

Fate of a Nation

An open-ended fantasy tribal game

MARTIN HELSDON records his experience of the Beta Test ...

FATE OF A NATION IS AN open-ended tribal fantasy game in which the players adopt a stone-age tribe of one of several different races. In the Beta Test each position began with a single small city; one of the first actions was to send out colonists to settle new villages to gather more crops and funds. In the now active game this and a number of other aspects have changed slightly, so that for instance a tribe now begins with a city and a town.

Although I've played tribal or nation games in the past, the most well known being Thomas Harlan's *Lords of the Earth* I had never taken part in a totally computer moderated game before. Being used to more free-form actions, certainly with leaders, the constraints of a totally code based system took time to adapt to, and neither of the positions I played in FOAN took on the level of character or personality I'm used to. At heart I am more a role-player than a strategy gamer, so the difficulties I experienced were not the fault of the game. After playing a number of turns I gradually adjusted to the different dimensions and began to accept the game on its own terms.

The Beta Test

During the course of the Beta Test new facilities were added, and changes made which increased and enhanced the playability, and if they didn't address the characterisation I hankered for, increased the range of actions available and resolved the problems that inevitable arose during the testing. The game now available to play differs in many significant ways from that available during the

Beta Test. The ways in which the moderators responded to player comments and how they implemented the changes demonstrates a level of professionalism and commitment that should bode well for the future of *Norberg Games*.

Some of the modifications included the introduction of leaders, changes to the speed of technological advancement - at least in the early turns - and the adding of many new features such as trading and magic, neither of which I sadly experienced, having severely messed up my economy at one stage...

Getting started

On entering the game, you have to download the order creator (which requires Java to be installed on your PC, a fairly standard application), enter the player identity provided on registration, define a password and then determine the nature of your tribe. Downloading and installing the order creator was painless and the only extra step was setting up a short cut - sadly FOAN doesn't provide its own desktop icon, which is something the developers might consider in the future.

Being a fantasy game, FOAN offers a choice of several races: humans, dwarfs, elves, greenskins, and others including the amphibious Mevaro, the insectile Krant, and the undead Ende. Each of these races has its own particular environment, mostly land, but for the Mevaro the sea and greenskins, Ende and Krant beneath the surface. Dwarfs start in the netherworld but are also comfortable on the surface

The game world is divided into various terrains, and the underworld naturally lies under the surface and consists of a maze of caverns, passages and underground seas. Scattered across the surface and underground worlds are cave openings that give entry to the other realm. This means that a tribe may rule all the territory it can see, but beneath its feet, or above its head an entirely different realm may exist. Each race has its own strengths and weaknesses and its preferred level. These

Fate of a Nation at a glance ...

A turn-based weekly fantasy tribal game from *Norberg Games*. Setting up a new nation is 10€ and the turn fee depends on the number of populated settlements. A new nation starts with a capital city and a town (turn fee 2.5€) and can never be more than 6€ (excluding optional costs).

attributes can be very important as the game progresses as they include birth and death rates as well as different offensive and defensive base capabilities and other factors that come out in play.

I chose, unimaginatively, to play humans at first, and later also ran an Ende tribe underground. The two environments were very different and the underworld felt suitably claustrophobic, even though there were plenty of caves and corridors to explore. Apparently it is possible to develop the technology to dig through the softer rock to link up caves.

After choosing a race the next step is deciding on a religion. Again, each religion has distinct advantages and disadvantages and acts as a modifier to some of the racial capabilities. Finally there is a heritage to choose with five different selections ranging from farmer to warrior.

With these aspects determined and saved to a file, the start-up is e-mailed back and with the first turn you find where your settlements of stone-age farmers are, with a turn report and map. At this point your tribe is ready to start exploring, sending out colonists, building structures in your settlements and investigating new technologies to increase their agricultural, economic, magical and military might.

All in all, starting up in the game is deceptively quick and easy, though these early decisions and selections will have a major impact on how your race proceeds.

Entering orders using the order generator is quick and simple, though it is advisable to check the orders using the list function before saving the file and e-mailing it back. The order generator includes a library function listing units, buildings and technology so that it isn't necessary to continually refer to the rulebook.

The wide world

Every settlement has a certain range in being able to see the land around it, and the initial map is therefore quite small. Fortunately each settlement comes with militia and scout units, and the immediate desire is to see "what's out there" and go exploring, to find not only sites for new settlements but what perils there may be nearby.

The map consists of a number of squares of different types of terrain, showing the areas that can be seen by your settlements and troops, going dark when areas are no longer

visible. Watchtowers can be constructed to permit an oversight of the borders.

For most races, scout units travel on foot, and take a turn or so before they venture out of known territory into the unknown. Whilst they can fight, they are far more expensive than the militia and it is a good idea to use them to spy out the land instead of enter combat. Unfortunately, one of my scouts had no choice – exploring past the mountain range that lay near my tribal capital they encountered a band of wandering bandits.

In addition to player positions, there are others 'out there'; above ground these are usually bandits whilst below ground giant spiders offer a similar threat. On the game forum, other players reported finding areas holding demons and mysterious towers. Whilst bandits and spiders may be found wandering about, on the surface there are also bandit encampments and in the netherworld nests of spiders.

Combat generally favours the defender so marching to intercept bandits or attack bandit camps (or spiders below) can be a dangerous affair, at least until the tribe has discovered new weapons and recruited better units. As these threats aren't just stationary they can seek out and attack tribal settlements; during the Beta Test several players had their villages attacked, and in some cases pillaged and destroyed. This gave rise to a siege mentality, as players had to keep militia units defending villages in case of attack, often at a higher cost than the taxes the settlement provided. Subsequently it became cheaper to keep a unit on garrison duty.

Economic Ruin

It was at this point I made a serious error. Faced by several bandit clans near my settlements and more being spotted by my scouts at a distance but obviously intent on entering my territory, I recruited more and more troops, and had some success at destroying some of the nearby bandits. However, having only completed a few technology projects, my troops were still fairly poorly armed and so instead of quality I had to project military power by quantity. The number of recruits paralysed and then destroyed my economy as I lacked the funds to pay them. Disbanding these units as quickly as possible, I neglected to delay whilst they returned to my settlements. These unpaid troops were naturally unhappy... and became bandits themselves.

Reading comments on the game forum, I wasn't alone in both wrecking my treasury and creating more foes for myself. Fortunately, by now I had completed some of the technology projects and was able to build better troops and seek out and destroy firstly wandering bands of bandits and then their encampments. Others weren't so lucky, with their outlying settlements destroyed.

This raises the importance of Projects, which can range from technologies to enhance and improve land use, to making use of wood, stone and metals to provide new military units and the ability to construct new buildings to provide additional benefits. The FOAN technology tree is extensive, though in the Beta Test it took a very long time to achieve the more useful technology goals; in the now-running game this is mitigated by accelerating research in the first ten turns or so, as well as increasing settlement population as the growing urban centres draw settlers in from the surrounding lands – in addition to attracting bandits...

For these reasons, the Beta Test wasn't entirely characteristic of the game following the test period. Certainly, my desire to explore was curtailed by the necessity of fighting off bandit incursions. So far, since starting a similar tribe in the full game, the incidence of bandits seems to be lower (for now) and the technology enhancements are coming through more quickly. It is possible to increase technological development by spending gold but I only did this once in the Beta Test before my economy imploded and so far in the live game haven't felt the necessity to do this.

Perhaps because my territory remained small, I never encountered any other players on the surface and so have no experience of inter-player conflict, communication or alliance. Playing in the netherworld, I did encounter a foreign scout sent down through one of the entrances from the surface, and whilst I attempted to herd them towards a spider nest, the Beta ended before anything occurred.

Conclusions

The Beta Test fulfilled its function and Fate of a Nation is doubtless a better game for it. The level of presentation, both in the order creator and rulebooks are improved, some aspects that caused frustration and confusion have been mitigated and the game looks to be a very worthy addition to the ranks of computer moderated games. Unfortunately I didn't

experience every aspect of the game, such as diplomacy, trade and magic. Communication with Peter the GM was always answered promptly and I have no hesitation in recommending the game.