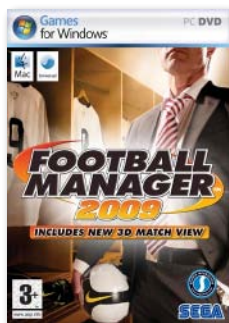


WINNING FORMATION

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2009



FORMAT REVIEWED

PC/Mac

OTHER FORMATS

PSP

PUBLISHER

SEGA

DEVELOPER

Sports Interactive

REVIEWED BY

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Perhaps the biggest British gaming success story of the last fifteen years, the *Football Manager* series, is still one of the industry's biggest oxymorons. Incomprehensible to newcomers and with all the graphical sheen of a flash spreadsheet program, the series has nonetheless warmed the hearts of the most demanding of audiences: PC gamers and football fanatics. Like most sport titles *Football Manager* is a series that endures numerous yearly updates with only a smattering of new implementations, but *2009* brings a curious addition - the 3D match engine. Has Sports Interactive finally succeeded in delivering the next-generation, full 3D experience would-be gaffers have long awaited? For one thing, it might be time to dial down those expectations just a tad.

First off, the numbers. With over 350,000 real-life footballers and over 5,000 playable clubs from 50 countries, SI has certainly not shirked in providing once again the most comprehensive football database yet (ask Everton F.C, who recently begun a data-sharing partnership with the developers for recruitment purposes). In addition to these figures, a number of small updates have been included, such as the ability to control a female manager, improved media relations and a more realistic finance and transfer system model. The media relations are most noticeable on your first playthrough, with the surprising addition of full press conferences, which eventually can lead to developing long-standing relationships with particular journalists. Although the option to launch into a Joe Kinnear-style sailor-speak tirade is sadly absent, the conferences themselves are fun to partake in and can lead to fascinating results.

For newcomers, the Assistant Manager Feedback addition is long overdue. Understanding the influx of more complex management options could inhibit newcomers from grasping *Football Manager*; now the Assistant Manager is on-hand to assist with team performance and tactics. For anyone who had skipped past iterations, the feature helps break down aspects that need improvement before, during and after each game, as well as offering invaluable advice on which players might be underperforming. While non-veterans will still find themselves occasionally lost amongst the plethora of options, this is one feature that directly benefits those not well-versed in the intricacies of the tactical behemoth.

Sadly, the biggest advancement of *Football Manager 2009* - the aforementioned 3D match engine - is also the most underwhelming. Although the prospect of hyper-realistic, HD representations of your beloved club might set gamers salivating, let's face facts - this is *Football Manager* we're talking about. The closest comparison to the meagre engine would be an Amiga-era *Sensible Soccer* title. Worse still, the 3D option can be prone to jerky stuttering and also increases the game time in comparison to the still-present 2D engine. Without eye-massaging graphical capabilities, it's hard to see why any *FM* veteran would choose the 3D option, relegating the much-hyped addition to an intriguing novelty, yet a novelty which will surely be slowly improved upon year after year.

Thus proves the theory that *Football Manager*



is a series that can only move in baby steps. Whilst inferior rivals were producing impressive match engines years ago, the developers were introducing their 2D match engine to much fanfare nonetheless. Sports Interactive simply doesn't move with the crowd, so while *2009*'s match view may disappoint, it's a feature that will be tweaked and managed to perfection over the next couple of years, just like every other new feature the franchise has ever incorporated. Whether this game is for you will likely be decided by the screenshots on this page. If they fill you with bemusement you'll be even more bemused when you try to get to the grips with the interface. If you never even looked at the screenshots then you'll be fine. *Football Manager* is the closing argument for proponents of gameplay over graphics, so whilst a few additions might miss their mark, the experience of *Football Manager 2009* is as solid as ever. Don't let the looks deceive, many months of late nights and social hibernation await.

VERDICT ★★★★★

