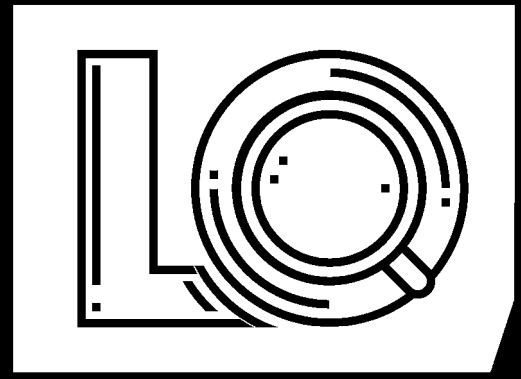


LATTE QUARTERLY



Stay Home



Save Lives

FMTM21

Play FM

Editor's Note

The last time I put words down for the Latte Quarterly Editor's Note it was the 28th February 2020. The World was on the cusp of some BIG changes, and Latte Quarterly was embarking on only its 2nd Issue.

Now 26th February 2021, I am pleased to say we've made it onto the other side with Issue 6, in the Football Manager 2021 cycle. Today's LQ does not skirt round the issue of a global pandemic, for reasons explained by FM Samo in "FM Pandemic". We go all in: sharing our experiences with, and without FM, as we all move out of what has been a challenging year.

Next up is a guest piece from Colin Sisson who muses with us about Eastern Europe, his love for their players and his aims at rebuilding a dynasty purely from the Eastern Bloc with Spartak Moscow. "Beast in the East" is a mixture of geography, history and the adoration of a game series that has spanned over two decades.

Moving on to "FM and Realism", FM Adventure poses the question of How realistic do we want Football Manager to be? It's a broad piece, covering a number of game aspects; and I guarantee it will spark debate in your mind as you take in the Latte Quarterly goodness.

Finally, we round off #LQ6 in style as FM Stag joins us to share his views on Pragmatism [in both Football and Football Manager]. "The Pragmatic Idealist" is a timeless piece, and very much Latte approved, as Stag challenges you to think about how you are playing the game we all love.

I sincerely hope you enjoy Issue 6 of Latte Quarterly, grab a latte and savour the moment.

FM Grasshopper

LQ Issue Six:

FM Pandemic

By FMSamo

Beast in the East

By Colin Sisson

FM and Realism

By fmadventure

The Pragmatic Idealist

By FMStag

FM Pandemic

By FMSamo

We've had plenty of debates back and forward over the past few months at Latte Quarterly towers, socially distanced of course, about whether we should reference Covid in this issue.

Times have been tough, they still are. We hear about the impact it's having on our lives on a daily basis. Football Manager, and this magazine, is supposed to be an escape.

That's it though, that's exactly why we should put a focus on it in this issue. We wanted to highlight just how much Football Manager has been there for us over this past year. It's allowed us to escape for even just a couple of hours a week into our own worlds. It's allowed us to keep on sharing those worlds with so many others while all of this other stuff has been happening around us.

We didn't want this piece to just be us talking at you, so I sent out a call to arms on Twitter and got some stories to share from others too. Hopefully while you're reading them all over the next few pages you can have a think about how much FM has helped you too over the past year. We'd love to hear your story if you fancy sharing it.

Tony @FM_Grasshopper

From what I've seen, no two people have experienced the same things during the global pandemic. It's also shown me that we've all got different struggles in life, and we should respect each and every one of them. No person has the right to dismiss your struggle, or belittle how difficult it has been.

For me, I've been fortunate enough to continue working throughout the whole of the pandemic. But equally it hasn't always been easy, as a number of colleagues I work with transported the dead as we used our fleet of vehicles between a Hospital and a temporary morgue. There are no real horror stories, nobody in my office has died, but it was always a morbid discussion talking to them in 2020.

I've also had to homeschool, sharing that juggling act with my wife. Both of us have gained a new found respect and adoration for those in the teaching profession. 2020 and the formative months of 2021 have not been easy.

Yet, here I am still writing FM. A pastime like no other. An escapism to venture off to Mexico, to imagine the burning heat in the state of Sinaloa as we progressed up to Liga MX. Then on to Colombia for FM21, to reunite with early FM wonderboy Sherman Cárdenas and continue Hugo Ojeda's story. I can't really quantify what that has meant to me. Being able to switch off most days for an hour or two, and forget everything else that's around on social media, the news or at work.

I didn't leave the house much (obvz). Especially in these last few months (Lockdown 3)...nights are long & dark, the weather is cold and I miss my family. But FM, and the FM circle of friends that come with it, have been precious to me. A mental reprieve for whenever I felt the mental wobble of what has been a struggling year.

FM. My rock xoxo

Mike @AccordingtoFM

Undoubtedly the last year has changed a lot of people's lives, a lot of which for the worse. In March 2020 I was in a good flow of playing FM and my (checks notes) Red Bull Salzburg save was ticking along nicely. We were then in the position of having to self isolate for two weeks as my son was unwell, but it turned out to be routine. This ended as the country went into national lockdown. We were stuck in, like the rest of the country, but with three young children it was impossible to fire up FM. I did play some initially as I was "working from home" but then I was furloughed while my wife continued to work and I had no time. To be fair it was during the usual part of my cycle where I probably would have lost a little interest in the game as it is. Anyone familiar with my content cycle it is usually October to February. This time was different though, without a mind deadening office job I wasn't able to read all the content and tweets or keep up with the community. I lost touch and I still don't own a copy of FM21. I do often see people bang out six blogs in ten days and wish I was able to do the same, but then I am also happy to have other focuses on my life.

Since the start of the pandemic I have changed my job, grown closer to my family and drank a lot of prosecco, not all things are positive of course. Difficult to say if things are due to the state of the current world or because I have left FM but I don't see a way back, for now.

Anders Nerdrum @Supernovalier

My usual way of playing is restricting myself to choosing clubs from places I've actually visited, and since the launch of FM20 my new cities to choose from was expanded with Newcastle and Edinburgh. So, naturally I had looked through the LLM clubs from there (as I normally avoid starting out in the top tier) in advance of the FM20 launch. The choice fell on Edinburgh City and my FM20 career started.

Due to me having a keen interest in football from many countries, I also listen to various podcasts, one of them being on German football. The guys running this podcast wanted to take a new approach when the RL football was shut

down in March, and thus they invited listeners to create football stories and news playing FM with German clubs as a part of their show.

Being a man with no strict principles (FM personality would be 'Spineless' I believe) I scrapped my Scotland adventure and started a new game with VfL Bochum and started writing up half season reports which I sent in. My story was included in some of the episodes of the show, and I was also given a challenge after promoting to try to become the best club in Ruhr. With the rivals being Dortmund and Schalke, it's hard as a newcomer in the BL but this gave me a save and a specific challenge in FM I'd never come up with myself and it was my debut being involved in a podcast with anything FM-related. Well chuffed.

And I did manage to finish my 2nd BL season above Schalke, have taken 4 points vs them, so mission at least kind of accomplished.

Matt @FMAdventure

Working as part of a Department that was designated as a vital service, my playing time of FM has actually been a lot less over the last year than it would have been previously. However, this has just meant that the free time I did get to sit down on FM was even more appreciated as a bit of a distraction and time to switch off. Naturally it did help somewhat that my save was going extremely well too...

Pilkijam @Pilkijam

I've played Football Manager for about twenty-five years. As someone who spent much of his childhood and youth in a wheelchair, Football Manager and games like it have allowed me to engage with football on a level playing field so to speak. If that weren't bad enough, I was diagnosed with a rare combination of degenerative eye conditions, I'm on the cusp of being legally visually impaired, and inevitably will lose my vision at some point.

Though the sight issues mean I can't play the game as much as I did there is a wider Football Manager community which I take great enjoyment from whether it's Latte Quarterly or watching Content creators like Lollujo, Zealand, Fox in the Box or Work the Space.

Leagues, Tactics, Training, Analysis... Everything FM

Somehow it makes the isolation and loneliness easier, particularly in the wider climate we find ourselves in over the last year.

The thing about watching so many content creators is wondering whether I could do it and what could I do that was new or maybe because I find it daunting and scary that's reason enough to do it in spite of the vision issues.

Adam @AdamMc_76

With commuting daily and the birth of my daughter in December 2019, my playtime on FM20 was limited at the start of 2020.

Having worked from home since March and social activities limited due to lockdown, I've had more free time which has been used for FM. This has provided a great escape from the ongoing pandemic as both my day job and a lot of TV were both focussed around Covid.

Rock's End FM @rocksendfm

I think FM20 will go down as one of the most important in history, just because of where it found us. At a time of deep darkness, it became a bright spot for so many people, usual players or not. For me personally, it was a daily break from the mess of the world but also it allowed me to meet so many great people that made everything less overwhelming. It's probably one we'll remember for a long time.

Ryan @DictatetheGame

Football Manager has not only helped me, but it's given me an escape from the harsh reality that we currently live in. I am very blessed that I am able to work from home, and it's allowed me to play the game even more. I often play my save with a friend (online) and the amount of laughs we've had over the past year has been nothing short of brilliant. Running an FM fan site has been challenging during this period, but it's brought like minded people together and allowed us all to escape. A predominantly single player game has brought so many people together, and allowed us all to take our minds of what's going on outside of the Football Manager world.

Jamie @TheTarrantino

The Lockdowns never affected me as much as others as I work in the Construction industry. The Government never decided to close us down - a mistake perhaps as whenever I have been on site visits there has never been social distancing.

My day consisted of going to work and returning home to drink for the remainder of the day. Only a fair few in the FM Community know this, but I'm an alcoholic. There, I said it. My partner was furloughed, so she had nowhere to go and was forced to put up with my antics when I got back from the office.

I missed the pub and drinking with my friends, but the alternative was cheaper. A crate of beer, some bottles of spiced rum, calls on Houseparty (remember that app?), it was as if my life had not changed and I was oblivious to what was going on around me.

Eventually, though I noticed that everyone around me, even those at work - I started a new contract a week before Boris Johnson announced the first National Lockdown - were beginning to see me for what I was: An alcoholic self-destructing.

Then one day I sat down to play Football Manager 2020. I started a game with Hanworth Villa with the Level 11 Database (made by DanFMDatabases), and I was engrossed, hooked, ADDICTED. It had been years since I enjoyed a Football Manager save.

I've loved every minute of it. I am engaged all the time by it and cannot seem to switch off. The best thing about that, though? The distraction of blogging about Football Manager has seen me stop drinking, and I had not even noticed it.

Yes, I had a glass of bubbly on New Year's Eve, I even have a glass of port here and there, but I'm not the raving mess I have been for the best part of 10 years. I have now also gone for three months without smoking. Amazing, eh?

It may sound ridiculous, but I mean it when I say: Without Football Manager (and quite probably this pandemic), I would still be the same way I was four months ago.

@VarsFM

I think most of us will reflect on 2020 as a bit of a shite year, for obvious reasons. For me, this meant cancelling my 25th birthday plans, my Master's degree becoming an online course, and limited hours at work due to cutbacks. But looking back, I also achieved a lot in 2020. I passed my driving test. I finished my MSc with a Distinction. I got Swansea to the Premier League on my FM20 Network save. All in all, despite the pandemic, I had a pretty good year.

Football Manager, in my experience, is the most immersive, all absorbing game imaginable. This can be a negative a lot of the time, but this year, a distraction from real life was a blessing.

For me, spending hours trawling through scouting networks, chatting about tactics with friends and scoring a well worked goal against one was the highlight of my evenings. It was something to look forward to after a day of staring at the same four walls all day. Playing FM, I wasn't alone in my room anymore. I was inside the Swansea dressing room, urging my players to perform better in the second half because if I lost against my mate, he'd never let me forget it. 365 hours of clicking continue. I wouldn't have it any other way.

@FromElevenOne

There was the early lockdown boom of playing loads, followed by the inevitable bust of not wanting to play at all. Overall, has Football Manager had a positive impact though? I think yes, in a couple of ways. Firstly, when I'm at my best, it can be part of a structured day. Turns out, a bit of routine is bloody important to me, and as I've been furloughed on and off over the last year, routine has been in short supply. Perhaps most importantly though, it's the stuff that surrounds the game that has helped me out. Writing has provided both a creative(ish) outlet and a sense of accomplishment really lacking outside of the same old, mundane household jobs. Linked to that, is the people online that I communicate with most days. Obviously any semblance of social life is in the bin, and as a strident opponent of video calls, text based communication is my go to. Chatting FM, total nonsense, and getting involved in shared saves

has provided a sense of...dare I say...community, that would otherwise be sorely lacking for me at the moment.

Phil @Phil_H_FM

I have always sought solace in the virtual world of Champ Man / FM. The last near 12 months have been tough for everyone, personally I was placed on furlough and my place of work has only been open for 5 weeks since the 23rd of March. During the pandemic one of the things I did was take advantage of the free time to really delve into Football Manager 20, it kept me going, something to look forward to and something to talk about which wasn't 'infection rates' etc... On top of that it helped me get back in touch with an old work colleague, reignite a friendship and start up a couple of network games, which we had done previously before I had my son in 2017.

Finally, I have really started to enjoy engaging with the community.. despite not being a blogger or streamer or YouTuber, people are genuinely friendly and helpful.

@FM_Samo

Believe it or not, my 2019 was actually worse than my 2020. Despite the pandemic, 2020 saw me begin a new chapter in my life and move to a new country (England, eugh). Work was busy despite travel being well and truly cancelled globally. When I had the time, Football Manager was there for me to unwind and switch off. I love this crazy game and the crazy people that play it. It drives me mad, it makes me happy, it annoys me and delights me in equal measure. It's been so important to step away from it over the past year, to not let it be the only thing I do despite it being one of the few things we've been able to do. That'll be important too when things start to get back to normal. It'll always pull us back in though. I can't resist an infuriating undeserved defeat or a euphoric cup win. It's always been there for me and I really hope it always will be there whenever I need it.

Beast in the East

By Colin Sisson

Italia 90 introduced me to Eastern European football like a shot of Belarusian Krumbambula before bedtime. Implausibly long names with creative vowel and constant combinations to match their fast-flowing and often-reckless approach to the game, then-named Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia made the quarterfinals, quickly followed by Red Star Belgrade's European Cup win a season later. By the time I got to see Gheorge Hagi dance through my beloved Notts County at Wembley in the Anglo-Italian Cup Final (only weeks before becoming one of the players of the tournament in USA 94) I was hooked.

Championship Manager played a significant role in this early obsession, too. And while I could justifiably waffle on about my love for the late, great Maxim Tsigalko, it was a little-known Bulgarian on Championship Manager 93/94 who became my fixation. Ivan Dobrevski was a Bulgarian midfielder whose real-life career amassed 127 games for Slavia Sofia and Botev Plodiv but became a firm fixture alongside Mark Draper in the Notts County engine room in a side that soon would test Draper's infamous, real-life desire to 'play for an Italian club, like Barcelona' as his captained a club that looked more Eastern Block than East Midlands as the save progressed.

If Draper struggled to get his head around basic European geography, he'd have had no chance navigating the intricacies of Eastern Europe from the mid 90s onward, as war and political independence divided countries and redefined boundaries, causing turmoil for domestic leagues and division in national teams. Yugoslavia gave way to Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo while the USSR separated into Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine.



Standing stoically strong amidst the chaos was Spartak Moscow, the 'People's Team', winning nine back-to-back domestic titles from 1992 - 2001 while the rest of the Russia and its former states tried to recover and regain its sporting identity. It is perhaps poignant that a large part of Spartak's title-winning teams boasted Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Georgian, Macedonian, Tajikistani and Azerbaijani squad members (with the odd Brazilian thrown in) as a final throwback to a bygone era.

Traditional domestic dominance dried up when new footballing threats emerged in the East in the forms of Zenit St Petersburg (Russia) and Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukraine) by way of energy-rich owners and began to challenge the old regimes, exemplified by Zenit and Shakhtar lifting the last European trophies won by Eastern European sides.

FM21 finds Spartak with just one domestic title in twenty years and bearing all the hallmarks of a club in constant flux.

Leagues, Tactics, Training, Analysis... Everything FM

On-field and backroom teams are a patchwork of staff leftover from regular regime changes, meaning that the immediate challenge is reorganising a club fighting on four fronts (first team, B team, u21 and u18) with no definable strategy or shape.

For my own save, the answer to Spartak's future lay in its past, challenging myself to rebuild the club as an icon of Eastern Europe by signing only players and staff from that region. That's not as crazy as it sounds having seen Croatia finish runners up in 2018 World Cup, Ukraine lift 2019's U20 World Cup, Serbia lift the same trophy in 2015, Russia's u17 European Championship win in 2013 and Romania's semi-final appearances at 2019's Euro u21 and 2020's summer Olympics.

This also meant getting to grips with Russia's new relationships with its previous states and I learned quickly to embrace them. Tribal divisions mean that you can forget about recruiting from either Lokomotive or CSKA Moscow, resulting in the scope you have of adding to your domestic pool (with only 8 foreigners allowed) is already limited. Yet diamonds can be found. The likes of Kazakhstan's Nurally Alip, a big yet mobile DLC, and goalkeeper Danil Ustimenko both play a key role in my squad, while Kyrgyzstan's Gulzhigit Alykulov won Russia's Young Player of the Year award in my second season having successfully converted to an outrageously skilful Advanced Forward.

Not that the policy doesn't come without problems. Spartak's final, pre-save season may have finished a disappointing 7th under Domenico Tedesco, but the club were able to retain Swede Jordan Larsson, Argentine Ezequiel Ponce and impressive Brazilian LB Ayrton Lucas. Finding appropriate homes for these types of players has been tricky, as player value in the Russian Premier tracks well below its English, Italian, Spanish and German counterparts. Lucas eventually left for Nice for £20m but deals have so far failed to materialise for Larsson and Ponce, despite bagging 80 league goals between them in two seasons.

However, the most transformative signing by far, and possibly one of my best pieces of business

on any FM save, is recruiting Vladlen Yurchenko from FC Zorya in Ukraine. Not only does he pose the type of technical excellence that this region of Europe had historically been awash with, but at 25 and costing £1m in Season 1, I'd found the perfect foil to the aggressiveness of Zobnin and Kral who were already at the club. Breaking out to form the pinnacle of either three central CMs or a packed, narrow 4 (3 CM, 1 DLP), Yurchenko orchestrated the middle of the park from both free-play and set pieces. This not only ensured both individual and team honours every season, but saw Yurchenko finally realise his potential that had taken him to Bayer Leverkusen as a teen. Offers from China and Saudi Arabia reached over £40m for him during his Spartak career so far, but rejecting has never felt so easy for a player destined to be an icon alongside Yegor Titov or Fyodor Cherenkov.

Waiting in the wings for when the likes of Yurchenko, Zobnin and Dzhikiya's time as lynchpins of my Spartak side to be over are my next generation. Mostly Croats and signed on deals that saw them loaned back to their clubs, the likes of Dion Drena Beljo, Mario Vuskovic, Tomislav Duvnjak and Ivan Cubelic are progressing well, with Beljo and Vuskovic looking the strongest talent so far.

Signing players with potential early and finding places to park them is fundamental on this save, not only due to the foreign restrictions but also a reflection of the very average youth intakes, a disappointing feature for a country boasting 144million people! That said, investment in youth recruitment and facilities ensures that those who do arrive make progress quickly, some making debuts for Spartak B in the first division before their 17th birthday.

Having an affiliate in Belarus can make all the difference, though. As one of the countries considered domestic in Russia's squad registration system and sharing a common language, having a place to park talent and play at a level between Spartak's first and B teams means that players remain happy and progressing. Shakhtyor Soligorsk's great training and youth facilities made them the perfect partner, whilst giving access to a wider range of newgens.

Leagues, Tactics, Training, Analysis... Everything FM

After the untimely death of Championship Manager icon Maxim Tsigalko, this link increased in poignancy and led to the creation of 'The Tsigalko Player Project' where I committed to bringing in at least one Belarusian per season, in the hope of discovering a worthy successor to the goal machine of my youth. While no such lethal marksman has appeared yet, goalkeeper Andrey Kudravets and midfielder Nikita Demchenko in S1 are good examples of what can be unearthed and I have high hopes for the newgens who have come through so far.

One downside to the save can be the feeling of detachment from the traditional European leagues and engagement with them limited to European club competition. The antidote to this is loading Germany too, as this not only allows your affiliation with FC Erzgebirge Aue in Bundesliga 2 to fully develop but also the chance to recruit Germans with dual Eastern European heritage, with both Eduard Lowen (Russia) and Waldemar Anton (Uzbek/Russian) as mainstays of my Spartak squad. And who wouldn't want the chance to add the next Klose or Podolski to their ranks?

But that sense of going against the tried and tested narrative, of doing something alternative and competing against the big European powerhouses, is exactly what keeps the save thriving, for me. That and the hope of creating an Eastern European side so great that it prompts the return of the greatest scouting report in football history, told brilliantly by Jonathan Wilson in his book 'Behind the Curtain'. Sent by fax by Walter Smith, having watched Red Star Belgrade before their UEFA Cup meeting with Rangers, he only needed two words: "We're f****d".



Leagues, Analysis, Tactics, Training...Everything FM



Latte Quarterly is collated, edited and published by **FMSamo**, **fmadventure**, **FMGrasshopper** and **AccordingtoFM**, but we will happily open our inbox to considering submissions from the wider community.

We invite articles of serious analysis, tactical discussion, guides, hints and tips or even tongue in cheek humour.

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FM and Realism

By fmadventure

How realistic do we want FM to be?

Yorke and Cole. Ant and Dec. FM and Realism. Iconic partnerships. Football Manager is a game that strives for realism, it really has come such a long way since the days of commentary only, sliders and dotted lines on the tactics board.

How realistic do I want Football Manager to be? It's a question I ask myself (and others) on the run up to release every year as SI begin to drop news on their new and improved features. FM is one of those unique games where you can really control how much or how little you want to involve yourself in the minutiae of the game. I find myself in that middle ground between being a deep diving micro-manager and a casual player, so I decided to write a bit about the elements of realism in Football Manager.

Attributes

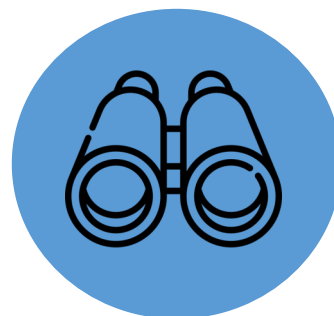
Player (and to an extent staff) attributes are central to everything in the game so it's no surprise that even this simple concept of competency values and their use throw up contrasting opinions.

Attribute Masking is the game's mechanic to either hide or estimate a player's ability in a certain area until you have done enough scouting to get the full picture of a player. There are some who decree that you won't get the full immersion in the game from being able to see a player's full attributes from the start - as realistically a football manager in real life wouldn't know everything about a 17 year old wing back from Angola's fourth division unless they had completed some level of reconnaissance.

Attribute Blanking (for want of a better term) is something that became quite popular in recent years - the one that comes to mind for me is @DGear86's FM19 save with Kaiserslautern. Dan had made use of a custom skin to hide the attributes of players and decided to make his decisions based on scouting/coach reports, playing stats and things he observed while in

matches. It's a fair argument to say that a real life manager wouldn't have the blessing of a sheet telling them what any player's given rating was for Long Throws.

I've always played with Attributes unmasked. For me, it's much of a muchness if I have to scout for 6 months to discover that an attribute that was estimated at 13-16 was actually 14. Assistant reports can be good for highlighting aspects of a player's style or capability but I always use them to complement what I see on the attribute screen. I just feel that if I wanted to head toward picking players based on guessing and what I see visually then I may as well go back to managing an amateur league team in real life - and I much prefer the virtual managing I can do from my warm home rather than standing on a council owned pitch in the pouring rain in a cold November.



Training

Training in FM has seen so much progression, even just within the last few editions. We no longer set one general focus and allow the game to develop our players for us. Now we can alter training schedules day by day, allocating three individual slots per day to a wide range of scenarios and training categories.

For individual players we can set a main role/position based focus alongside the team training and then even an additional focus to really hone in on a specific few attributes. On top of that we can try to dictate the way a player carries out their duty by asking them to learn or unlearn certain player traits.

If you're someone who has a defined tactical vision then you'll likely want to ensure that your players are training to make the most of that tactical set up. There's no point in training them to play a possession based game if your tactic is a more direct set up that has no need to control the ball for extended periods of time.

If you're a person who likes to shape the club from the ground up, you can go as far as controlling team and individual training for both senior and youth squads. However, as is the case with so much of FM, if you just want to crack on and play games then you can always just palm this off onto your coaching staff.

Mentoring

This is certainly something that could be covered under training but I felt that it deserved to be given its own focus. Mentoring has evolved from the old tutoring mechanism. With tutoring you would ask a senior player to take a younger player under their wing and this would in turn (if successful) develop elements of their attributes and personality or even player traits depending on which option of tutoring you asked the player to do.

Now, we have the mentoring system. Players are grouped together and so they can influence and be influenced by more than one player. This feels like a much more realistic way of working as you can more easily imagine groups of players working and training together rather

than them splitting off into pairs and kicking a ball between themselves - I am exaggerating slightly here but the point remains.

It's another area that I use a mixture of methods in. Sometimes I'll have a specific player in mind that I want to impart their wisdom on others however a lot of the time, I'll ask my assistant to suggest mentoring groups and then I'll tweak it from there.

Player and Press Interactions

Interactions have become such a big part of the game. It's always sort of been there but now it seems like it's been pushed even more to the foreground with how it is represented in the game.

Having a private chat with a player can either make or break a situation. Players are always keen to come and talk to you if they're not happy and your choice of response (or decision to ignore them) can have a massive impact on them going forward, both in terms of their morale and their decisions. The same goes with team talks, it's now very visible through the body language banners and icons to see what sort of reaction any misjudged comment may have.

Press conferences have had a revamp to become more aesthetically pleasing and, again, it is much more obvious to see what reaction any specific comment you make has had. Some people don't enjoy the sheer volume of press interactions that the game pushes on you now - pre-match, post-match, tunnel pre- and post-match, new signings, transfer rumours, competition draws. It can be overwhelming but if we're talking in terms of realism, isn't this exactly what we'd expect a manager of a high profile football club to face?

Gestures are the new toy for FM21. I say new but really they're just the same motor as they were previously but with a more tangible name to them. For me, I'd rather have the idea of throwing a water bottle than just having something noted as having said it 'aggressively'.

The layout of team talks and team meetings have changed now also, and this came in for some criticism but this is the sort of realism I want to see in the game. The players' names are all laid out in a shape as if they were sitting around you in a changing room - it's not a massive feature but it's the type of thing that raises a small smile on my face.



Club Vision

Certain clubs have a way of doing things. Call it a vision, a process or a DNA. It can be related to the sort of players they want to sign, how they operate financially or the style of football they expect to play. It stands to reason that if you go to a club like Liverpool that the board and fans would not be particularly pleased to see you play for a goal then shut up shop and see the game out defensively.

I really like the idea that you should adhere to the way of a club you join. If you want to take this to a further step of realism then you should consider this when applying for jobs or adding yourself as a manager to certain clubs. It seems that the game does factor these things in during their shortlisting criteria anyway!

Matchday Experience

This is another area that has had a mixed reaction in FM21. I have already mentioned the team talk layout being to my liking but the general match day experience has changed for players of the game.

Instead of having access to a mountain of stats across various categories, you now have only limited information available during the game as default. At half time and full time you do get the

usual player and team views available to you.

I may be in the minority with this but I like this as a point of realism. If I was managing a real time, I wouldn't expect myself to be able to pause the match to check how many passes my defensive midfielder had made between minutes 15 and 30. However, as I've said there is a fine line to tread between the game being playable and enjoyable and being considered hard work - it doesn't appear that you can change the availability of this information on the game as it comes however this may change in the future or some skinning expert may find a way to do this.

A smaller note is the condition of players. This is no longer represented as a percentage figure but instead by a coloured heart graphic. This really makes sense to me, yet again from a realism point of view as you can judge for yourself from the visual graphic how much a player has left in them in the same way a real manager would judge by seeing a player's body language or movement on the pitch.

Transfers

A transfer in FM could previously be done and dusted in a matter of clicks. Maybe there are times that a transfer can be done as simply as that but more often than not a club is on the trails of a player for months on end. Negotiations can stall and talks can break down then restart days or weeks later.

FM has seen a move in that direction with more AI clubs now stalling on transfer bids to see what interest is there from clubs, agents touting their players out and an inbox notification now telling you when a player is expected to make a decision on their contract. I've even seen a screenshot of an agent coming back to a manager to renegotiate a previously agreed contract because of the interest of other clubs.

SI have also added in the Ask Agent About Availability button which can be used to pre-empt how likely a player will be to come to your club along with some possible demands. It's not perfect and still transfers don't take as long as they probably should in line with how it happens in real life but I feel like it is a step in the right direction.

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Things we want and things we definitely do not want

When we talk about realism and new features, the forums are always awash with fanciful notions of being able to spend your wage as a manager. It may be realistic but it's definitely not a step I want to see in Football Manager.

One thing that always crops up is the ability to watch training either in full or in part. I have mixed feelings on this - I don't really want to see my squad doing shuttle runs or passing drills but something related around set pieces would be useful. I'd like the ability to see practice corner or free kick routines rather than waiting for how they perform in matches. It would be useful to be able to tweak and tinker with certain movements to get the best out of these high percentage situations.

So, how realistic do we want FM to be?

As they say, opinions are like golden generations - everyone has one. I enjoy being able to delegate some things that I find too detailed to my staff to allow me to tailor the game to the right level of realism that suits me.

It's clear that there are many things that SI could add or refine to improve the game in this aspect but overall I am happy with the direction that FM and Realism is going.

My answer to the above question may seem like a bit of a cop out but how realistic do we want FM to be? The answer to that is entirely subjective - to repeat myself yet again - as with so many parts of this game. That's what makes FM so addictive.



The Pragmatic Idealist



Nowadays we regularly read about how football managers have specific and varying philosophies. No longer satisfied with saying that Manager A likes his players to play in a wide attacking style while Manager B is known for defending deep and hoofing it long on the counter, the debate has become increasingly intellectualised over time. With this talk of 'philosophy' once confined to the football historians and niche writers who would regularly reference Cholo or Total Football; the rise and accessibility of platforms like The Athletic and the sub-brands it hoovers up like Tifo Football, have helped foster in a new age of discussion about the sport itself.

In the modern era, some managers are lauded for their pragmatism. Think of the praise heaped upon Pep Guardiola for switching between fielding two or three centre backs to nullify specific opposition attackers in particular matches. At the same time, some are derided for their apparent dogmatism. Consider the vitriol aimed at Maurizio Sarri's unshakeable commitment to his 'Sarri-ball' approach, regardless of results for the entirety of his time at Chelsea. Then there are the supposed idealists who invite criticism as much as they command praise, depending on their team's form. Think of Marcelo Bielsa or Jurgen Klopp's respective high press systems, always deployed despite the circumstances. What does it all mean?

What are you on about?

Football writer Jonathan Wilson wrote for The Guardian in January 2021 "There is perhaps no word so misused in football as pragmatic." He is right. Many simplify the definition of pragmatism to mean defensive and stubborn, and idealism to mean attacking and full of flair. This is not really the case. Pragmatism is to "deal with things sensibly and practically rather than based on theory" while idealism is to "have a very fixed approach to doing things, based on your own way of thinking," to paraphrase some popular definitions.

On the football pitch, this is more a question of whether a manager analyses the opposition's strengths and weaknesses, changing his approach to counteract them while playing a shape and system best suited to the strengths and weaknesses of his current playing staff. The opposite approach would be a manager deciding from day one that (for example) a quick counter-attacking, short-passing 4-3-1-2 is how his team should and will play football. If his current crop of players is not used to that or naturally suited to the philosophy; they can shape up and fit in, or well, they can get out.

What does this mean in Football Manager?

Part of the beauty and addictive nature of Football Manager is that there is no wrong way to play it. In saying that, some may consider trying to find programming flaws to exploit what is in essence a video game to gain an advantage is arguably "wrong," but that is not for me to judge. In its capacity as a simulation of football management, which is how I see it, there are many ways to skin a cat.

Most FM players will have a preference on this topic, whether they actively recognise it or not. When you first take over a new team, do you spend time analysing the profiles of the players in your squad then head to the tactics screen to build a shape around what you have found? Or perhaps you do the opposite. Do you instead load up your favourite tactic, then see who in the current squad could best be deployed in the roles you have already decided your team will use?

Another consideration is what you do in a match when it does not go your way. If you go a goal down early in a match, there is a wide range of actions you could take. What do you normally do?

The most idealistic among us will stick to our guns, thinking "Don't worry, it's fine, we'll score at the end." Exactly like Carlos Puyol turned and said to Manuel Estiarte in the stands at Stamford Bridge in 2009 after Michael Ballack put Chelsea 1-0 up in the ninth minute of a crucial Champions League encounter. If you remember that night, Andres Iniesta ultimately proved his suspended captain right. Barcelona resolutely stuck to their tactical tenets despite their opponent's evident strength, and they eventually equalised, going through to the final. Idealism was the victor, albeit in the dying seconds. Is this your approach?

The nuclear option at the opposite end of the spectrum is to abandon your principles when you lose that early goal. No way will you sit here and let the opposition take home the win! To hell with your initial strategy, clearly it was a mistake. You will load up that tactic you have been keeping up your sleeve that goes route one and plays three central strikers plus two wingers. Let's destroy the bastards.

The middle ground is that you could make minor tweaks. Push the defensive line slightly higher, change the passing directness or increase the team's tempo a little. Maybe change that support duty on one of your midfielders to attack for the next 15 minutes or so, to nudge them slightly further up the field. This is pragmatism in play, making practical changes to counteract what is unravelling in front of your eyes.

If you have played Football Manager for any real length of time, I imagine you have tried all of those at one stage or another. I know I have. You will find your own preference and philosophy in time, and again, there are no wrong answers.

What are the pros and cons of the pragmatic approach?

Say you are a pragmatist. When you look at players in your squad, I am sure you have seen that FM suggests the most suited positions and roles for each of them. Even if you are not particularly interested whether a striker has racked up a higher xG or attempted more shots so far this season than your other forwards, if FM shows that your best player is best suited to the poacher role to the tune of four golden stars, then you would be mad asking him to do something different. It is logical. You find that your next highest rated player is most suited to the pressing forward role. Only a fool would field anything but a two-man strike-force of a pressing forward and a poacher, no?

You repeat this process across the team and realise that your lack of quality at full-back but overload of talented central midfielders seems to best fit a 3-5-2 shape. You have managed to get your 11 highest rated players on the pitch at once, and flexibly allowed your players' strengths to define your tactical approach.

Ahead of your next game you realise that the opposition has exceptionally pacey wingers who have assisted a significant number of goals this year. They play with only one up front, but he is a giant battering ram of a Target Man who scores most of his goals with his head and face. Usually, your centre backs are those who can play a bit. You have been selecting defenders who are good at bringing the ball out of defence and have better passing than the average stopper.

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For this match, however, one of these guys needs to step aside and let you play your brutal six-foot-six destroyer. Yes, he has an attribute of four for passing and cannot run, but this does not matter. Horses for courses. He has aggression of 16, strength of 18 and a jumping reach of 20. Do your worst, target man! If they do knock in a goal or two; do not worry, we will switch up the system and get back into the game.

The pros of this approach are that it results in high immediate tactical familiarity, leading to the related boosts in team cohesion and performance. Players are also fundamentally happy playing in their natural position, so are easier to manage. You can field many of your highest rated players as possible in one system and opposition threats are regularly nullified.

The cons are that your team have no fixed tactical identity. You are neither a free-flowing short passing team nor a team of physical powerhouses. Recruitment is more difficult as this lack of fixed identity makes identifying appropriate player strengths in the market a tougher ask. Lastly, do not forget that the initial boost provided by high tactical familiarity is undone if you regularly chop and change strategy based on the opposition or match events.

What are the pros and cons of the idealistic approach?

Say you are an idealist. When you look at the player profiles in your squad, you disregard the star ratings and suggestions that FM presents you with. You do not need it. You are the manager after all! You have a fixed idea of how your team should operate on the pitch. In this case, you love a narrow system focusing on through balls from a creative 'number 10' behind a pair of strikers and think the width should always come from tireless

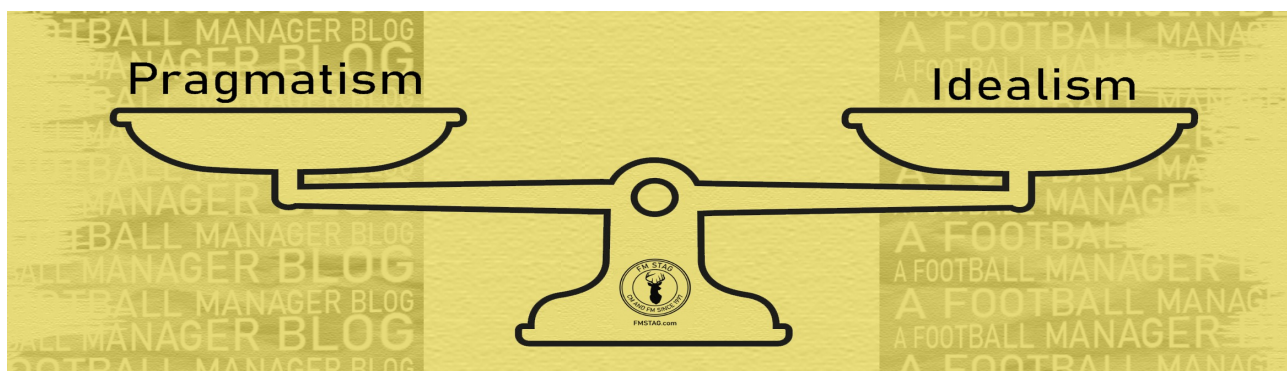
wing-backs. Oh, and counter-pressing is how best to defend.

You apply your preferences across the squad, even if it means transfer-listing some talented players or big names who simply do not fit. Those who are not perfect but still useful are being retrained to take on a new role if they are willing and able to.

Ahead of your next game, you set your team up exactly how you want them to play, and the opposition...wait, it is not about the opposition! If you win, it is as your players did their jobs better than the opposition did theirs. If you lose, it is because the players did not follow your instructions as well as they should have done. Though in time, you are certain that they will do. Then the success will inevitably come.

The pros of this approach are firstly that your team have a definable tactical identity. You have a particular style and when it really starts to deliver results, it is a joy to see it in motion. Recruitment is less of a minefield as you have specific requirements for the players in your system. When the penny finally drops and everyone sings from the same hymn sheet and are fully comfortable with your system, tactical familiarity is high, and stays that way, with all its performance-enhancing benefits.

The cons here are that if your system is definable, it is predictable. A pragmatic opposition manager may be able to work out which levers to pull to get the better of you, and he may have a squad versatile enough to do so. Also, newly signed players may take longer to adjust to your strategy, so re-training and a lot of patience will be required.



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In Conclusion

This article was not designed to push your preferences in one direction or the other, as football and playing Football Manager is certainly richer for the variety. Even within the comparisons I have provided, there is room for disagreement and a rich and lengthy discussion. Just like there should be.

Example. Pep Guardiola may be the king of the pragmatic approach, sometimes even accused of 'over-thinking' opposition strengths and making too many changes, but do not forget he is widely credited with the re-emergence of the 'Tiki Taka' philosophy when he took arguably world football's most stubbornly idealist club Barcelona through their most prolific trophy haul in recent memory.

Jurgen Klopp rightly wins plaudits (and trophies) when his Liverpool side embody his specific 'Gegenpress' philosophy to the letter, but who had to be versatile and pragmatic in this thinking when his left-back Andy Robertson had to be replaced by midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum at half time that night at Anfield against Barcelona in 2019?

The answers are not set in stone, and neither should they be.

Football Manager might still be a long way away from being as nuanced and immersive as the richness of football itself, but if you make some changes in how you think about playing it, you might just have more fun.

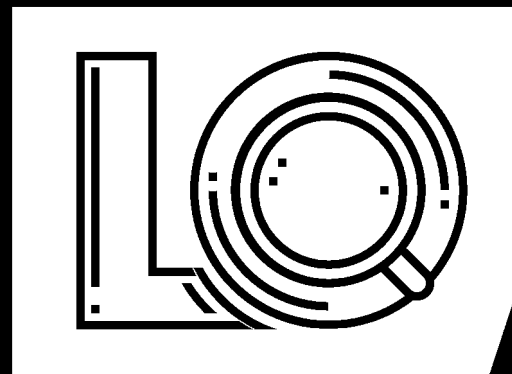
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