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Kate Edwards

CEO and Principal Consultant

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: CEO and Principal Consultant

Organisation: Geogrify

Location: Seattle, USA

How did you get to where you are now?

After initial studies in aerospace engineering and industrial design, I ultimately opted to pursue geography and cartography as I've always had a strong interest in the subjects – as well as a persistent interest in technology and creative media.

I completed my bachelor's in geography and then spent one year working as a production cartographer at Thomas Brothers Maps before I decided to pursue graduate studies. My thesis for my Master's degree in geography focused on virtual world's technology as an interface to create more intuitive maps. While pursuing my doctoral work in the same area, I was recruited into Microsoft to work as a cartographer on Encarta Encyclopedia. That role evolved from being the cartography lead on Encarta, to Encarta World Atlas and then into a new role as the company's first Geopolitical Specialist within the Geography Business Unit - to help the company with geopolitical sensitivities on maps (Kashmir,

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Taiwan, etc.).

When the company had a significant faux pas with two products in 1997, I created the Geopolitical Strategy team to protect the company from geopolitical and cultural content risks across all products and locales. This led to my involvement in most of Microsoft's video game projects, and in that work, I found my true calling – performing a hands-on, critical risk assessment of how creative decisions in digital content may affect a company's global business. After managing this unique team for seven years, I departed Microsoft and created my own consulting company, Geogrify, that has provided culturalization services to many companies, including Google, Facebook, Amazon, Electronic Arts, Bioware, Ubisoft, LEGO, and many others.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

The most useful resource that helped me to get my current consulting role was a willingness to be flexible and open-minded with my career path. The role that geography plays in global business, and especially in the technology sector, is so implicit at times that we have to be resourceful and innovative in how, where, and in what role we apply our valued-added knowledge. Very few companies will ever have openings for a “geographer”, so with guidance from mentors in the tech and video game fields and some trial and error experience, I was able to eventually discern how my skills and perspective could benefit companies.

What do you do as part of your role?

My work is divided into three main areas: consulting, advocating, and public speaking. The consulting work is my primary function, applying culturalization expertise to my clients which are in video games and the tech sector. The advocacy aspect pertains to my work to improve working conditions and best practices in the game

industry – from reducing harsh work periods and increasing diversity and inclusion, to ensuring that workers are protected from abusive management practices. This aspect is what led me to serve as the Executive Director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) from 2012 to 2017. And lastly, I often get asked to keynote or participate in many game industry and other tech conferences around the world. So a significant portion of my time is spent traveling (80% of the year in 2018) and it's something I truly enjoy. The direct engagement with local cultures and geographies continues to inform not only my consulting work but also my understanding of industry conditions around the world.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

It's been absolutely critical for me to develop some business acumen to market my services and cultivate relationships with clients and potential clients. Having a strong creative drive has helped me to forge paths and try to discern alternative routes to my work. Leadership skills are also very important, along with a willingness to be exposed to public feedback, which can be challenging in today's social media environment.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

The work that I do on a daily basis relies upon my ability to view the world through a geographer's lens. From logistical travel knowledge, to discovering a potentially offensive symbol or gesture, to understanding the importance of a historical event in a specific locale, to comprehending the folk costumes of a local culture and how they might be leveraged by a creative designer – all of these aspects (and many more) are reliant on geography.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Without a doubt, the best part of my job is being able to work with so many incredibly talented people in the creative field of video games. As a game player myself, it's a real joy to be able to apply my geographical insights to these unique problems and help the games I love to play be

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successful in markets around the world.

Where might you be in five years' time?

As I created my job and cultivated a niche for my work, this has all been quite an adventure in uncharted territory. I can't honestly predict where I will be in five years from now, but if it's anything like the last five years, it will mean continued exposure via public speaking and additional clients for my consulting. I also hope to finally release my handbook on culturalization practices, something I've been working on for too many years.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

The path that I have forged is somewhat unique and entrepreneurial in nature, so first and foremost I would advise students being a geographer isn't enough. You need to build a well-rounded set of skills that include business and marketing knowledge, as well as a certain level of proficiency within the domain in which you aim to apply your skills (e.g. in my case, video games and the general technology sector). Also, to do the work that I do, you must be able to absorb information from a wide variety of sources and be able to process it objectively and distil a course of action.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

I almost feel like geography chose me, not the other way around. I have been obsessed with maps and travel since a very young age. Every summer found our family on a road trip to some new place in the US and beyond, and it was an opportunity for me to truly understand the value of being exposed to new places and people. If you find yourself with an incessant wanderlust, or a persistent curiosity about the world and its people and environment, or a fervent need to help others understand the "big picture" of how their actions affect the world around them, then geography must be seriously considered as a career path. After 30 years of professional work as an applied geographer, I can attest that geography provided me with the perfect foundation. I believe that geography can give you a broad and flexible basis on which to build your career path in a variety of directions.