# Chapter 25
# Pluralistic Coordination

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## ABSTRACT

*Two questions are examined. Why is coordination hard to achieve when teams are diverse? Are there conditions under which players of MMOGs can learn skills of effective coordination and transfer these skills to real teams? A pluralistic network is a social system in which people are committed to working together effectively despite cultural differences. A core set of eight practices enables a network to be pluralistic. An experiment with the World of Warcraft game confirmed that the game can significantly accelerate learning of those practices. To enable the skills to be transferred to the real world, the game must be augmented with a reflective learning environment.*

## WHAT THIS CHAPTER WILL DO

We will examine two questions. Why is coordination hard to achieve when teams are diverse? Are there conditions under which players of massive multiplayer online (MMO) games can learn skills of effective coordination and transfer these skills to real teams?

Many coordination breakdowns can be traced to inability to work well with people of different cultural backgrounds, belief systems, and value sets. Even when well-intentioned parties try to avoid these breakdowns by spelling out expectations toward their common goals in detail, the breakdowns persist. We will offer a vision of "pluralistic networks" in which people of diverse backgrounds can work together effectively. We will argue that there are universal practices of effective coordination in pluralistic networks. We will describe those practices and suggest ways to cultivate and learn them.

In anticipation of developing an education program for pluralistic coordination practices, we conducted pilot experiments with one of the most successful MMO games today, World of Warcraft (WOW). We tested the possibility of

using the WOW game environment to support learning universal coordination skills. We have found that, with a well-designed external context of learning and reflecting on in-game experiences, it is possible for players to overcome their geographical or cultural differences and improve their coordination skills, both in the game and in the real world.

We also concluded that MMO games alone, at least in their current versions, are not enough to produce this result. However, when combined with a theoretical framework and guided reflections and discussion, these games can provide a rich and practical environment for learning new coordination skills and practices that will enable people to work more effectively together in today's multicultural world.

## THE COORDINATION CHALLENGE

The Internet confronts us with a plurality of values at a level of immediacy unimaginable to previous generations. At work, at play, and at home, we are unavoidably connected to people from all over the world. In organizations large and small, project teams are increasingly virtual, consisting of people in dispersed geographical locations, who have different cultural backgrounds and value systems. To flourish in our world today -- or even just to participate in a meaningful way -- requires the cultivation of a new kind of pluralism. The new pluralism is a mindset that goes far beyond tolerating diversity; it actively engages with others to articulate shared goals and commit to working together to achieve them. The new pluralism requires a new skill set, which we call the *Orchestration of Commitments in Pluralistic Networks*. Our objective in this chapter is to discuss why we need this new kind of pluralism and how to cultivate it in our networks. We are confident that MMO games can be useful tools for developing and cultivating this mindset, when combined with a framework for observing the way

we engage with each other and with new practices for more effective engagement.

Coordination is essential for all human beings to work together. It underlies all human social practices. It is how a group acts together as a unity, achieving a purpose that no individual could alone. Business, government, and military organizations exemplify systems of coordination that enable them to make and fulfill offers on a broad scale. These organizations rely on small teams to carry out specific tasks and missions. We will focus here on coordination within small teams.

Despite its being essential, many people find coordination to be a major, sometimes insurmountable, challenge. Coordination breakdowns manifest as miscommunication, misunderstandings, unmet expectations, distrust, blindness, prejudice, lack of sensitivity, ill-timed actions, wasted motion and resources, missed deadlines, and performance-killing bad moods. As a result, coordination breakdowns are usually expensive, wasteful, mission killing, and sometimes life threatening. A plethora of coordination technologies have been offered to overcome these problems and enable virtual teams, but even with those tools coordination breakdowns have become more common as teams become more dispersed. Exquisite coordination, which separates high performance teams from the rest, is an ever more elusive goal.

Missed promises are a simple, but common example of miscoordination. In software, the best 20 percent of all enterprises deliver 80 percent of their originally promised software products on time. The average company, however, achieves on time delivery only 50 percent of the time. The average company is delivering negative consequences to half its customers, who cannot trust its promises (Ebert and Dunke, 2007). Larry Fisher (Fisher, 2009) quotes Charles Spinosa, a principal of Vision Consulting and coauthor on other works (Spinosa, Dreyfus, and Flores, 1997), on the costs of a company's failure to fulfill its promises to its customers. "I ask companies to list their top 10 promises, how many will be fulfilled,

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