

## Alexander Fitzgerald



Alexander Fitzgerald is a professional poker player who has been in the industry for over a decade. After running away from home during high school, Alex worked as a commercial fisherman and security guard, until he found success playing Texas Hold'em. While describing himself as having average intelligence, Alex has been able to accrue more than \$3,500,000 in tournament earnings around the world. This includes final-tabling EPT (European Poker Tour) and multiple WCOOP (World Championship of Online Poker) events, along with practically every regular tournament online. In addition to his extraordinary success as a player, Alex also runs a poker consultancy which serves more than 1,000 professional poker players in 60 countries. Constantly at work, Alex has published hundreds of training videos, articles, and webinars. He is regarded by many as the most important tournament coach in the world.

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# FOREWORD

## BY FARAZ JAKA

I met Alex back in my early twenties while traveling to Macau on the tournament circuit. Between the months of shenanigans bouncing in and out of hostels across Europe, and the time grinding online poker at his home in Malta and later in Costa Rica, I got to know Alex very well. He not only became a good friend, but also a professional peer with whom I could discuss ideas.

Alex teaches high stakes poker for normal people. He's always had an amazing ability to connect with people from all sorts of different backgrounds and skill levels, and deliver material that is beneficial to a wide variety of players. His statistical database work and HUD analysis disrupted my ways of thinking through hands. It challenged me to look at the game from a different perspective. It ended up helping me find ways to exploit my opponents that I otherwise would have overlooked.

Back in 2009 Alex, a friend and I toured through Europe. We played a ton of poker but we also were able to go vagabonding around the continent during our downtime. We had many decisions to make in terms of where to go, how to spend our money and what routes to take to find real life experiences we'd remember.

We committed our entire schedule to spreadsheets and tracked every dollar

spent. We analyzed how long each mode of transportation would take and what the pros and cons were. We had to make decisions we never imagined we'd be making when we got into poker. We had to decide whether or not to bring a monitor we purchased mere days ago to the next country, or instead abandon it to avoid inconvenience and extra baggage fees. We had to consider our options concerning whether to buy new clothes, leave clothes behind or to buy new luggage to transport new items we picked up. Finally, there were tons of calls we had to make in regards to whether to skip a live tournament to play online or to skip online tournaments to be rested for live events. We had to quantify the perceived value of sleep versus the immediate EV of playing an online tournament.

Naturally we made many mistakes in these decisions but, due to our diligence, we compiled and analyzed all the data and kept refining our strategy. We found that things we thought we were doing to save money were so inconvenient and time-wasting that they ended up costing us more money later. On other occasions we found that taking a longer transportation route to save money ended up leading to a more culturally satisfying experience and was actually preferable to travelling in taxis. We also shared our data with other travelers and in return learned tricks of the trade from their experiences.

The way we approached the challenges and decisions on the road is the same way Alex tackles problems at the poker table. Through trial and error, and by using huge sample sizes of decisions and outcomes he has been able to come up with verifiable strategies that maximize his own, and his students' EV, at the poker tables. He's already done all the hard work for us. All we have to do now is listen carefully and learn!

The work and data Alex has compiled for this book is really impressive. It is the result of his extreme work ethic, persistence, and stubbornness. It reminds me of a time back in Malta when, without warning, Alex randomly ran into the freezing Mediterranean sea in the middle of winter just to prove he could do it. I was moments away from offering him \$100 to do the task but he ran off before I could even open my mouth.

While it's funny to think of the episode now I can see that, in retrospect, Alex was experimenting and collecting data all along. It's just wonderful for all of us that he has now finally decided to share his findings.

Here's hoping you get as much enjoyment out of reading through Alex's vast playbook as I got laughing my ass off at him that windy winter day!

# CHECK-RAISING

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In my mind check-raising is a “dark art” of poker. It’s so powerful it almost feels like it shouldn’t be allowed. This is especially true when you’re in the big blind. Players give you these incredible odds by just 2x raising, so you flat. But don’t you want to do something else when you miss all those boards?

We’ve proven earlier that even if you just continue with made hands you’ll make a profit flatting most bets that just double your first investment but, unbelievably, you can sometimes increase your earnings by 100%, simply by including a check-raising game. I focus greatly on teaching my students how to check-raise for a multitude of reasons. Let’s start with the first one that didn’t occur to me for the first 10 years I played poker.

Your win rate is a great arbiter of how good of a player you are. If you are making 5BB per every 100 hands of tournament poker you play then eventually you are going to turn a profit. That is verifiable proof that you are staying ahead of the game. If your normal BB/100 rate is higher, then that can prove you’re running under expectation. A good win rate is around 5BB per 100. If you could increase that by 2.5BB you’d be injecting 50% more earnings into your bottom line.

Where do we find that 2.5BB however? It's hard to do from early position. You expand your range, diminish it, work on your triple barrels, and on and on. It seems like the money never comes in.

We shouldn't try to make our money there. If we fold every single hand UTG we will be making zero big blinds every 100 hands. Certainly, that's not good, but we're also not losing anything. However, if we fold every single hand in the big blind, as some position Nazis are prone to do, then we will lose 100BB every 100 hands we play from that position. If that sounds like a lot, that's because it is.

Later in this book we will get more into what we just discussed, but now we're going to focus on saving those big blinds, as opposed to cutting our limbs off with the forced bets we don't save.

## How Do You Prove a Check-raise Was Profitable?

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There is a specific study regimen I have my players follow. They pick a specific topic, learn as much as they can about it, attempt to execute the play in the field, mark the hands for review, and then analyze the hands in their study hours. This teaches them how to fish as opposed to handing them the day's catch. If I simply told you "check-raise more" you wouldn't be prepared to adjust as the game changed with you. You need a veritable study method to confirm your plays.

Let's examine a check-raise I made and see if it was a profitable play. We can find all the check-raises we've done by selecting "Tournament Reports" in Hold'em Manager 2, then "More Filters," and then looking at the Quick Filters section, adding the one that says "Check Raise Flop." From there, we will get a list of every time we check-raised.

Here we have flattened a raise to 8,000 (Figure 65). My big blind was 4,000, so I only had to call 4,000 more. We don't 3-bet because this hand works very well postflop and there's no need to give him a chance to 4-bet us off our hand. We head to the flop after I have completed the bet. On this board of 8♥-5♦-3♦ I check. He bets 11,500. We check-raise to 30,600.

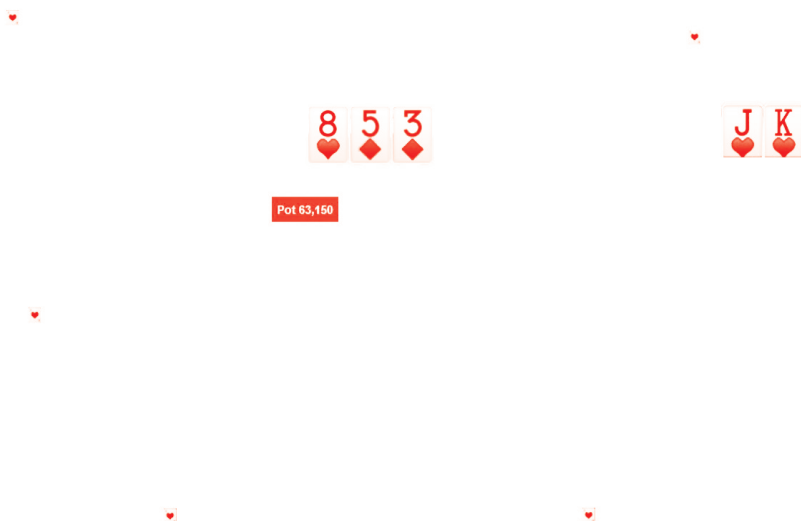


Figure 65

How do we know if this was a good bet? First, we need to see how often our check-raise needs to work. To find this we divide 30,600 by 63,150, which gives us the answer 0.4846. Our bet needs to succeed 48.46% of the time in order to show a profit. Will it work this often? To find this out we have to ask another question. If our bet must succeed 48.46% of the time to show a profit with any two cards, then how often must the villain play to avoid being exploited?

The answer is the remainder. If he's playing 50% of the hands he is folding the other 50%. He is folding too often. We don't even need a hand to make this play. In this case he needs to play 51.55% of the time to prevent our play from being instantly profitable. What does 51.55% of his continuation betting range look like? That's where Flopzilla really is a miracle worker. I can't tell you how difficult all of this was before this software came out.

Let's say he continuation bets every hand. He opened from middle position, which the HUD says he opens 17% of the time. Since every one of his other statistics, including earlier positions, has him opening 23% or more, I



am going to assume he's been dealt a few duds in the hijack. However, for the sake of the argument, whenever we are trying to prove a bluff is profitable we should give him the tightest range possible. In this case that'd be 17%. We enter the 17% in the left part of the Flopzilla calculation, in the circled area shown in Figure 66.

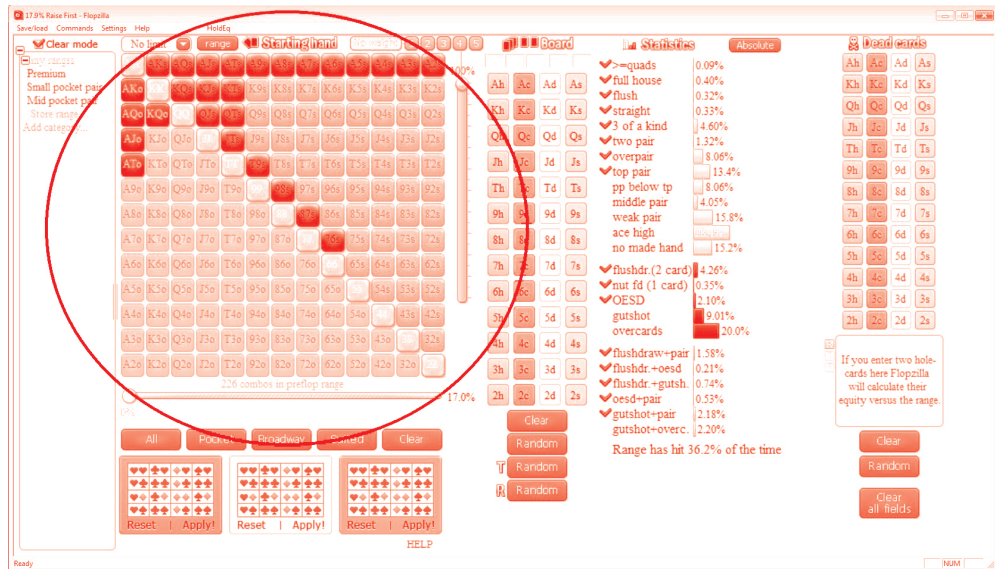


Figure 66

We then put the flop into the section marked “board” and then put our hand in the dead cards. Under the heading “Statistics” we have the percentages our player has each hand on this board. If we put a filter next to the ones we believe are going to call or raise against our check-raise we get a percentage at the bottom, which tells us the total of all these hand types put together (Figure 67).

As we can see, if our opponent defends with any pair or any draw he will be defending 51.6% of the time – almost the exact percentage he needed to defend with to make our bet not immediately profitable.

Now, try to think for a second. What assumptions did we just make? There were quite a few of them, but let's start with the obvious one: we assumed our opponent defended with 2-2 versus nearly a pot-sized check-raise. This does not sound all that likely.

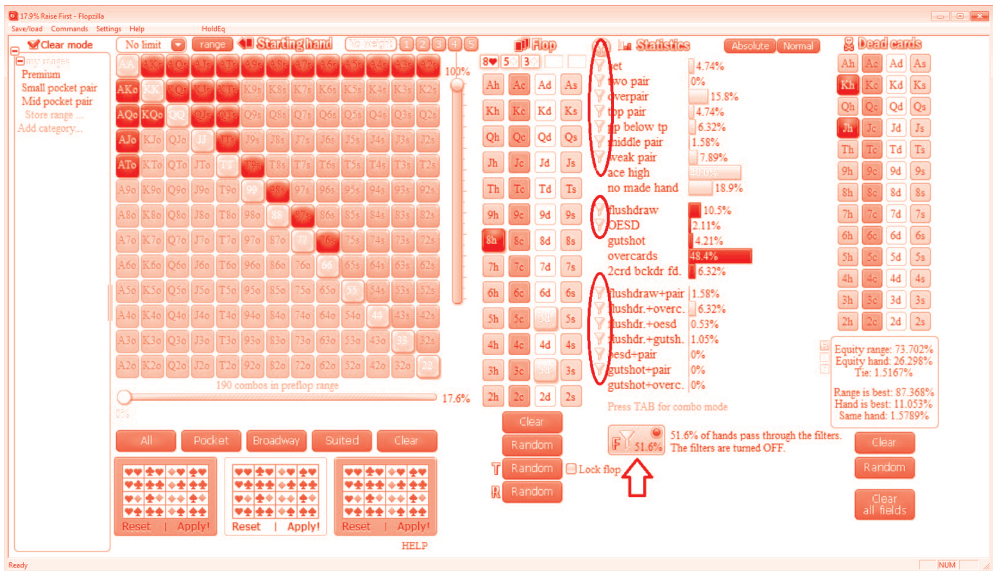


Figure 67

Remember, he had to defend with all those hands just to break even against our check-raise; he did not make money. If he folded any of them he was folding too much, and we were making a profit with any two cards.

Another assumption we made was that he continuation bet 100% of the time. Many people wish to discount this entire process because it's hard to find a person who continuation bets every single board. In fact, this person's continuation-bet statistic was low, only 33%. This generally indicates a pretty value-driven range, since you hit the board about 33% of the time. It seems that's when the gentleman decides to put more chips in the pot.

However, most people's continuation-bet figure is 75%, 80%, or sometimes higher. This indicates that the person is largely betting air. Since you can only have a hand 33% of the time, then logically, with 33/80 equaling 0.4125, the other 58.75% of the hands must be nothing. This analysis also makes another crucial assumption: he is betting all of his value hands.

I have asked hundreds of poker players from 60+ countries what they check back with on a variety of boards. More than 80% of the time it is a small value hand or similar mediocre showdown value which doesn't want to get blown off the pot. That's not a horrible instinct to have. The problem comes when you have a continuation bet of 75% or more, and your opponent has a

note that you check back some second pairs and top pairs. That means you can't even have all of the value hands in your continuation betting range. Now perhaps you have a value hand 25% of the time out of the 75% continuation betting range; you have nothing a full two-thirds of the time here. Your range is insanely susceptible to a check-raise.

The last assumption to examine is that we lose instantly the second our opponent calls. All our calculations took it for granted that if our opponent didn't fold we instantly lost. If we get to see a turn or have drawing equity our play actually needs to work less. So, why start from the framework of a complete bluff? Because if you get in the habit of making plays which would clear a profit without cards you'll begin making money regardless of how you're running that day. Picking hands that add equity is just icing on the cake. And we have some serious icing in this instance. Our over-card outs are fairly safe. We made an estimate as to his range earlier. None of the hands we guessed he could have involved cards that interfere with ours. If we hit a jack our jack is good. He bet/folded A-J and he doesn't have J-8. Similar logic applies with the king. The over-card outs give us an extra six cards that assist us. We also have a backdoor flush draw. If we turn one of the 10 hearts in the deck we will receive a helpful equity boost. Our double barrels will seldom need to work with this back up plan in place.

That doesn't mean you should be leading the turn all that often. Many of my students after their check-raise is called say to me, "Well, since we check-raised we have to fire the turn." No doubt this has been said thousands of times on popular forums. It has a ring of truth to it. After all, if you're going to build this huge pot out of position, you should be willing to fight for it, right?

Wrong. If you think a turn continuation bet is a good idea it usually means your flop check-raise was bad. You check-raise on the flop because you assume your opponent is continuation betting too many hands and folding most of them. This means he heads to the turn with a fairly tight range. Versus that you generally want to check/fold, bluffing verbally that all the while you were trying to find out where you were at.

There are occasions you get called quickly and you just know the player has gotten fed up with you. These are rare situations but you should bet because your bet will only need to work a small percentage of the time.

## Check Raise Sizing

Generally with check-raises we want to make the sizing larger, typically around 80–100% of the pot because we are out of position. If our opponent would like to play with us when we are at a positional disadvantage then they must pay a premium to do so. If our opponent calls us, our play on future streets is usually fairly simple. They have a strong hand, so we can fold.

There is still a place for small raises, however. It's just that typically their efficacy goes way down with the discounted investment. You're not making a good "buy." You're saving a few more chips when you're wrong, but those chips aren't worth it when you consider how much more they're defending. They should be defending more. If you give them a good price and position than they'll rightfully want to take a card off to see what you do. If you balk they can put a small bet in there and see if that takes it down. If they have nothing and they want to test you then a small check-raise will ensure their 3-bet doesn't cost them much.

There is still a stigma attached to a large check-raise bet. It is typically made by beginners who have flopped a big hand and are worried that it's going to get cracked. If your opponent 3-bet versus that and they are wrong their backer or friends are going to have a field day. The larger check-raise doesn't even have to work that often either. As we proved in our example hand, our hero had to defend with every single pair and draw in order to break even, and that check-raise we made was almost to the size of the pot.

Hopefully, you have gleaned what types of players we look forward to exploiting with this play. We want guys who are opening and continuation betting too much, clean and simple. Back in the day when I played more cash, if I found a guy was opening 15% or more of the hands from early position I'd lick my chops, thinking "fresh meat." It was very difficult to defend that range on a variety of boards. The players since then have become more talented, so we want more of a cushion. We are looking for people who are opening 20% of hands or more frequently. We then want them to be continuation betting 75% or more of the time. These people are ripe for a check-raise.

There are some times when you don't need to read these numbers on a HUD to launch the play. If someone is opening from the button, for example, it is more likely that they have a range of 20% or higher. Even if you know nothing about the guy because you just sat down with him you can guess that he's

part of the 95% of players that open a greater than 20% range. Similarly, if you flat from the big blind and check you can assume most players are going to bet with nothing. You only completed the bet, so you have less perceived risk. You also just checked, showing you have less interest. When they see both of these signs, most opponents go ahead and try to take the pot when they didn't flop anything. If they check back it's more often than not a mediocre value hand.

There is a fold-continuation-bet-to-raise statistic, which is handy if the person has never folded to the play. Yet, the sample size is usually something close to three hands. For all you know some recreational player attempted the most ill-advised check-raise bluff ever versus the guy. Perhaps the guy just had a few sets and got action. Either way, the small sample can be seriously thrown off.

If you see 0 out of 3 under this statistic category it should convince you to fold when you're on the fence, but if everything else lines up you should not be dissuaded. Similarly, if the hand selection, board, bet size, and other statistics do not line up, do not go check-raising just because this gentleman has had to bet/fold a few times.

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## Board Textures for Check Raising

There are certain board types that work extremely well for a check-raise. One we have already seen is the low card board. People typically do not raise with small cards. They want to make big pairs with big cards. As simple as that sounds it is still a fact that many people look at a board such as 7-5-4, see that they missed, and move on. They do not stop to think about what really hit this board in their opponent's range and, save for the sets and over-pairs, they've largely bricked.

Another board that is great is one high card with two low cards and a flush draw. A board such as K♥-3♠-6♠ is wonderful to check-raise because our opponent will have missed most of the time, and we can credibly represent a number of hands. We would normally check-raise with a set and a nut flush draw. If the stacks are 25-35BB, as they frequently are in tournament poker, you could plausibly have flush draws and top pairs as well.

The other attractive facet of this board is that many people fold their pocket pairs on it. If they think your range is a top pair, a nut flush draw, or a set they likely won't want to go to war with 7-7, 8-8, 9-9, 10-10, or J-J. If we

get the villain to fold these hands then they are bet/folding 60%+ of the time.

Some of you at this point are no doubt asking yourself, “Why would I want to check-raise that board? Our opponent could easily have a king! What if I went after a board like a 3-3-2 rainbow?” A 3-3-2 rainbow is a fine board to check-raise. Our opponent will not have a pair or draw 70%+ of the time. The problem is when your opponent starts to question what you would have. Would you really check-raise with a 3 there when it’s so hard for your opponent to have anything? For this reason I refer to these textures as “chicken boards.” Everyone at the table and on the rail knows no one usually has anything.

If your opponent becomes suspicious he could potentially 3-bet or call you down, showing that he’s playing much more than we previously expected by just counting pairs in his continuation betting range. That doesn’t mean you should never attack a chicken board, it just means that you need to pick the spot well. A good time to apply pressure is when your opponent’s flat will be a significant amount of his chips, and a 3-bet will commit all of his chips. People still are not eager to table ace high when their 3-bet jam gets called, so we can focus on 25–40BB effective stacks more often when we check-raise; these stacks give us the most opportunities to exact this kind of inflection point bet.

## Hands for Check Raising

Many people do not consider their hand at any great length when they are check-raising. If they think they see a profitable situation they attack. They only start thinking about whether they should have used the particular hand once they’re called and they hit a goofy top pair on the turn, which could easily be dominated.

Not all hands play the same when check-raised. If you have an ace in your hand, for example, that’s not a good thing. An ace blocker is good to have pre-flop, but not for a postflop bluff. Why? Because your opponents most likely bet/folding combinations involve A-x. There are 12 of each one of these, and only four combinations of each pair. So it takes all the combinations of 8-8 and 9-9 to account for one A-Jo combination wise. Multiply that by every A-x combo, and you can see they are plentiful. You are blocking every single one of them with an ace in your hand. That makes it much more likely your opponent has a made hand. Aces are better jammed preflop or played for a re-raise.

We can see this in these Flopzilla analyses. First, let's look at our opponents combinations if he opened a 21% range and continuation bet the entirety of it on a J♣-7♣-3 board. If we check-raise and he defends with middle pair or better, we can see that he will be defending 46.8% of the time (Figure 68).

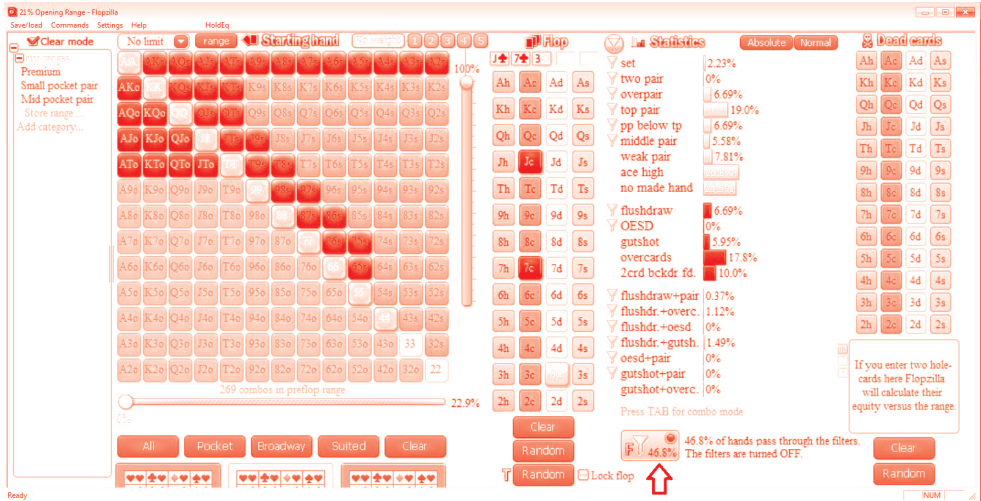


Figure 68

Figure 69 shows what happens to the filtered percentage if we put a solitary ace in the dead cards section.

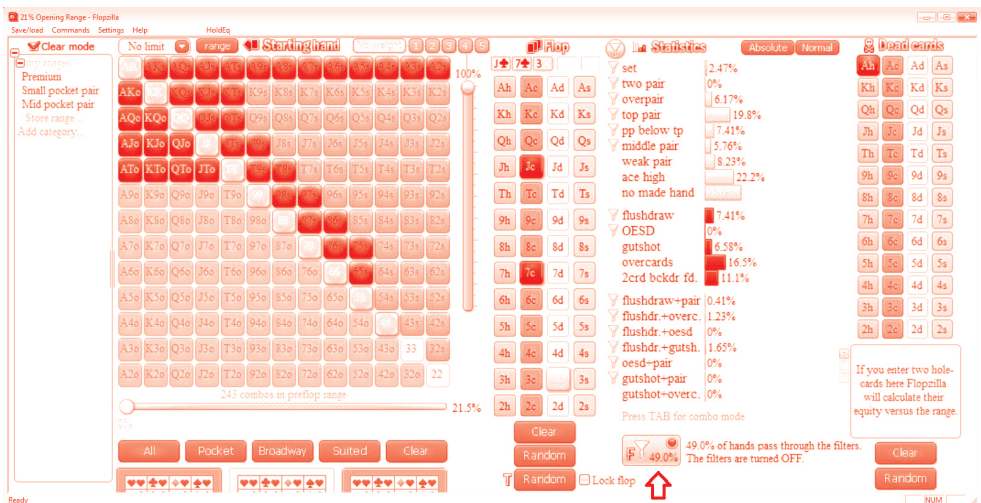


Figure 69

You'll notice now that our opponent has a middle pair or better 49% of the time, more than the previous 46.8% of the time. In simpler terms, you would be better off here if the dealer did not deal you a hand.

There is one exception to this rule. That is when you have the ace that blocks the nut flush draw, as you can see in the Flopzilla analysis shown in Figure 70.

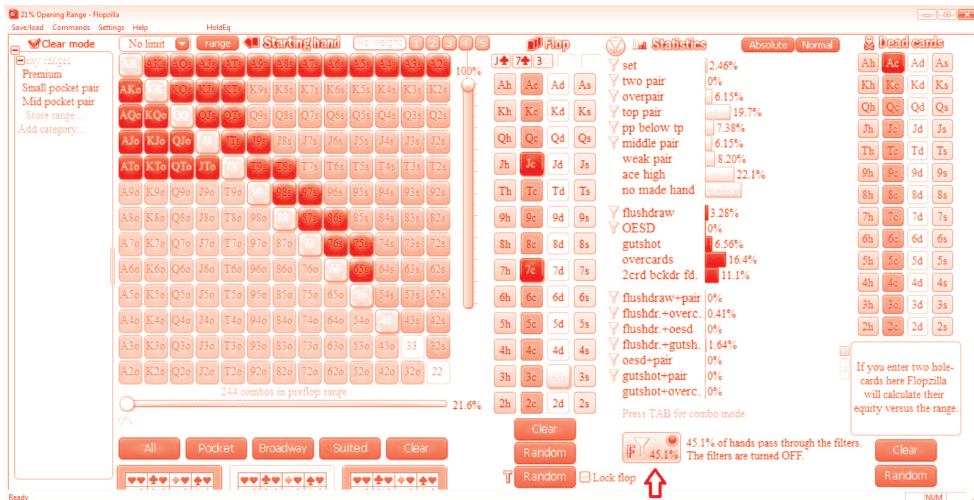


Figure 70

Now there are a number of combinations you just took away from your opponent. He will be hard pressed to 3-bet jam into you when he doesn't have the nut flush draws available. So this analysis begs another question: other than the sole ace blocker of the flush draw, what should we check-raise with?

My favorite cards to check-raise with (especially on low flops) are the broadways, as they do not block the A-x combinations I want to bet/fold, and they have great over-card potential. If I hit my pair it's unlikely I will have incredible reverse implied odds. For example, say the board is 5♥-2♥-4♦. If I check-raise A-10, get called, and hit the ace on the turn I could be in deep trouble. A-5s, A-2s, and A-4s are likely hands in my opponent's range. While I just made a good top pair he just made two pair. Things are about to get real pricey.

If I check-raise J-10, however, and hit the jack it's unlikely my opponent has J-5, J-2, or J-4. It's going to be very difficult for him to put me on a jack.



Things are more likely to get pricey for him now. It's even better if you have one heart in your hand, in our 5♥-2♥-4♦ board. A backdoor draw might not sound like much, but it does give you 10 cards you can continue to fire on the turn. The additional flush equity makes it so that your turn bluff bet doesn't need to work nearly as often.

Another hand which can work very well as a check-raising hand is a small pair. Unlike the bare ace blocker there's no reverse implied odds. You either drill your set on the turn or you do not. If you have less than third pair with your 6-6 it's fairly easy to fold. If you hit your set you can get the money in. It's hard to misplay with such clear cut standards.

No one ever puts you on the turned set either. Often your card looks fairly innocuous. Say you flatted with 5-5, and check-raised on the J-9-4 board. You get called, and the turn is a 5. Who on Earth is going to think that's a bad card for them? If they called you on the flop they're likely going to the river, and they're not going to like what they see.

Again, your main emphasis here should be the check-raise. Analyze whether the bet is sound, and use these hand guidelines to decide whether to do the play on the borderline decisions.

Finally, a note on when you get caught: it is going to happen. You are going to turn over some absurd hands when you finally get called down and you backdoor something. Never tell people what you were thinking. Never ever snap fold after you check-raise, either. Always make up a hand that a recreational player would play. If the board comes J-8-4 and you check-raise bluff with 10-6, do not immediately fold if you get 3-bet. Show the 10 and go "10s, wanted to see where I was at." Now you sound like a dolt as opposed to someone who knew how to check-raise bluff. Beautiful.

## Coordinated Boards

One time, the best online tournament No Limit Hold 'Em player in the world said something to me, and it's stuck with me ever since. It was so freakishly simple that it pissed me off I didn't say it: "Alex, when people bet small on coordinated boards, do they ever have a big hand? Ever?"

I thought about a typical coordinated board. Let's take a very coordinated one. Say 7♦-6♦-5♥. Does anyone bet small with an 8-9? No. They're worried

about getting sucked out on. They want to get the money in now. Do they bet small with a set? Two pair? Nope. Again, the same worries, and they want to get the money in. Every time they bet small there it's one pair. Even if it's an over-pair they're going to have a hell of a time if you check-raise and keep firing into them.

I'm always amazed at the times people randomly launch a bluff that seems without logic. This is one of the rare boards where you can have the world and your opponent might have indicated he has nothing. Focusing our bluffing efforts here makes more sense.

## Balancing

I'm not a big believer in balancing. I find most of the people who kept bandying that word about are trying to sound like high-stakes regulars. They never seem to be around a few years later. Yes, when Phil Galfond plays Isildur1, he needs to be very aware of balance. In normal MTTs when your experience with a player will often cap out at a couple of hundred hands let's assume he's playing his game more than yours. He has so many players to deal with and so many tables, it is a natural survival instinct for him to just control this game. He might make a good deal of money continuation betting 80%+ of the time, especially if most people just fold. His style could work against 95% of pros on a particularly soft site. It's just on you to make sure you're the 5%.

Versus the players who are a bit more wary I'd advise not to check-raise whenever the board is simply favorable to you. Yes, he's likely to have missed 60% of the time. That's true for most boards. It's hard to make a hand in No Limit Hold 'Em. If you attack every single time that he continuation bets soon you're going to break the ATM. Everyone will know you just like to check-raise boards, and no one at the table is going to believe you in later levels, when those chips become really precious. To avoid this unfavorable scenario I'd advise making sure you have something when you check-raise. A backdoor flush draw might be all you need to make your check-raising range harder to understand. Try to focus on the hands we discussed in the previous section: Broadway cards, aces that block the nut flush draw, backdoor draws, and the like.

If you let the cards determine when you'll check-raise you'll be harder to read. However "random" you think your check-raising timing is it's probably

riddled with emotion. A good regular is going to know when you feel like entering the game or not. He isn't going to know what's in your hand.

You need to be aware whether it seems as if you're check-raising every hand, and maybe start folding your worst backdoor draws, but in general fire out at people when you can follow up on a few turns. This randomizes the timing, and allows you to fold them out on the turn occasionally if the flop bet doesn't work, and of course this also means they don't get to see your hand, which keeps the air of mystery around what exactly you're doing this with.

If you ever get caught check-raising with air notice carefully who is paying attention. Make a note on that player. The next time you're against him and you hit a good top pair you can check-raise it. He's very likely to try and 3-bet you off the hand or call you down. A great time to do this is when you flop an ace. Say the board is A-6-4 and you have A-Q. If you check with the intention to call and he has a weaker ace he might bet the flop, but it's likely he'll check the turn for pot control if you check again on the turn. If you check-raise the flop he'll be confused. Who really check-raises an ace there? It's hard to have a set or two pair. He just saw you doing this with air. Now, he's along for the ride. He'll call down much more than he should. Furthermore, if he had Q-Q, J-J, 10-10, or another under-pair it's likely he would have bet once and given up. Now he's incredulous about your check-raise. You might get three bets out of him!

Be sure you don't only check-raise dry boards with the top pairs to "balance." You have to get out there and play chicken with some players, otherwise you'll be horribly readable. If they're prolific pot controllers realize their favorite boards to check back on are the boards with no flush draws, because there's little that can catch up with them on the turn. If they're continuation betting you can rule out some pairs, and check-raise their mostly air range more boisterously.