

Designing a new mechanic for Magic: The Gathering

Magic: The Gathering's latest set (At time of writing) is Streets of New Capenna. Inspired by noir detective and gangster stories, New Capenna is a huge city ruled by 5 demons at the heads of 5 individual organized crime families. As a design challenge for myself, I will be presenting a new card mechanic to be added to Magic: The Gathering's new set.

Bribe: After attackers are declared, an opponent may pay (2 mana). If they do, remove this creature from combat and tap it.

Bribe would be a brand new keyword mechanic playing into the sets theme of corruption and power being the driving forces of New Capenna. For a basic cost, a powerful creature can be removed from combat, helping negate some threats from your opponent, provided you have the means to pay.

Here are some specific notes on the mechanic

- The generic cost of 2 mana was originally 1 mana (the same amount a treasure artifact could make) but this was too cheap to not consider. 3 mana was far too expensive when playtesting and often was ignored in favour of just blocking. 2 landed as a good middle ground where the choice wasn't always certain, and provided more tactical options.
- The mechanic also originally didn't tap the creature when it was removed from combat. Normally in Magic, when a creature attacks, it also taps. However, I realised keywords like vigilance and other effects can keep creatures untapped when they attack. The added tap felt more impactful on the board state.
- The choice of "An opponent" over "target opponent" is intentional. One of Magic's most popular formats currently is Commander, a format designed for multiplayer competition. One popular element of Commander is the chance to play a Politic style deck, offering deals to players in the moment as part of their game plan. Bribe offers them the chance to help out another player in return for some assistance later in the game.

Here's an example card with Bribe at common:



This is intentionally basic, which makes sense for a draft common. It's a big creature, that can be bribed to remove it as a threat for a turn. In a deck built around getting as much value as possible out of bribes against you, this would make a nice filler choice.

Building off of the basic Bribe, there would be cards with added pay offs for creatures being Bribed, and for bribing other players creatures. Here are some examples at uncommon in 2 more colours, White and Blue



This Blue Uncommon focuses more on additional temporary value from Bribes. On its own, the card does nothing and is easily removed by damage, but combined with a more aggressive board of Bribe creatures, this card becomes a lot more potent, making the choice of a bribe much more costly for the opponent.

This green creature is a pretty big staple of magic, a fetch land effect. Attaching it to Bribe makes an interesting challenge for the opponent. Leveraging removing damage from the board for a turn against granting the opponent a chance to find the exact source of mana they need for the turn is a difficult question, but one that I think leads to interesting gameplay.



As we reach higher levels of rarity, we can increase the power of the cards themselves leading to some very interesting play patterns. Below are examples of 2 rare cards, one creature and one enchantment that care about Bribe



I designed this rare to be more of a draft bomb compared to a constructed build around card. Its aggressively costed at 4/3 for 3, with a conditional upside. In the right draft deck, this card can give you access to some bigger threats for free, and the fact that the effect isn't just when the gang boss is bribed elevates this card to Rare.

This enchantment was designed more for constructed play, where the additional cost of a 2nd colour is less of a constriction. In turn this would fit into an aristocrat themed deck, where your own creatures dying grants you some kind of benefit. This enchantment would fit in as a midgame boost, to mitigate some pain from bribing an opponent's creature.



The final task I wanted to try would be to design a new commander that would care about the bribe mechanic. Commander is a multiplayer format where players are limited to a 100-card highlander deck (you can only have one copy of each card in your deck), which includes a “Commander”, a legendary creature. As we now know Streets of New Capenna has a 3 colour theme, I decided I would design a legendary creature with 3 colours in its casting cost, or colour identity. With these constraints I decided to choose White, Blue, and Green (in the community, this colour set is called “Bant”, and fit them to a detective style character who isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty to find the truth. Enter: Argyre, Damned Detective.



Here’s a break down of Argyre’s design. For a start, I tried to include each of the three colours in Argyre’s cost as part of his main ability. In a multiplayer game where decks have a much wider pool of cards to choose from, Bribe is a much less common mechanic. The first ability on Argyre fixes that, representing his ability to manipulate as a detective to find out the truth. This is the White portion of his colour cost, which often has blanket effects that many players can take advantage of.

The next portion of his card is reflective of Blue, and provides a powerful use for bribes. Card draw is always helpful, and Argyre’s first ability means you can use the mana to instead crack the Clue to draw a card.

Argyre’s final ability is from green, which loves pulling creatures from the deck. It also helps play into the mechanic loop of Argyre’s card. Creatures are Bribed, Clues are made, Clues are sacrificed to pull a big scary creature from the deck which other players are incentivised to Bribe, which in turn helps Argyre.

I also took care to make Argyre’s mechanics feel reflective of his role as a detective. Originally, his final ability let him exile a creature from the field for 2 Clues, but that didn’t really feel impactful enough on the game to make him an encouraging Commander option. Now his card is more reflective of his new role in New Capenna as a Recruiter for the gangs who’s being forced to work against his will, while still making use of his own detective skills.