6/10/04 This is the third draft of the chapter on Slowplaying and Check-Raising in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to KingYao@HoldemBrain.com or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page.

Hold'em Brain: Slowplaying and Check-Raising
Copyright 2004 by King Yao

Slowplaying
Slowplaying is the act of playing a hand that is strong in a manner that would indicate that it is not so strong. The slowplay is used with the intent of trapping other players into the hand and trying to get more chips out of them. Although it is a useful concept, it is often misused and abused. Slowplaying is useful if you have a hand that is so strong that you need other players to catch up just so they can call with an improved, but losing hand. It is not a useful strategy if those players that catch up have a decent chance of making stronger hand than your hand. Slowplaying is also not a useful strategy if your opponents were willing to call your bets or raises anyway. Here are some situations to think about.

1. You have Q♦J♦ and 5 players see the Flop for one raise.

Your hand: Q♦J♦

Flop: Q♠J♠J♣

You have a full house. This is a great Flop for your hand. There are all sorts of possible hands that other players may be drawing to with a Flop like this. They could have two spades for a flush draw, they could have a straight draw with AK, AT, KT, K9, T9, T8, they could even have trips with the fourth J. This is a time to ram and jam and try to get more money into the pot as there are many ways that other players will call anyway. If you wait until the Turn to make the raise, other players will naturally be afraid that you have a monster, but being aggressive on the Flop could be read by other players as a strong drawing hand or a Q with an A or K kicker. When one of the draws gets their card on the Turn or River, they may think they have drawn out and even raise you at that point.

2. You have Q♦J♦ and raise in late position. Only the big blind calls.

Your hand: Q♦J♦
Flop: Q♠J♠J♣

You have flopped a monster, a full house. Now you may think about slowplaying and hope he catches up. If the player is aware though, you may have to put in a bet on the Flop and hope that he calls. Most players will expect you to bet on the Flop with anything, so if you do not bet, they may get a strange feeling wondering why you did not bet, and think you are slowplaying a monster hand. Against players who are less aware, a check may get some bets from them on the Turn or River if they pair up one of their hole cards.

3. You have A♣A♥.

Flop: A♠2♣3♦

If you had raised before the Flop, it is usually difficult not to bet on the Flop. It is usually best to bet with the hopes that another player has the case A or is drawing to a straight with a 4 or 5. In order to make a successful slowplay here, you would need a player to catch a pair with a hand like KJ on the Turn. But players who are aware will usually be very careful with an A on the board.

4. You have 55 in a three way pot.

Your hand: 55
Flop #1: A-5-5

This is a monster hand that has almost no chance of losing. Many players will play with an A in their hand, so even if there are only two other players in the pot, they may be willing to call or even raise. Slowplaying here will probably just reduce the amount of your win. If you bet and everyone folds, it is likely that they had no piece of the Flop and would not have put in much after that anyway. If the Flop had a J instead of an A, then the situation is different.

Your hand: 55
Flop #2: J-5-5

This is a situation where a slowplay may be useful. A player with A7 may not call a bet when there is a J on the board since he may figure you for a J and think he only has 3 outs. But if he senses weakness when you check to him, it may get him to play on. All players are more likely to play a hand containing an A than a hand containing a J. So it is less likely any given player has a pair of J's when the Flop is J-5-5 than has a pair of A's when the Flop is A-5-5.

5. You are in the big blind with J♠T♠ and call a late position player's open-raise.

Your hand: J♠T♠
Flop: 9♣8♦7♠

You have the nut straight. In this case you need to determine the looseness of the pre-Flop raiser. If you think he is willing to call all the way to the River with a hand like AK, you may want to check-raise on the Flop and take the lead. If he is willing to play hard with a hand like AT, then you do not mind betting and raising at every opportunity. If there is a greater probability that he will give you more credit and fold to your aggressive play on the Flop and Turn, then it may be best to just check and call his bets, until an A or K show up, then a check-raise may get more money into the pot if he indeed has a pair. The correct usage of slowplaying will depend on how you think your opponent will play.

6. You have AK in early position and raise pre-Flop. A couple of decent players call behind you.

Flop: A-8-4

You bet out and get called by one player.

Turn: 4

Now you may want to put the slowplay into gear. Since your opponent did not re-raise before the Flop, it is likely that he did not have a big pocket pair and instead has a hand like AQ, AJ, AT. If you check, it should give him the idea that you have a big pocket pair and are afraid of the A. You can now check with the intention of check-raising on the Turn, or wait until the River to pull off your check-raise. This slowplay will work best against decent players who respect your play yet are willing to get all the edge they can get. You do not want to try this slowplay against opponents who are loose enough that they could have called your pre-Flop raise with a hand like 98, because then they will likely not bet after you have checked. You also would not want to try this slowplay against opponents who are very timid and may be afraid to bet a weaker pair of A's even after you check to him.

Check-Raising
A check-raise is a form of slowplay. A check-raiser cannot be the last player to act, because he needs to rely on an opponent betting after he checks so he can raise. The check-raiser usually thinks he has the best hand at the moment, but sometimes he is check-raising to make it expensive for other players to stay in the hand.

A check-raise is a strategy that is often frowned upon in social home games. Oftentimes they are not even allowed, or if they are allowed, your friends or family may get perturbed when you make the play against them. It feels deceitful and cunning. If there are no exogenous negative impacts on your personal relationships with the other players when you check-raise, then you will need to have it in your Hold'em weaponry.

There are three ways to use a check-raise successfully. The first way is where you think you have the best hand and would like to get more money in the pot. The second way is where you think you can semi-bluff or bluff successfully with a check-raise. The third way is where you think you can increase your expectancy by check-raising and forcing others to fold even if you do not have the best had at the time. They all rely on the fact that you are comfortable that someone behind you is willing to bet, because without a bet by another player after you, there cannot be a check-raise.

The most common scenario for a check-raise is when you think you have the best hand and would like to get more money in the pot. Often this occurs when you are in the big blind and call a late position open-raiser. The reason this play should work better against a late position open-raiser than an early position open-raiser is that the late position open-raiser is likely to have a worse hand than an early position open-raiser. Any pre-Flop raiser is likely to bet on the Flop when it is check to him, especially when there are not many players left.

For example, you are in the big blind with KJ and call an aggressive player's open-raise from the cutoff seat.

Your hand: KJo
Flop: J-7-3 rainbow

You should go for the check-raise on this Flop for two reasons. First, you probably have the best hand so you want to get more money into the pot. Second, you can count on the cutoff player to bet since most players will bet on the Flop when it is checked to them after they have raised pre-Flop. Most players will bet in this situation regardless of the quality of their hand. A check-raise will either get more money in the pot or could force a hand with outs to fold. Getting a hand with outs to fold on the Flop is key. For example, you would be happy to see a fold from a hand like A5. It would be an effective free card if you did not check-raise because he has already made his wager, and if you just call, you are not charging him any more to see the Turn. If you just call the bet on the Flop, planning to check-raise on the Turn, your opponent may check along with you on the Turn after he sees you call him on the Flop. This would allow him to see both the Turn and River without any additional bets. Check-raising is more successful when the other player is an aggressive player. Aggressive players will raise with weaker hands overall in late position, and they are almost guaranteed to bet if checked to on the Flop especially if the hand is now heads-up.

A semi-bluff check-raise or bluff check-raise can only work against opponents who are willing to fold. It will not work as often against those that will automatically call you down with a hand like AK even without a pair. For example, you have T9 in the big blind and call an aggressive late position raiser from the cutoff.

Your hand: T9o
Flop: J-7-3 rainbow

You have an inside straight draw. You should consider check-raising the original raiser with this semi-bluff because he will be forced to fold a hand like A5 or KT. This is a more interesting problem because if he calls your semi-bluff check-raise, you have to consider what to do on the Turn. Normally a bet on the Turn is best in the hopes that he folds, but if he raises you on the Turn and you do not catch the straight or a pair, you will be put into a tough decision and will likely have to fold. But if your opponent is a calling station, willing to call down thru the river with AK and no pair, then a semi-bluff check-raise will have no bluff value. Also note that if you check-raise with both types of hands (top pair and inside straight draw) when it is heads-up, you have become a bit more unpredictable to your opponent, which is good for you and bad for him.

Another time when a check-raise is useful is in a multi-way pot when your hand may be the best hand but is vulnerable to overcards. In this situation, one bet from you in early position may not be enough to get players with overcards to fold, however two bets may do the trick. For example, you are in the big blind with TT. Two players limp and a very aggressive player on the button raises. You call as do the two limpers. Four of you see the Flop which contains no cards higher than a 9. If you bet, any one of the players could call with correct odds as they are getting 8:1 odds on two overcards (they have pot odds to call, see the section on the DIPO method in the Pot Odds chapter). However, if you can count on the aggressive late position player to bet when it is checked to him, now you have an opportunity to check-raise and make it two bets to the limpers. With only overcards and two bets to them on the Flop, they will now be faced with a negative

expectancy call and will be more likely to fold. This strategy has its pitfalls in that you may be costing yourself even more chips if the button actually has a higher pair or has hit a set.

How often should you check-raise in a heads-up situation when you have the best hand?
Here is a common Hold'em situation. Everyone folds to a late position player who raises and the only player who calls is the big blind. The Flop is a good one for the big blind, and he thinks he has the best hand. The big blind checks with the intention of check-raising. If the big blind is actually ahead at this point, and the late position player bets after the big blind checks, the big blind gains an advantage by check-raising which forces the late position player to put in more chips in order to see the next card. However if the late position player checks after the big blind has checked, now the big blind has given the late position player a free card. We can compare the two different scenarios to see how often the late position player has to bet in order for the big blind's check-raise strategy to have positive value.

Assumptions:
1. Before the Flop, there are 2.25 big bets in the pot.
2. The big blind has an 80% chance of winning the hand and he is ahead on the Flop.
3. There are no more bets in on the Turn or River to make the equations manageable.
4. Your opponent will not raise if you bet nor re-raise if you raise.

Action	Computation	Result
EV of checking if the LP checks as well	(80% x 2.25) + (20% x 0)	+1.80
EV of a successful checkraise	(80% x 3.25) + (20% x -1)	+2.40
EV of betting out and the LP calls	(80% x 2.75) + (20% x -0.5)	+2.10

With these assumptions, if the big blind bets out, he has an EV of +2.10 big bets. If he is able to check-raise, then he increases his EV up to +2.40 for a gain of +0.30 ($12 in a $20-$40 game), but if the late position player checks behind him, then he has decreased his EV to +1.80 for a loss of -0.30. Using these numbers, it can be shown that if the big blind expects the late position player to bet more than half the time after the big blind has checked, then going for the check-raise is the better strategy. For example if we assumed the late position player would bet half the time after the big blind checks, then the EV of checking would be the same as the EV of betting.

Action	Computation	Result
EV of checking if the LP bets 50% of the time	(1.80 x 50%) + (2.40 x 50%)	+2.10

If the late position player is expected to bet 60% of the time, then checking is the better option.

Action	Computation	Result

EV of checking if the LP bets 60% of the time	(1.80 x 40%) + (2.40 x 60%)	+2.16

Conversely, if the late position player is expected to bet less than 50% of the time, then betting instead of checking would be the better play. Here's the expected value equation using 40%.

Action	Computation	Result
EV of checking if the LP bets 40% of the time	(1.80 x 60%) + (2.40 x 40%)	+2.04

If a player has raised in the pre-Flop round and only the big blind calls, the pre-Flop raiser is highly likely to bet when the big blind checks, no matter what the Flop is. This is why it is usually correct strategy to go for the check-raise when you are first to act in a raised heads-up pot and you think you have the better hand. If you believe the pre-Flop raiser is less likely to bet than check, then you should think about betting out.

This type of situation comes up fairly often in Hold'em. Not only does it come up on the Flop as described here, but it comes up on the Turn or the River as well. It is more useful to apply the check-raise when you think you are ahead if you believe your opponent is more likely to bet than check if you check. Knowing how your opponent plays is crucial. If your opponent is passive and a scare card that hits your hand comes on the Turn or River, you may have to bet because you cannot count on him betting after you check. However if your opponent is aggressive, then you can have more confidence that he will bet after you check.

Defending against the check-raise
When a player check-raises you on the Flop, it is usually because they have made a pair. How you play will depend on the opponent. If you are quite sure he will not check-raise with a semi-bluff draw, such as an inside straight draw, then you need to be aware of the number of outs you may have. Let's say you raised in late position with ATo and only the big blind calls.

Your hand: ATo
Flop: Q-9-3 rainbow

Your opponent checks, you bet and he check-raises. You are getting 7.25-1 odds (4.25 small bets before the Flop, and so far 3 more small bets on the Flop). If your opponent has a split pair of 9's (without an A or T kicker), then you will have 6 outs which is enough to continue and call to see the Turn. However if your opponent has A9 or a split pair of Q's, then you will only have 3 outs. If the Flop gave you two overcards to the board rather than one, you can usually expect more outs.

If you have a strong hand (such as AQ) and get check-raised, then you can usually expect the check-raiser to bet again on the Turn. In that case, you should wait until the Turn to raise him. Re-raising on the Flop may lose you an extra small bet, effectively making it the reverse of the free

card raise.

If a player check-raises you on the Turn, and the Turn card is the second card of that suit to hit the board, then there is a chance that the player is making a semi-bluff check-raise. He may now have four cards to a flush and realize he has added 9 more outs to his hand. Semi-bluff check-raises with a newly formed flush draw are easier to see than semi-bluff check-raises with a newly formed straight draw. If you think the check-raiser is capable of semi-bluffing in this spot, and you have a good hand, such as top pair with a good kicker, then you will have to call him. Not only is there a chance that he does not hit his draw if he was semi-bluffing with a draw, but if he has a pair, your top pair may still be good. It becomes more difficult if you have a worse hand, such as middle pair. In this case, you may still want to call if a flush draw appears on the Turn, but when the third flush card comes, you should seriously consider folding on the River. If he was semi-bluffing with a flush draw, he would now have his flush. If he was not semi-bluffing with a flush draw, he probably had a made hand better than yours.

Fancy Play Syndrome
This is a phrase coined by Mike Caro. Fancy Play Syndrome describes the overuse or misuse of plays like semi-bluffs, free card raises, check-raises and slowplays. These plays may seem very advanced and often look cool when they work, however they are not always the best way to increase your expected value on a particular hand. For example if your opponent is a calling station, then the use of a semi-bluff has little value since the bluff factor is not worth much against a calling station who is not going to fold. The use of a free card raise against an over-aggressive opponent may not work if he decides to re-raise you or bet out on the Turn if you did not hit your draw. A check-raise may not work against passive opponents who are less willing to bet, thus not allowing you the chance for the check-raise. Each of these plays has their merits, but they only have their merits within the context of the right opponents and/or the right situations. Players who learn about these types of plays feel empowered by the knowledge and sometimes they feel they must put it into play as often as they can. But that would defeat the purpose of using these plays, which is to increase expected value.

Strategy	Works best against this player	Works worst against this player
Free Card Raise	Passive	Aggressive
Check-Raise	Aggressive	Passive
Semi-Bluffs	Weak / Tight	Calling Station
Slowplays	Aggressive	Calling station