



Presents...

**How to Beat
No-Limit Hold 'Em
6-max Cash Games**

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Chapter 31: Levels of Thinking

Crucial to playing and winning in tougher games, the levels of thinking in poker are a product of using hand ranges, history, table dynamics and image. You use all these in combination to start really getting into your opponents head (and understanding how he's getting in your head).

The levels of thinking are progressive. The first level of thinking is what your cards are. The second level of thinking is what you think your opponents cards are. The third level of thinking is what your opponent thinks your cards are. The fourth level is what your opponent thinks YOU think his cards are. The fifth level is what your opponent thinks you think that he thinks your cards are... ok, that's enough for now.

Obviously, you use these every time you play, at least the first two levels. Most every player thinks on the first two levels. Sometimes, you'll find that 80/2/.5 fish who seems completely oblivious to anything except his two hole cards. But we can usually assume our opponent is thinking about what we hold.

In the 6-max world of online poker, the games can become so aggressive and full of bluffing and trickery that you must consider some high levels of thinking. It's not easy to have a grasp on this and will take experience, but with an idea of what to look for and with you constantly thinking about this subject while playing the game, you'll be on the right track to outthinking your opponents.

The levels: An example

I'm playing a \$3/\$6 game on Full Tilt. Three out of the 5 opponents at the table are good, solid and aggressive TAGs who I've played a few hundred hands with. We all

have a decent idea of how each other plays. One of them opens UTG+1 to \$21. I 3-bet **J♣J♦** on the button to \$72 (*level one*). The TAG calls.

I immediately start thinking on *level two*. To call my raise, I think he has a good hand. I put him on a hand range of any pocket pair, **AKs, AKo, AQs, AQo**.

Sometimes he'll 4-bet **AA, KK** and **AK**, and sometimes he'll call with a hand like a suited connector, but for the most part that is going to be his range.

I'm also thinking on *level three*. For me to 3-bet him on the button, I usually have a good hand, but I know that he knows I can 3-bet him lightly given I have position. I think he puts me on a range of **TT+**, **AJs+**, **KQo+** and some random suited connectors and small pairs.

The flop comes down **5♥6♥7♣**. The TAG checks. I bet \$130. The TAG goes all in for \$400 more.

Level one says I have a good but not great hand; a medium overpair on a low board. *Level two* says my opponent has a hand that liked the board enough to go all-in. Knowing my opponent is aggressive, he can be shoving in **44, 55, 66, 77, 88, 99, TT, QQ, KK, AA, A♥K♥** and **A♥Q♥** here.

He can be shoving hands like **44** and **A♥Q♥** because when I think on the *third level*, I know he knows I can have random hands on the button or overcards that didn't hit this flop. On the *fourth level* of thinking, he knows that I know he can have a very strong hand here like a set. He also knows that I know he can make a move here, but the pot size and the cards dictate he moves all in with virtually any hand that is worth continuing.

I combine all of this to make my decision, which would be a call. There's simply too much money in the pot, so we make a pot odds influenced call.

Guidelines for level one and level two

If you have read the book up to this point, you should be on your way to understanding these levels. For level one, you consult the preflop chart and what stats to aim for. For level two, you need to understand the concepts covered in previous chapters on your opponents and their hand ranges.

Guidelines for level three

- **Consider how smart and aware your opponent is.** When playing the lower limits or against bad players, they just won't be thinking deeply enough for you to really consider what they think of your hand. You stick to value betting and playing the strength of your hand compared to the strength of theirs. At higher limits or against better players, you can assume they are thinking much on the same level as you and will have a good idea of what your hand is.
 - **Always be thinking how to manipulate their thoughts.** When you think your opponent has your hand range narrowed down, be careful. They can either try to bluff you off the marginal holding, or sometimes they will be able to avoid putting money in against your strong hand. It's important to mix-up your play versus these players as described in **Part VI** of this book and **Chapter 23 on position**.
- **Always be thinking what you are representing.** Keep on your toes about what your hand looks like to your opponent. Every action you make is saying

something to your opponents. To make that big bluff, you must have your opponent thinking you have a bigger hand than his. To make a big call, you must think your opponent is betting a worse hand because he thinks your hand is weak by what you've represented.

Guidelines for level four

- **Consider how smart and aware your opponent is.** Even fewer players will be thinking this deeply. I wouldn't even worry about this below \$1/\$2.
- **Does the play for your opponent make sense?** Does he play a hand like this often? If he does he can have a pretty good idea of what he is representing to you and play accordingly. He can also make bluffs where he is representing a big hand because that's how he'd usually play a big hand.
- **Beware the good players who play a lot of tables.** They are probably on some sort of autopilot and are not going to be considering things very much at this level of thinking as they have too much going on.
- **Critical thinking.** Being able to process all this information will take some very tough and deep thinking and a great deal of experience. You must use your logical mind to process what he has, what you have and what you are both representing and how you react to what each other is representing.

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