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SPECIAL ISSUE ON KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE

From Rats to Riches: Game Playing and the Production of the Capitalist Self

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Abstract This article examines *Cashflow*, a board game that readers of best-seller financial success books play in order to learn the basics of investing and to enhance their financial skills. Cashflow is a fictitious market, in which players buy and sell assets with the ultimate goal of becoming "financially free." Based on participant observation of clubs in the United States and Argentina, and drawing on the ideas of performativity and governmentality, the article focuses on four topics. First, the role of the game in establishing definitions of what it means to be rich. Second, the development of calculative tools. Third, players' work on the self, through which they explore what may be fostering or limiting their chances of financial success. Finally, the work done by players to fit the game with reality, which allows the game to be used in different national economic contexts.

Keywords Performativity · Governmentality · Popular culture · Games · Self-help · Finances

Introduction

This article looks into *Cashflow*, a board game played by readers of financial success books that give advice on how to become rich. People who play Cashflow do so in order to learn about finances, to enhance their technical skills, and to prepare their characters for the challenge of attaining "financial freedom." They play the game because they lack, or believe they lack, the necessary tools or mindset to invest in businesses, the stock market, or real estate. Cashflow, very much like the famous game *Monopoly*, represents a fictitious market in which players buy and sell assets with the ultimate goal of obtaining profit. Unlike Monopoly, however, Cashflow is explicitly designed and interpreted by players as a tool for preparing oneself for real-life financial mobility. Both players and organizers

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repeatedly stress the fact that it is more than a game. Most players take it very seriously. "It is not really a game; it is a tool to condition our minds for finances, accounting, and business," said one group organizer when introducing the game. Although players may have fun while playing, a full game demands several hours and significant effort (occasionally including traveling long distances when games are not held in players' hometowns). A clear distinction between playing a game and playing Cashflow can be seen in the introduction to a weekend session by one of the organizers: "I believe you are not here for a weekend distraction. You are interested in financial freedom. There's a great place around here if you just want to kill time, where you can play bridge or *bocce*. But that's not what we are here for." Repeated play is seen as enrichment, and as a statement displayed on the board says: "The more you play, the richer you become." The game is aimed at helping players understand their personalities in regard to finances and at helping them acquire a "financial mindset." Players are encouraged to draw lessons from every step of the game and to apply them to "real life."

In my analysis of Cashflow, I draw on two theoretical worlds: The literature on performativity and the literature on governmentality. While these two worlds are different in many regards, the intersection of their concerns is at the center of what happens in this game. Cashflow is an instance of the *production of economic subjects*, which is the common ground of performativity and governmentality (Callon and Muniesa 2005, p. 1232; Miller and Rose 1990, pp. 9–10).

First introduced by Michel Callon (1998), the main idea of performativity is, simply put, that economics does not (just) study the economy but it actually performs it. From this perspective, economic models are not mere reflections of a reality outside of them, but they have the power to make the economy work in the ways originally predicted by the models. According to Francesco Guala (2007), there are at least two ways in which economics makes this happen. One way is by "informing institutional design," that is, creating the conditions, in enclosed markets, for the emergence of the market exchanges assumed as natural in economic theories. This form of performativity reflects very well the case of the organization of the strawberry market auction system analyzed by Garcia-Parpet (2007). The second way that performativity occurs is when economics more directly shapes the behavior of individuals in markets (Guala 2007, p. 152). In this sense, the *homo economicus* (or any form of economic action that can be assumed and modeled in economic theories) is neither a natural occurrence nor the fiction that sociologists have combated for years. For Callon (1998), the fact that the homo economicus is not natural does not mean that it does not exist: it can be produced. Callon asserts that the rejection of the homo economicus as a fiction prevented sociologists from looking into the processes through which market actors are actually constructed and formatted as what economists assume they are. The challenge is not to prove that the homo economicus is an unrealistic simplification, but rather to understand the processes through which people acquire the tools that make them similar–although with varying distances from the ideal—to what economists treat as a reality.

The idea of performativity can be used in a narrow sense and in a broader sense. The narrower sense is close to the idea of self-fulfilling prophecy, and is well reflected in what has become a "classic" example of performativity, the case of the application of the Black-Scholes economic models in the Chicago Board Options Exchange (MacKenzie and Millo 2003). Cashflow is not a case of performativity in this sense. There is not a distinctive economic theory or model that becomes true by virtue of its application. In a broader sense, however, performativity has brought attention to the role of calculative tools in shaping economic subjects. For Callon, the *homo economicus* is essentially a form of calculation.

That calculation is not a purely mental process; it involves collaboration between humans and objects, which he calls “calculative agencies,” the assemblage of humans and calculative tools that makes up the *real* homo economicus. Formulas, accounting tools, computers, and various forms of expertise (most notably economics, broadly conceived) are regarded as “prostheses” through which people become calculative market actors.

To be sure, most of the popular financial gurus behind resources like Cashflow are not professional economists. Callon has called attention to the importance for performativity of expertise that may not be immediately classified as “economics.” He calls these experts “economists in-the-wild,” who complement “confined economists” (Callon 2007, p. 336). Callon emphasizes the role of formulas and statements produced by non-academic economists. In fact, the idea of performativity to a large extent blurs the boundaries between theoretical and practical economists: “the words ‘techniques’ (or ‘technology’) and ‘theory’ serve more to impose social hierarchies and scales of legitimacy than to describe practices and types of production” (Callon 2007, p. 333). Several “lower-status” forms of expertise–lower when contrasted to academic economics—have a crucial role in producing a world in which people behave in similar ways to what economists assume they do. Performativity research has dealt with engineering, accounting, marketing and other market professions. For Callon (2007, p. 333), “a host of professions, competencies and non-humans are necessary for academic economics to be successful. Each of these parties ‘makes’ economics.” Financial gurus and the resources and technologies that they promote are part of the network of calculative agencies that produces economic action. They may be hard to identify with “real” economists, but they are no less real. They may be ignored by academic economists, but their tools are used and their statements heard by a massive audience unlikely to have any more direct contact with more legitimate forms of economic expertise. As financial gurus grow in popularity, they have an increasing role in configuring economic actors.

The subject that the game helps to perform is not exactly the homo economicus, or better, it is not *just* the homo economicus. The subject that financial self-help (and Cashflow in particular) attempts to produce is one that calculates rationally, maximizing benefits and minimizing costs based on purely individual considerations. But it goes beyond that. It is an actor with calculative prostheses, but not just any calculative prostheses. It is an actor that maximizes benefits, but not just any benefit. Cashflow provides the calculative tools for an actor that maximizes benefits from financial investments. In Cashflow, a rational actor is someone who calculates in order to minimize her work and maximize streaming revenues from investments (in the stock market, real estate, etc.). In short, the game is a learning tool designed to provide calculative prostheses for an economic subject in line with financial capitalism (see Davis 2009).

The literature on governmentality, more explicitly concerned with the production of subjects, has also paid special attention to calculation and accounting as crucial practices through which subjects are constructed. For governmentality too, calculative tools have performative power. According to Peter Miller (2001, p. 392), “the calculative practices of accountancy are intrinsic to and constitutive of social relations, rather than secondary and derivative.” Calculative tools shape subjects: “accounting practices create a particular way of understanding, representing and acting upon events and processes” (Miller 2001, p. 393). Seen from the governmentality perspective, calculative tools have important political implications, because they make subjects legible and governable “from a distance.” With adequate calculative tools, governments do not need to intervene in the governed individual sphere and can act instead on external representations of their predicted behavior (Barry et al. 1996; Miller and Rose 1990).

Through Cashflow, players voluntarily try to acquire the accounting tools, principles and goals that are supposed to lead them to financial success, and at the same time to become the autonomous calculative subjects imagined by the neoliberal art of government (Miller and Rose 1990). This transformation is not imposed from above. Players know that economic action that is "competent" in financial capitalism is not a given, a point of departure, but rather the result of a process through which they have to deeply transform their selves. They dedicate themselves to this transformation by reading, attending seminars on financial expertise, watching DVDs, looking for investment opportunities, networking, and finally, taking a few hours periodically to play Cashflow. This exploration and work on the self fits with what Michel Foucault called technologies of the self, those technologies that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, p. 18). Throughout the game, players have multiple opportunities to reflect on and redefine their financial selves in order to effect changes in their attitudes towards financial success by working on manifestations of their selves (fear, anxiety, risk, hope, etc.). Players are actively involved in turning themselves into competent market actors. They vigorously try to fit the calculative prostheses to their selves.

The game participates in the production of an economic subject adjusted to (and which makes up) financial capitalism through three distinct but related processes. First, Cashflow provides a set of definitions about what the goals of people in financial capitalism should be and what they mean. As I will show, the difference between having a fortune and being financially free is crucial and conveyed by the board game. As straightforward as it may sound, the meaning of "being rich" is not given and is open to constructions in which ideology and culture play a role, but also the technical calculative tools utilized. Second, during the game players acquire calculative prostheses adjusted to financial capitalism. They learn some of the technical nuances of bookkeeping; investing; calculating returns; and distinguishing various sorts of income and expenses, assets, and liabilities. Third, they work on their selves to make it receptive to those tools and goals. Players not only learn what being financially successful is and the technical skills that such a mission requires, but they also look inside their character (their self) to find what may be fostering or limiting their chances of success.

The crafting of a successful financial capitalist self is seen by players as a process. Self-help authors recommend playing the game periodically, weekly or monthly. In this regard, it is not that different from sports training, in which exercises are repeated countless times, and in which learning is necessarily practical (Wacquant 2003, pp. 58–60). I have seen experts and group leaders play from time to time to continue crafting their capitalist selves. Cashflow is not the only tool that they use to become market actors. In any given game session, there are players for whom Cashflow is one of their first encounters with financial self-help technologies as well as players who arrive to Cashflow after having started their journey into financial self-help by using other techniques.[1] The game is seen as one

[1] Books, in particular *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, are the usual point of entrance. But there are also players who were dragged to a game by a friend or family member. They may encounter financial self-help through fortuitous roads, but they also find in financial self-help resources the narratives to explain why they are and should be there. They may not think that there is anything wrong with their financial dispositions before knowing about the books and game, but they discover their own financial deficiencies as they start using these resources.

resource in this transformation. No one expects to "change their mindset" only by playing the game; it has to be combined with other practices and training that make up the whole enterprise of "financial education." But it is a privileged practice because, unlike other resources, players can see themselves "in action," both getting to know themselves and starting to perform their desired identity. It is also important to note that, while players do undergo change through these resources—they use the technical devices, calculations and language from the game, they see themselves and the economic world in a new light, and many engage in economic activities in accordance with their new goals—that does not mean that they will eventually become rich or "financially free." While the tagline of Cashflow is "the more you play, the richer you become," the actual outcomes will obviously depend on many more factors than the self (most of which financial self-help intentionally ignores). As financial self-help products like to say in the small print, results are not guaranteed.

The article is organized into five sections. First, I will describe the context in which games take place and provide a brief explanation of the mechanics of Cashflow. The next three sections correspond to each of the three processes mentioned above: acquiring definitions and meanings, developing calculative prostheses, and attaining self-knowledge. In the final section, I address the issue of how players fit the game to "real life" and how they modify the game in practice. In this section, I take advantage of my multi-site fieldwork in New York and Argentina to explain how this active engagement by players makes the game work in economic contexts different from which the game was originally designed for. In the conclusion, I return to the theoretical issues presented in this introduction.

Context: The game and the clubs

This article is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Cashflow clubs in New York City and Buenos Aires, Argentina. I played or observed more than thirty games in a variety of settings. Since, depending on the rules used, a game session can last 2–6 hours, I observed (and most times engaged in) more than 100 hours of play. In addition, I attended pre-game explanations and post-game discussions, and I had several conversations about Cashflow with group leaders and members. This paper is part of a larger project that studies the use of financial self-help books and other resources in the US and Argentina. Most financial self-help books and other resources used in Argentina (and in many other countries) are literal translations from American resources. I chose the US and Argentina in order to understand how resources developed in the US travel and are adapted to a different economic context. Thus, my multi-site approach is not comparative, but rather extended or global (Burawoy 2000, 2009). What the two cases illustrate (in the last section of this article) is how actors operate on financial self-help resources in order to make them "globalizable" and usable in multiple countries. Argentine players have to produce their own cross-national comparisons to make sense of Cashflow.

The game was created by Robert Kiyosaki, arguably the most successful guru of recent financial self-help literature. Kiyosaki published his first books in the late 1990s, the most popular of which is *Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids About Money—That the Poor and Middle Class Do Not.* His publishing endeavors now include more than 30 books translated into dozens of languages, targeted at children, teens, men, and women. Estimates of his sales vary from ten to 26 million books worldwide. He has been non-stop for almost a decade in the best-seller rankings both in the US and Argentina. He also offers various seminars, TV broadcasts, videos, and coaching services.[2] Basically, Kiyosaki's books encourage readers to overcome the class and individual dispositions that keep them from becoming rich. The books also suggest that the desire for the security of a job should be replaced by the quest for "financial freedom" and advocate "financial education" as a correction to the financial dispositions of middle and working classes. His books for beginners in financial self-help recommend playing Cashflow as a means of becoming financially literate and entering the path to "financial freedom" (Kiyosaki 1999, 2000; Kiyosaki and Lechter 1998). The website of *Rich Dad* has a "community" section where one can register a Cashflow club and find the contact information of club organizers. While anyone can register a club and organize games, some clubs have become more permanent or semi-institutionalized, developing their own websites or online forums.

While, as with any board game, you can play at home with family or friends, or even on an electronic version available on CD, getting together with others provides opportunities to network and interact with people with the same interests and similar attitudes toward financial freedom.[3] In addition, many players say that their close friends are not interested in playing with them, so attending a club game may be their only chance to play. The cost of the game product (around $200) is another reason to take advantage of a club.

I played in a variety of settings according to the different club structures. There are two types of settings: a) sessions with one to three boards and five to 15 attendants, which are held in a public space like a coffee shop or in an office or private home. These are informally organized through online forums or webpages and are free or very cheap; and b) sessions which are part of a one-day workshop organized by a more institutionalized group. These are typically more expensive.

In New York, there are several permanent clubs that organize small games (among other activities), and two dominant clubs. Most of the games of both clubs are facilitated by the same person, Sonny, who brings the games, paper, pencils, and other materials needed to play.[4] Sonny is the most active game organizer in the city.[5] Sometimes he charges a small fee of $5 per player to cover expenses for these materials, but generally he holds the games for free. Game announcements are published online in the clubs' websites and broadcasted by email to previous attendants; usually between five and 15 people attend. Since the game can be played by up to six people, there are usually two simultaneous games at separate tables. The games are held once or twice a month, sometimes more, depending entirely on the availability and will of Sonny, and each session takes about 3 hours. Occasionally, some players exchange numbers and organize their own games. In Buenos Aires, I attended sessions organized by members of an online forum. These small games (five to ten people) were generally held in someone's apartment or office, and people would chip in to buy refreshments and food. There was another group that organized a few meetings in a coffee shop that was closed to the public for the occasion, charging the price of a fixed menu. These events were attended by around 20 players.

[2] The question of why this book in particular became so popular is not easy to respond. Recent research shows that success of cultural products may not have much to do with the inherent qualities of the product and may be caused by self-fulfilling prophecies and the "Matthew effect" (Salganik and Watts 2008). Kiyosaki's success can be attributed to an effective branding effort, because his varied products and platforms advertise each other. Readers I interviewed usually recognized that his simple writing to convey complex ideas that shook their basic notions about the economy was the most attractive factor of Kiyosaki's work.

[3] Networking is one of the mandates of the Rich Dad literature and other self-help books. Readers are told that interacting with people with similar concerns will help them work more actively for their financial success. They also use networking to find financial opportunities or business partners.

[4] All names of participants, organizers, and organizations have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

[5] Since Sonny is involved in several groups, attendants frequently do not know to which club a given session belongs. In the last few months of my research, one of the two main clubs became largely inactive. However, the frequency of games did not change, because Sonny kept organizing games with other clubs or meet-ups.

The second setting, the large one-day "financial freedom workshop," is very popular in Argentina. These workshops are organized by a group led by Matias, who created his own website devoted to *Rich Dad* in Argentina in 2006. Matias started playing with family members and officemates in early 2006 and registered a club with the official *Rich Dad* website in March. A few months later, as he was attracting more people to the games, he started his own website, and in late 2006, he organized a public session with 50 people at a coffee shop in Buenos Aires. He later assembled a team and started offering full-day workshops featuring talks on specific financial topics in the morning and a Cashflow session in the afternoon. His group (*Financial Freedom Argentina*) has been organizing workshops throughout the country, assembling teams in several provinces. In Buenos Aires, workshops are usually held once a month in a rented conference space and attendants are charged a moderately expensive fee ($70–$150), which includes lunch and coffee. The attendance is usually 50–70 people, who occupy ten to 12 game tables, and the net time of play is at least 5 hours. In a display of institutionalization that other groups lack, team members of Financial Freedom Argentina wear distinctive shirts and answer questions around the tables throughout the game.

The dynamics of game-playing is rather informal. Participants do not dress in any special attire to come to games. In weekend games, it is rare to see people in business attire, although there are usually a few in the events organized by Financial Freedom Argentina. Wearing a tie on a weekend signals to others that you are treating the meeting as a business event more than a day of fun. But not wearing a tie does not mean that the player is less serious about it. In fact, most of the organizers dress casually. When a game is organized on a weekday, most people attend after work, so it is more frequent to see participants in their office attire. But in general, there is nothing like a dress code. During games, players talk and interact with each other and the organizer constantly. They ask or offer help to others, talk about the rationale of the decisions they are making, and comment on their own activities, books they read, seminars they attended, investments they are considering, etc. Depending on the personality of those playing at a given table, a game can be a very fun experience. In the large events, you can hear people loudly laughing, celebrating or complaining about their bad luck.[6] Although organizers and players will generally comment on the seriousness of the game and the importance of applying Cashflow principles to real

[6] Argentine games are usually louder, but this is probably not something related to Cashflow itself.

life, having fun is accepted and encouraged. A Cashflow table can become messy. Not only the board itself usually takes up most of the table space, players have two pieces of paper each, calculators, several pencils and a few erasers and pencil sharpeners that go from hand to hand. The rest of the table is usually filled with some of the dust generated by the erasers, game cards lying around, and sometimes individual business cards. In addition, depending on the setting, players often have water, sodas, coffee or snacks (they may have chipped in for supplies or purchased a flat rate menu pre-arranged with the coffee shop). I never saw alcoholic drinks in games, and I never saw anyone suggesting or banning alcohol.

At the time I conducted this fieldwork (2007–2009), none of the groups that organized games had any organic connection with Kiyosaki's company, which holds the licenses to, produces, and distributes several products, including games and books. Cashflow groups are usually born out of fans' interest in playing and meeting people. By offering workshops, business opportunities, and a highly organized website, Financial Freedom Argentina organizers were working towards becoming a profitable financial education business. However, they had not managed to forge a connection with Kiyosaki's company in the US, which to their view was not interested in the Argentine market. Still, they continued organizing games and activities, and Matias was planning to try again to establish a connection with the American company once he had built a large organization. Thus, the independence that I observed may change in the future.[7]

While my involvement in games was usually as a player, sometimes I just observed. During the one-day events with dozens of players, I was admitted free of charge and usually asked in return to help answer players' questions, like the rest of the team. At these large events, attendees usually introduce themselves at the beginning, so I always had the chance to briefly explain that I was doing participant observation of Cashflow clubs. At the smaller games, I told people about my researcher status more casually, or when they asked why I was taking notes.

Given the massive popularity of Robert Kiyosaki's books, both in the United States and in Argentina, participants are quite heterogeneous, but within certain bounds. Kiyosaki's books are mostly targeted towards people who hold nine-to-five jobs that they would like to quit to become business owners or investors. Indeed, one of the typical things that attendees say at the events is that after reading Kiyosaki's books, they realized they wanted to move away from being employees. Yet, not all participants are nine-to-five employees. Many people with more flexible occupations (small business owners, entrepreneurs, freelancers) also attend games and events. People who work in activities connected with real estate or network marketing are also usually well represented. Kiyosaki's books give an alternative narrative of upward mobility, arguing that formal education is not really important, that the skills needed to be financially free are not the ones learned in school. Yet many attendants have achieved higher education, and certain majors such as business administration, advertising, and marketing are usually represented. It is fair to say that while Cashflow game players are neither the very rich nor the very poor, they are not homogeneous within those bounds. Club members are also diverse in terms of age, ranging from high-school students to semi-retired people, but most are roughly between their mid-twenties and mid-

[7] During the two years in which I played Cashflow, I attended games from as many different clubs as I could in New York and Buenos Aires. In New York, there are several clubs formally listed in the Rich Dad's website, but most of them are inactive, so I ended up attending games from four different groups. I played in games advertised in the groups' web pages or in meet-up websites. In Buenos Aires, I attended games organized by or through the two main groups (Financial Freedom Argentina and the online forum). In both cities, I played in almost all of the active groups.

forties. Unlike the expert worlds of finance and investing, which are largely male-dominated (Abolafia 2001, p. 15; Levin 2001, p. 117; Roth 2003; Czarniawska 2005), Cashflow players are more evenly distributed in terms of gender, although on most occasions, there are slightly more men than women.[8] It is also common to see couples attending games together. In New York, the race of participants is also diverse, representing the population of the city.

While I will explain the dynamics of the game in greater detail throughout the paper, I now need to give a brief and necessarily overly-simplified explanation of the basics of Cashflow. The board contains two tracks, the rat race and the fast track, and four piles of cards: "big deals," "small deals," "the market," and "doodads." Each player has her own financial statement, which displays her income, expenses, assets, and liabilities. Players initially copy the numbers from their randomly picked profession cards, and then make changes to their financial statement throughout the game. The goal in the first track (the rat race) is to invest in assets (stocks, properties, businesses) that generate enough incoming cash flow so that it surpasses your monthly expenses. When that happens, a player is allowed to move from the rat race to the fast track. Once in the fast track, a winner is crowned when: a) she lands on her dream (previously chosen in the fast track) and has enough money to buy it, or b) she accumulates \$50,000 in monthly cash flow from investments in the fast track.

Participants take turns throwing the die and moving among the 24 squares that form the wheel of the rat race. They may land on seven different possibilities: "paycheck," "opportunity," "the market," "doodad," "baby," "downsized," or "charity." Landing or going over a "paycheck" square provides a player with her monthly cash flow (the difference between her income and her expenses). Each time that a player receives a paycheck represents a month of her life. The "opportunity" and "market" squares are what get the game moving. When landing on "opportunity," the player picks a card from the "big deal" or "small deal" piles, depending on how much cash she has available to invest.

[8] Although financial self-help resources largely assume a male audience, there is a growing literature especially targeted towards women. This literature is slowly being translated and published in Argentina, but it is much more extended and established in the United States. See, for example, Kim Kiyosaki (2006), Orman (2007), Bach (2002) and Chatzky (2006).

Opportunity cards offer real estate properties, stock, or businesses. Each real estate card provides information on the amount of the down payment, mortgage, and total cost of a property. It is assumed that the property is rented out and, after covering the mortgage and other expenses, it provides positive monthly cash flow. Stock market cards offer stock shares at a certain price and provide information on the price range of the given stock, so that the player can evaluate buying or selling her available shares. In the case of stock, the player who picked up the card may buy stock from the market, but anyone is permitted to sell (players do not trade stocks—or anything except for cards—among themselves). Similarly to real estate cards, each business card offers an opportunity to purchase a business with a cost and a fixed incoming monthly cash flow. "Market" cards present cash offers for real estate or businesses. If the player owns the type of property that the market demands, she can sell it to the market, usually at higher prices than the original purchasing value. Throughout the game, players may buy and sell assets several times in order to increase their wealth, reinvest, and eventually have their income from investments surpass their expenses. Landing on "doodad" forces a player to pick a doodad card and spend the money indicated on the card on some consumer good.[9] When landing on "baby," the player has to add this new item, and an amount determined on each profession card, to the expense column. Landing on "downsized" means that the player loses two turns and has to pay her total monthly expenses once. If a player lands on "charity," she has the option of donating 10% of her monthly income in order to throw an additional die during three turns. The advantage of throwing two dice is going faster, and therefore receiving more paychecks.

In most cases, new players sit with participants with more experience. When games are held as part of a workshop, players receive a brief lecture on the rules and goals of the game. Most times, they just sit down and follow the informal instructions of the leader or other players. For beginners, the rules, goals, and accounting of the game may be hard to understand. Somewhat like Howard Becker's marihuana smokers (Becker 1953), players learn as they go, make sense of what they are doing while they play, and recognize the rationale of their actions only as they perform them (see also Gee 2007). The first time I played, in New York,

> I told the rest of the group that I didn't want to play and I could just watch, because I had never played before. They smiled and said that everybody had to play (but they didn't sound as if they were forcing me, more as if they knew that I would learn fast). I insisted, saying that I didn't want to make the game slower and Robert said, very kindly, that it wasn't a problem since other people were also playing for the first time. (fieldnote)

Even if they received a lecture before playing, during their first few experiences with Cashflow, participants may not know exactly what they are doing. They become familiar with the objects of the game as they use them and as other players help them interpret their actions. Even if beginners are lucky enough to win, understanding and incorporating all of the concepts of the game could take several sessions.

Acquiring definitions

Each rule and each step of the game conveys a meaningful set of definitions of what economic success is. The basic structure of the board entails a dualist definition that is

[9] All cards are seen by all participants, regardless of whose turn it is, and are read out loud.

central to Robert Kiyosaki's books: that there is a substantial difference, at the cognitive and character levels, between the rich and everybody else. Thus, the board has two distinct tracks. Unlike regular board games with an open ended track, the "rat race" is a circle, representing a rat's running wheel. Rats represent players in their financial travails. According to Robert Kiyosaki, most poor and middle class people behave financially like rats on their running wheels: they run and run but stay always in the same place. The "rat race" represents the idea that, no matter how much people work, they do not change their financial position. This image is used to characterize middle class financial burdens, in which more income means higher expenses, more debt, more needs—essentially being trapped in a perennial circle of hard work and financial difficulty.

The rat has a powerful symbolic meaning. For example, during the introductions at a workshop in Buenos Aires, one of the participants said: "I'm here because I read Kiyosaki and immediately felt that I was one of the small rats running on a wheel." In fact, the pieces that represent players on the board are little rats of different colors, standing on their hind legs, dressed in human clothes. The board also features various images of rats wearing costumes that identify different professions (policeman, secretary, pilot, doctor, etc.). In the center of the wheel, there is a rat wearing a millionaire's robe, with a bundle of dollars in her hands. The rat race is a simple but effective metaphor. Everyone in the world of Cashflow clubs knows what "getting out of the rat race" means: having all your expenses covered by an income that does not require work. That is what defines "financial freedom."

By playing Cashflow, people acquire specific definitions of what being rich entails. Throughout the game, they realize that having a huge amount of money is not the same as being rich. In the world of Robert Kiyosaki and other self-help gurus, richness is equated to "financial freedom," the possibility of having one's spending needs covered by investment revenue (or "passive income"). In the language of Kiyosaki, financial freedom, or escape from the rat race, is attained once passive income equals expenses. That means that the individual does not need to work any longer to maintain her current lifestyle. At the beginning of the game, new players are informed by the leader or by other players that they are allowed to leave the rat race track when they achieve this. However, in the midst of learning the rules and making calculations on their income statements, new players often lose sight of this goal. On several occasions, I saw new players identify the "passive income" box on their income sheets and understand its meaning only well into the game. There is a moment when everything "clicks" and a player figures out that the goal is not just making money, but becoming "financially free." This is of crucial importance in understanding most of the current financial self-help resources: the project of financial success does not start by learning "how" but rather by learning "what." Not any kind of enrichment makes sense in this stage of capitalism. Players learn that the logic of financial flow is the way of thinking appropriate to financial capitalism.

For people who thought that being a millionaire just involves having a lot of money, this means a reconfiguration of their goals. "It is not enough to turn $1,300 into $90,000, like you did in the game. The point of the game is that you understand that you are not free until you make money work for you and generate incoming monthly cash flow," said a group leader in a post-game discussion. Experienced players know that profession cards that represent lower-paying jobs have also fewer expenses. Since financial freedom (or the chance to leave the rat race) is achieved when passive income reaches the amount needed for expenses, it may be easier to win the game starting with lower-paying professions. This conveys the notion that it is not necessary to have a lot of money to be financially free; those who need less are actually closer to being rich. As Matias put it when explaining the game: "Kiyosaki says that if you have the intelligence to play the game and win, it doesn't matter if you have lots of money. If a person receives passive income to match her expenses, it means that she has the financial intelligence to get into big businesses."

The latter statement presents a counterintuitive and central definition of financial success that people who play Cashflow share. Members of *Rich Dad* clubs usually complain that those who do not know enough about Robert Kiyosaki tend to think that one's chances of becoming rich are related to the amount of money one has. In fact, the structural conditions that determine and reproduce the position of the individual in the economic structure are absent from the game (and generally from the financial self-help world). They are not seen as external limits, but rather as a form of class *habitus* inherited from our parents' "poor" mindset (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 52–65; Kiyosaki and Lechter 1998). This habitus is rendered conscious and modifiable by the individual through work on the self, financial education and practices like Cashflow.[10] Social class is seen less as a position in society than a state of mind and a choice:

> We do our best to provide distinctions between how the rich, the poor and the middle class think...and then leave up the choice to you as to which way you want to think. After all, one of the benefits of living in a free society is that we all have the choice to be rich, poor or middle class. That decision is up to you, regardless of which class you are in today. (Kiyosaki 1999, p. 6)

Kiyosaki's fans recognize that the most important asset in order to become rich is "financial intelligence." Financial literacy is partly disentangled from financial wealth. In a post-game discussion, Matias interpreted one of the goals of the game: "the key is to put your ideas together and realize how I have to train my brain to be able to visualize an opportunity and take it. It is a way of fertilizing the soil of my brain to be ready to jump on an opportunity." Matias also recognized that it is obviously necessary to have the cash to be able to take an investment opportunity. But that cash is within reach if the right mindset has been fostered. The weight is on the cognitive side: without financial literacy, you will not even know how to recognize a good investment opportunity. This literacy is not one that can be acquired in formal education, which is regarded as largely useless for this purpose.

The disentanglement between money and financial knowledge is also represented by the transition from the rat race to the fast track. When a player leaves the rat race and enters the fast track, she enters a different game. The fast track is where the rich invest (it contains very large investments, including factories, chain restaurants, buildings, oil investments, etc.). By turning the page of the income statement, the player finds a new form to fill with her financial information. But now the passive income acquired inside the rat race is multiplied by 100, and that becomes the monthly cash flow with which a player starts her journey in the fast track. This is the only case in the game, which otherwise reveres and advocates accurate mathematical calculations and book-keeping, where money multiplies for no clear reason. When I asked Matias during a game why the money was multiplied by 100, he answered:

> Kiyosaki says that passive income is multiplied by 100 because the person who has achieved financial freedom has acquired the knowledge and training to do big business. It doesn't matter if he is a doorman, teacher, doctor or truck driver. If he has done it, he has the financial background to multiply that amount by 100. Why? Because he is already financially free. He understood the game of money. He can operate at a new level.

[10] See Binkley (2009, p. 67). For a discussion of the relation between the largely un-reflexive habitus and the conscious technologies of the self, see Burkitt (2002).

As exciting as it may sound to reach the fast track, it is in many ways less thrilling than the rat race. In the words of a player: “I enjoy the rat race more because I learn more. It is more similar to my real situation. Once you are in the fast track, everything is too easy and you don’t learn much.” Some players actually wonder if it was better to stay in the rat race even after achieving financial freedom. While the rat race has a more didactic goal, the fast track focuses on aspirations: how would it feel to be rich?

At the beginning of the game, after picking a playing piece, players are asked to choose a dream. For every rat, there is a corresponding cheese of the same color, which is placed in a dream square. Dreams are located in the squares of the fast track, identified by a pink color and a price. The choice of a dream reminds players that not everything is about money and accounting. You are supposed to have a dream on the horizon and increase your cash flow towards that goal. “You won’t be able to achieve financial freedom if you don’t have a big dream that drives you,” said Matias when presenting the game in a workshop. Once a player has advanced to the fast track, if she lands in the dream square where her cheese is, and she has enough money to purchase it, she wins the game. Examples of dreams are dinner with the President, a cabin at Montana Lake, playing golf around the world, or funding a research center for cancer and AIDS.

As several scholars have shown, games are usually rich in meanings and representations (see Fine 1983; Geertz 1973; Goffman 1961; Henricks 2006; Sallaz 2008), and Cashflow is no exception. The game provides definitions of financial success, establishes a separation between wealth and financial intelligence, and helps players develop an idea of what financial advancement is about. That idea is centered on the notions of financial freedom and passive income. Players’ calculations are oriented by play towards acquiring income minimizing work, and in this sense they are constructed as subjects of financial capitalism. In the next section, I turn to the technical calculative prostheses that players acquire playing Cashflow.

Acquiring calculative tools

The second form of learning that the game entails is the acquisition of calculative tools. Most calculations in the game are at the relatively basic math level. On a practical level, however, they can be cumbersome. Players have to write and erase their income statements continuously throughout the game, filling in information from the cards and constantly asking for help from others. The writing and erasing affect the pace of the game, because each player has to wait for the previous one to finish her accounting before she can throw the die. In games with more advanced players, they usually continue playing and do not wait for others to finish their accounting. However, it is hard to understand the mechanics of the game within the first few deals. The following fieldnote is from a session with many tables in which I was asked to help in coaching players:

> There was a short session explaining how to play the game, but that didn’t seem to be enough. Every minute, I or one of the other three leaders had to run to another table to clear doubts and explain the basics of the game. It’s hard to explain quickly and effectively with the noise of more than 60 people playing in the same room. The first time that someone at a given table buys an asset, I have to go through all the changes and calculations they have to make on their statement, and I have to ask the other players to pay attention to the explanation. At times, while I was explaining at one table, I saw all of the hands at another table rise. After the first hour, it becomes easier, as some of the players are able to help others.

Before starting to play, each person picks a random profession card and copies the information from the card onto her own income statement. Professions vary from lower status jobs, such as janitor, to high income professions, like airline pilot and lawyer. Unlike fantasy role-playing games (Fine 1983), players do not "perform" their assigned identity; they only use its financial information, which differs mostly in terms of salary and monthly expenses (the added expense of having a baby, for example, is higher when the status of a profession is higher). While the amount of money in your pocket increases more quickly if you have a higher salary, higher expenses make it harder to match them with your passive income and get out of the rat race. Income statements contain four sections: Income, Expenses, Assets, and Liabilities, plus a section in which the difference between total income and total expenses is calculated, resulting in one's monthly cash flow. This is the amount of cash that is left every month to be used for investments and is what each player receives each time she goes over a paycheck square.

The income statement is the most important object in the game and a key tool in financial calculation. During a game, Sonny told me: "This game is not about real estate, is not about stocks, is not about business. It's about you and your financial statement." Several players told me that filling the sheet out at home with their real financial information marked a major change in how they perceived their personal finances. Players are regularly encouraged to take the statement home and apply it to their own finances. Some even suggest playing the game with their real financial information copied in the income statement. Accurate bookkeeping contributes to the self-discipline thought to be necessary to succeed financially. But it is not just accuracy; by playing Cashflow, people acquire a certain form of ordering their personal finance, and a particular way of understanding each expense and income item. During the game, they usually connect the significance of representations of transactions to their daily use of money. "Doodad" cards, for example, force players to spend money on consumer pleasures (dinner with friends, golf clubs, coffee, etc.). Usually players complain when they have to pick a "doodad" and some reflect on how they may spend that money in their everyday life without even registering it, draining the resources they could otherwise use to invest and generate passive income. An expense now becomes a "doodad," an obstacle between their current position and financial freedom.

In addition to the income statement, players have a balance sheet in which they keep count of how much money they have in their pocket.[11] Many times, new players have a hard time identifying the function of each sheet and what instances of the game will affect them. Cards like "doodads" will only have effect on their accumulated cash (since they have to buy a consumer good once), while landing on "baby" affects only the monthly cash flow (by raising monthly expenses), without effect on the balance sheet. The difference between balance sheet and income statement is parallel to that between capital and cash flow and to that between having a fortune and "financial freedom." Thus, a distinction between two technical devices plays a role in reinforcing the central definitions of financial success.

Robert Kiyosaki promotes in his books a distinction between assets and liabilities that defies the one that most people learn in basic accounting classes. While a house or a car is usually considered an asset, they are regarded in the game as liabilities. For Kiyosaki, the

[11] The game provides fake bills in several denominations, and one player is supposed to be the bank. However, with very few exceptions, bills are replaced by balance sheets to make the game easier and faster.

distinction is straightforward: whatever puts money in one's pocket (generating passive income) is an asset, and whatever takes money from it is a liability:

> I changed my approach completely. From the beginning, the guy says that an asset is not what you have, but what makes money for you. He changes your idea from page one. Wait, but in high school I was told that my house was an asset! But your house doesn't give you money! While you live in your house, you have to pay bills, taxes. An asset is something that you buy that generates money for you. (Santiago, age 35)

This simple distinction, which moves certain goods from one column to another, has an impact on players in terms of how they think about their expenses. Each expense (both in game and in their actual finances) is classified according to this categorization.[12] As mentioned above, "doodad" cards present consumer expenses, which are contrasted to money spent in assets. A house or a car, usually considered assets, are only so in this framework if they are somehow generating positive incoming cash flow, for instance, as a rental property or taxi business. Players see themselves as having access to a secret that most people do not yet realize. Placing things in the right column is seen by Martin as one of the things he learned playing:

> I used to be orderly with my finances, but perhaps I didn't have a column for assets that would generate passive income. I didn't have one...I was looking for it, but I never put it there. Now that I've seen that I can have passive income....You see, that's what I learned. I realized that I was acting in the game as I do in real life, and that maybe what was missing was that column (which I now have) and the effort to rack my brains to figure out how I can generate passive income. (Martin, age 31)

The latter quote summarizes the importance of "the material reality of calculation, involving figures, mediums and inscriptions" (Callon 1998, p. 4) in the configuration of economic subjects and the effect of a tool like Cashflow. By transposing a column from the game to his actual finances, Martin incorporated a prosthesis that will drive his calculation and generation of income. An apparently simple accounting tool, the column for passive income, shapes a subject well-fitted for financial capitalism, who frames the economy in terms of acquiring income generated by financial assets instead of work. In the next section, I focus on the work on the self that players perform in order to make the goals and calculative tools fit them well.

Knowing the self

Steve, the organizer of a *Rich Dad* group, always insists that you quickly realize that you are not playing Cashflow to beat the other participants; you are actually playing against yourself. He says that through the game, you learn what your fears and tolerance to risk are and what kind of investor you are. Most players do not regard Cashflow merely as a game. It is more like a crucial instance in which you get to know yourself and to explore why you are still in your current financial position and what work you can do on yourself to move ahead. Although it may be nice to win the game, people play the game to study and modify their attitude and calculation in the financial world. Winning is usually less important than understanding what you are doing, learning, and being able to translate it into "real life."

[12] The classification of "monies" rather than "money" was analyzed by Viviana Zelizer (1994).

Since winning is not such a priority, there is a general sense of cooperation and collective achievement among players. When someone has gotten out of the rat race, applause from her table (and other tables) usually follows. The first person to leave the rat race is usually praised. Sometimes, the organizer asks the first person who left the rat race what they have done, so that others understand the process. In general, players will give and take advice from other players, or will help others in understanding the calculations on the balance sheet. Many times, players joint venture into investments when they do not have enough money to take a deal by themselves. The game can be very long, and leaving the rat race, not to mention winning the game, is not easy. There is a general sense of pride in leaving the rat race. Several people remember how many times they made it to the fast track in recent games. But the meaning of winning the game should not be overstated. In more than a third of the games that I observed, the session had to be stopped due to time limitations or it broke up when people started to network, talk about their own businesses, exchange cards, etc.

There are, however, instances in which competition becomes more important. These instances usually occur when what is at stake is how brave in investing and negotiating a player can be. In other words, they occur when a competitive situation may shed light on the viability of a particular self to succeed in financial capitalism. When a player picks an "opportunity" card and she is not willing to use it (because she does not have the money for the deal or because it does not seem attractive enough), she can sell it to another player or auction it to all players. Although it happens very often, this is an exceptional situation in the game, since all other transactions (buying and selling stocks or real estate) are done with "the market" and not between players. This is one of the very few transactions in which money flows between players. When a player offers the card and someone is interested, the buyer has to pay the seller a price for the right to use it. After receiving the card, the buyer will then proceed to invest the money as if she had picked the card in the first place. New players often find this procedure hard to understand. Several times, I saw organizers, who have the task of translating the game into "real life," explaining that the transaction was like giving a piece of information or a tip to someone else: "John rewards you for giving him a tip about a property for sale. And now John will use your tip to buy the property for himself. How much do you think your giving the tip is worth?"

A value for the card has to be established, and it depends entirely on negotiation between players (this is the only value that is not provided by the cards). For players who have enough money but have not been lucky to land in opportunity squares, buying cards from others is a good way to keep investing. The seller, on the other hand, is receiving compensation for giving away a card that she would not have used anyway. Experienced players usually quickly agree on a value and move on to make use of the card. However, inexperienced players usually find it harder to establish a value. Negotiation of cards in these cases is a show of performance. All players, of course, will try to get the most out of the negotiation. But there is not a clear scale determining how much a card is worth. If a card is not traded, then it goes to the bottom of the pile and no one receives any benefit. For inexperienced players—and occasionally for others—this negotiation is about their own value as negotiators. In a game in which you are supposed to discover features of your personality and your adequacy in the world of business and investing, no one wants to perform as a weak or gullible negotiator. The following fieldnote describes an interaction between an experienced player who was explaining the game and a rookie:

> Theresa had a deal but didn't want to take it because it was too big. Once she rejected it, Robert offered $25 for it. Although she didn't want the deal, she felt that Robert

> was taking advantage of her poorer situation in the game. She said, 'I want $1000' (which seemed off scale to me). He said that her request was unreasonable considering that the down payment for the deal was about the same amount. So she came down to $800, which was still extreme and far from the $25 Robert was offering. She asked how much money he had. So Robert explained, "In real life, this is what you get, an offer. Can you look at me and know how much money is in my bank account?" She said, "of course not." Robert said that it didn't matter how much money he had since she wouldn't know that anyway, but just if the deal was good for her or not. Finally, she decided to abandon the deal and put the card under the pile (not selling it to Robert). George (who was observing the game) and Robert explained to her patiently that what she had just done was a mistake. George insisted that she could have negotiated for $50 or for $75, but that throwing the deal out was just like throwing that money away. Robert told her that with her criteria, he would feel that she wanted to screw him over—no deal for me, no deal for you—and that in the future, he would not want to partner with her. She lost money and a potential partner.

In this case, Robert and George taught Theresa to master her emotions to become an effective rational actor in two senses. First, she could have received money for free that she could have used later for investment.[13] Second, a low price for the card could have been an investment in networking, cooperation, and future partnership, which in financial self-help is considered crucial for success. She was not identifying the indirect social benefits of this transaction.

While Cashflow players value the calculative skills that they may gain by playing the game, it is not only technical skills that they need if they want to take up the challenge of becoming "financially free." Sociologist Paul DiMaggio called attention to J. M. Keynes's forgotten idea of "animal spirits," "the emotional feeling-states that shape economic behavior above and beyond what a purely cognitive, rational model would lead one to expect" (DiMaggio 2002, p. 79). While these emotional feeling-states are usually regarded as an obstruction to adequate economic action, in Cashflow and financial self-help they are what make it possible. The game pushes players to deal with their internal fears and their gut feelings about money and risk. They explore their selves to find if they have "what it takes" to be successful investors who not only have the information to rationally evaluate investments but also the guts to leave aside their "poor mindset" fears and jump on opportunities. Hence, players are encouraged to use the game both to get to know their financial selves and to start performing new ones. In the first financial freedom workshop that I attended in Argentina, Ramiro, one of the organizers, lectured on the basics of the game for a few minutes before people went to the tables to start playing. He strongly advised players not to let others drive what they do in the game. Listening to others' opinions is fine, he said, but since the game reflects who we are, it is better to think for oneself. However, the idea that being oneself is the best way to play Cashflow is also contested. Another game organizer, knowing that new players are often overly cautious in their investment decisions, told participants: "Don't play as if you were playing in real life. Pretend to be someone else, be bold and take more risk. This game is about changing your mindset, so start doing it now." A player in New York, who was reflecting on the four

[13] This scene is similar to the behavioral experiment usually called "Ultimatum game," in which people turn down free money just because other experimental subjects are getting more. The Ultimatum game points to other factors that individual maximization of benefit playing a role in people's economic decisions (Kiser and Bauldry 2005, p. 179). I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of *Qualitative Sociology* for suggesting this connection.

games he had played so far, said that the first two times he played, he was very cautious and studied each opportunity and his ability to take it carefully. He behaved as he would have behaved in real life. "I did almost no deals, and eventually life caught up: I landed on baby, downsized, etc.," he said. The next two times he played, he decided to be bold and take more risks. "Life caught up again, but this time I was ready."

Cashflow is seen by players as both a chance to learn about their selves and an opportunity to start performing the economic identities of bold successful investors to which they aspire. Most important, it is not only a matter of acquiring the tools that make them rational economic actors, but also of working on their self in order to align it with those tools and acquire the courage to take the risks necessary to become rich. Technologies of the self and calculative tools come together to produce economic subjects. The next section looks at how players negotiate the relationship between game and reality.

Bending the rules and fitting "real life"

A game organizer in Argentina liked to adapt the motto of a cable movie channel, "it happens in movies, it happens in life" to Cashflow. He would start sessions saying: "it happens in the game, it happens in life." In spite of this motto, much of the game is not as immediately applicable to "real life" as players would like to think. Players deal with inconsistencies—like the already mentioned transition between the rat race and the fast track—interpreting and modifying the game to make it work. They actively engage in fitting game and reality. This engagement is crucial not only to make Cashflow generally possible, but also to make it usable in different national contexts.

Although it was originally developed in the English language for the American market, Cashflow is played in several countries. In spite of national differences, the basic process people undergo when they play is the same: they learn goals, they acquire tools, and they work on their selves. All of the transactions represented in the game, although abstract enough to be understandable in any capitalist context, come from the American economy. Argentine players usually commented (and often asked for my input) on how easy things seem to be in the United States if the game reflects the actual US economy and investment opportunities. In the game, mortgage down-payments and interest rates are ridiculously low by Argentine standards, and returns for investment in rental property are too high. Also, Americans are generally far more used to owning and trading stocks than Argentines. Many times, Argentines joke about local economic disasters and how the game would reflect them (especially in relation to the country's 2001 financial crisis and the *corralito*, when all bank deposits were frozen by the government). But frequent comments about lack of realism are contested by the idea that realism is perhaps not so necessary:

> Some people I played with...they don't understand that this is an education process, and they lean more towards saying, "It would be great to have opportunities like these." The game itself, regardless of what it is said about it, even if it has some things that are a bit unrealistic, is precisely about getting rid of the mindset that says "opportunities are for some people only" and to say instead "why not?" (Ruben, age 24)

Argentines may have a harder time adjusting the specific examples from the game to their surrounding reality, and in this regard, their use of the game is different than its use in the United States. However, what they do is not that different from what American players do: at each step of the game, they contrast game with reality and try to figure out what the game is telling them and what they can make of it, regardless of its realism. This active engagement, which I call translation, is what makes the American game work in a different national context. Players actively translate the game to make it fit their context. This local translation is what makes it global.

It is for this reason that rules are not a strong presence in games. Once the essential mechanism of the game is shared, what can and cannot be done is decided by contrasting the transaction in question with what would make sense in "real life." I rarely saw a rulebook, and I never saw a player or an organizer consult a manual to figure out how to solve a complicated situation. In this sense, players are not passive consumers of the game, but rather *practitioners*, as philosopher Michel De Certeau (1984, pp. 29–42) preferred to call consumers due to the active and productive character of the use of cultural products. As much as Cashflow players respect and sometimes worship financial self-help gurus, they use what De Certeau defined as *tactics* through which they change the game. In a territory defined by the product Cashflow (De Certeau's *strategies*), players make small modifications, but, in a strange twist, not to subvert the original idea of the game, but rather to perfect it. The success of a tool like Cashflow depends partly on the robustness of the rules that govern the game, but mostly on "how well participants translate the imperfect fit between contextual norms of the simulation and the reality it is based on" (Hoffman 2006, p. 172).

Players call that reality "real life." Most games are coordinated by a facilitator who teaches the game, answers questions, and most importantly, provides meaningful translations between the game and "real life." For example, consider a situation in which a player had the chance to purchase stock at one dollar a share and then someone picks a card offering 40 dollars a share to whoever owns the stock. This is the most profitable deal in the whole game, and it will probably enable the lucky stockholder to leave the rat race (if she bought a substantial amount of stock beforehand). Multiplying $3,000 into $120,000 in a few rounds seems a bit unrealistic. However, usually "translators" bring up examples of companies like Google or Microsoft, or of angel investors who invest early on in a company startup, to justify such profit. Such "real life" is not the life of the average Cashflow player. "Real life" is a constructed notion of a world with multiple financial opportunities available. This construction is a collective effort, since all players contribute in their conversation to the matching of game and reality, but translators have a more defined role in shaping it. They provide imaginary access to the rationality of a world of financial opportunities, regardless of their actual "real life." Each facilitator may be closer or farther from that imagined world, but what matters is the success of their performance as translators. Following Erving Goffman's notion of performance, whether the performer is telling the truth or embellishing her presentation, the performance has to be successful anyway (Goffman 1990, p. 66).[14]

There are several examples of rules being bent, ignored, or re-written. In New York, where I played for the first time, partnering for deals is common practice. As mentioned above, the "deal" cards usually say that if a player does not want to use the opportunity (perhaps because she does not have enough capital), she can sell it to another player. If the player chooses to sell the card, she ends up with some additional cash for future deals (instead of investing in a business that would generate incoming cash flow). In addition,

[14] On several occasions I thanked the group organizers who let me do fieldwork in their events by helping players and answering their questions. In these sessions, I tried as much as possible to stick to the rules and procedures and to avoid engaging in translations into "real life." First, as the researcher, I did not want to be the person introducing this connection. Second, how could I translate the game into the world of investing and financial freedom if that was not my "real life"? I discovered that keeping the game at the game level demanded a great effort. Translation is an integral part of the game.

players can take opportunities by partnering with others, usually dividing investments and returns equally, although sometimes that distribution may be subject to negotiation between the players. On one occasion, I became part of a joint investment with almost every player on the board. When I played for the first time in Argentina, however, no one on my board even considered partnering. At the next game, I looked for a business partner when I needed one. In the post-session, I was asked to explain to the rest of the tables what I had done, and I was praised by an organizer for innovating. I later read the actual rules and found that partnering was forbidden, which incidentally makes the game more competitive and less cooperative. Some players told me that it did not make sense to ban such behavior, if that is what you would do in real life when a good business opportunity is too large for one investor. The idea of *practicing* the game is generally taken from a free-market approach to rules: regulations should not strangle business creativity.

Another innovation that I only recognized as such after a while was that, in New York, games are played with two dice. Thus, players go over "paycheck" more often, putting money in their pockets faster, thus speeding up the game. In Argentina, games were much longer because only one die was used. When I asked Ramiro, a game facilitator, why they did not add a die to make it faster, he said that such innovation places the game farther from reality, making it seem too easy to get out of the rat race. He did not invoke the rules, just the contrast with "real life."

The first time I played in one of the games organized by Financial Freedom Argentina, I noticed a card that was new to me. It said "you join a network marketing company." I was surprised because this card had never come up in New York games. When I told Alejandro, a member of the group that was in charge of my table, that the American game did not have the card, he was not surprised. "We added that card," he said. Nineteen-year-old Nicolas, excited that a card matching his own activity in "real life" had come up, completed Alejandro's statement: "in order to fit reality better. I have one of these businesses!" Alejandro added: "If you read the new writings of Kiyosaki that haven't reached Argentina yet, he pays a lot of attention to the network business. So the game is somewhat outdated." Alejandro was referring to *The Business School* (Kiyosaki and Lechter 2005), a book that at the time was not published in Spanish and in which Kiyosaki recommends that readers join network marketing companies. Financial Freedom Argentina members are also part of a network marketing company (which they usually invite participants to join), so they adjusted the game to reflect the recent book, but also their own activities and interests. Later, Alejandro told me that his group was going even further than adding cards, developing an entirely new game to fit the Argentine context. Dario, an active member of an online forum that frequently organizes small gatherings, went as far as developing a new set of "Latin cards," which seeks to adapt Cashflow to the conditions of Latin America.

Cashflow players see their development as economic actors as an active pursuit. While play is usually considered a space where reality is suspended, in Cashflow, an imagined real life is always in the background and contrasted with play. That connection with an imagined future overpowers the structure and rules of the game, and players actively engage in their innovation.

Conclusion

Ethnographic studies of finances have grown extraordinarily in recent years (Abolafia 2001; Beunza et al. 2006; Beunza and Stark 2004; Beunza and Stark 2003; Hassoun 2005; Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002; Lepinay 2007; Levin 2001; Zaloom 2006). Most studies have focused exclusively on brokers, traders, and other agents at the core of the financial world and have explored forms of expert knowledge, interaction, and technology involved in banking and finances. My ethnography, however, focuses on the margins of this world: the people who do not belong to it and struggle to claim a piece of it. Cashflow, like financial self-help literature in general, is a space in which popular culture converges with financial knowledge. Very few studies address financial knowledge outside of the expert and limited world of trading rooms (see Harrington 2008). The fact that Cashflow participants are intentionally and explicitly trying to become something they consider they are not—competent and successful calculative financial actors—makes the process of constructing a subject adequate to financial capitalism more visible than in expert financial worlds. Around Cashflow boards, players construct a shared notion that money can make more money, an idea that is taken for granted in less amateur investment worlds, and which is, for the most part, new to them.

Terry, a cab driver who was playing Cashflow for the first time, kept repeating to himself throughout the game: "I need to play this a lot, man, every day." Day after day, thousands of financial best-seller readers perceive the transformation of their economic performance as a profound transcendental experience. They read books, look for online resources, attend workshops and seminars, and play board games. By playing Cashflow, people change their definitions of mobility and financial success, acquire calculative tools that adjust to those definitions, and attempt to change their internal dispositions through work on the self. Players of Cashflow may joke and have fun during the games, but it is nevertheless serious business.

Cashflow players seem to be as aware as sociologists of the constructed character of economic identities and competences. They do not assume themselves as rational *homo economici*, but rather see competent economic action as an end to be achieved. To be sure, as popular as financial self-help may be in a global scale, obviously not all economic actors need to use this particular tool to learn to be a good capitalist. What ethnographic research on practices like Cashflow brings to light is that the production of economic subjects in financial capitalism is a social process. This process can take a multiplicity of forms, both at the massive level and in more enclosed markets, and Cashflow is one of them. As Callon says, the *homo economicus* "exists in the form of many species and his lineage is multiple and ramified. But if he exists is not to be found in a natural state—this expression has little meaning" (Callon 1998, p. 51). Economic knowledge and tools that do not belong in the professional world of academic economics, and which are massively marketed worldwide, are components of the assemblages that produce economic identities and competences.

What Cashflow illustrates is a combination of dimensions that act concertedly to shape a particular form of subject. Reconfiguration of goals, acquisition of accounting calculative tools, and work on the self operate together to produce an economic calculative subject adjusted to (and at the same time a producer of) financial capitalism. Most important, the subjects themselves voluntarily engage in the practice of reshaping their calculative capacities, goals and character. Their "tooling" is not accidental or imposed from the outside, but rather a conscious work on their selves in order to change their economic "mindset." In fact, their active engagement is a condition that makes possible the use of technologies like Cashflow. In a world in which financial success products produced in the United States circulate in radically different national contexts (the Rich Dad products, for example, have been successfully published in dozens of languages), practitioners' active *translations* of tools and narratives is a crucial factor in their global character.

Calculative tools are central in the configuration of market actors. Performativity theory brought attention to calculative tools, and governmentality brought attention to their political implications. Acquiring calculative prostheses is by no means politically neutral. Financial self-help users are told that inadequate calculative tools (like confusing assets for liabilities or passive income for regular income) will bring their demise as economic beings. If they do not patiently grow new prostheses and a new self, they will inevitably end up on the losing side of financial capitalism. These prostheses are new parameters and measures to read the economic world, take a new look at their own economic position and, with the help of technologies of the self, re-make their dispositions. But there is no direct coercion involved: it is their choice to do it. This realizes the dreams of neoliberal governmentality (Miller and Rose 2008; Binkley 2009): a world of legible citizens that voluntarily produce themselves as autonomous subjects; who hold themselves as the only accountable factor in their economic outcomes; who, with the aid of accounting techniques, think and calculate in line with the general functioning of a post-industrial economy based on financial services and without job security and stability.

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