:** Your angles are very close to the ideal for your SIDES, well within the permitted deviation; females regard you as good-looking. [3]
- 2pt **Perfect symmetry:** You are treated as though you have status of SIDES +1, females regard you as extremely handsome (and may make excuses to feel your angles, even though this is generally considered to be extremely impolite...) [3]
- 1pt **Good sight:** You can see further than usual through the Fog and gain +1 on Visual Recognition if you buy the skill.
- 1pt **Military honours:** You are sometimes treated with almost as much respect as an equilateral! [2 only]
- 1pt **Wealthy:** You don't need to work for a living [3]

Flatlanders may also take up to TWO disadvantages to gain points; if a number is shown, this is the minimum SIDES where the disadvantage is relevant. Any advantages and disadvantages taken must affect different aspects of the character, e.g. Symmetry and Insane are acceptable, Symmetry and Minor Irregularity are not:

- 1pt **Son of an irregular figure:** You are not irregular, but may have "bad blood" and are treated with suspicion by anyone aware of your heritage. [4]
- 2pt **Minor irregularity:** If detected you would be forced into the civil service as a clerk of the 7th class and supervised wherever you go, but it isn't obvious without a careful inspection and comparison with standard angles. Somehow this has gone undetected so far. [4]
- 3pt **Major irregularity:** You would be executed immediately if detected, and must buy the Disguise skill and use it often to avoid discovery. You are probably a criminal. [4]
- 1pt **Poor Sight:** You have trouble coping with objects more than a few inches away, and can't learn Visual Recognition.

2pt **Involuntary movements:** You suffer from some involuntary condition in which you occasionally move uncontrollably, and may endanger those around you (or yourself). Females and Isosceles are executed if this flaw is detected, others may be imprisoned.

2pt **Sharp:** You are very sharp (BODY 7) but stupid (MIND 1). You are probably best fitted for a military or police career, or for crime. [Isosceles ONLY]

1pt **Eccentric:** You have one unusual belief, opinion, or mode of behaviour. You are considered strange, and are often treated as though you have fewer SIDES than you do.

2pt **Insane:** You would be confined if detected. One rare delusion is a belief in an extra spatial dimension.

1pt **Reversed:** You have somehow been rotated through the third dimension; now you see left as right (or east as west) and vice versa. Think of yourself as an alien abduction victim. You do not necessarily understand extra dimensions, but may be treated as "evidence" by those who do.

SKILLS

SKILLS are derived from SIDES (S), MIND (M) or BODY (B), to which up to three points may be added; with the exception of Brawling and Stealth, if no points are spent on a skill the character does not have that skill. No skill may be improved above 10. If a bracketed number is shown that is the minimum SIDES needed before training in the skill is available.

For example, if a skill has a base value of M and the character has MIND (2), its value will be zero if no points are spent on it, 3 if one point is spent, 4 if two points are spent, and so forth.

Brawling and Stealth begin with the base value shown even if no points are spent; for example, the character above automatically has Stealth (2) if no points are spent on the skill.

Some of the skills shown on the next page are illegal, others considered vulgar or worse. For example, Recognition (feeling) is impolite at best amongst the aristocracy.