

Original Game Pitch: *Betterball*

Summary

Betterball is a new type of sports video game. Through the use of a dynamic invented sport, a fantastic setting, and a strong narrative, *Betterball* delivers the joy of a competitive team sports experience to an audience beyond conventional sports fans.

Sports video games can offer an unparalleled mixture of strategic and action gameplay. Players can experience the physical action of athletic competition, manage a team's tactics, and develop the skills of players. They can play competitively, on a team, or both. The depth and breadth of gameplay modalities in many sports games puts even the most heralded strategy RPGs, such as *XCOM* and *Valkyria Chronicles*, to shame. Even so, many gamers never give them a chance based on factors completely exogenous to sports in the abstract. Nearly all sports video games require knowledge about a real-world sport - often not only about rules, but about teams and players as well. Some people are excluded from sports games by those prerequisites, and some are turned off by their cultural connotations - the lionization of athletes, the forcing of children to compete, and the general macho hypercompetitiveness associated with sporting events.

Betterball seeks to remove those confounding factors, distilling the enjoyable aspects of sports games into a more universally enjoyable form. The fictional sport of betterball combines familiar elements of existing sports into a simple-to-understand system, adding aspects of customizable card games to make the activity distinctively unique. On top of that, *Betterball* adds enticing narrative elements, making each and every game meaningful.

Story Synopsis

After being rejected from his high school sports teams, Alan Cadca decides to invent his own sport, called "betterball." But when he and his friends win a game and declare themselves Betterball Champions of the Universe, their claim is taken very seriously by some important extradimensional personages. As it turns out, betterball is remarkably similar (even in name) to the official sport of many other dimensions. Soon after Alan's team wins their first game, a strange rift appears in the air. A jovial squidlike alien offers them a chance to compete in the Destiny League, the foremost interdimensional betterball competition. Drawn to the chance to experience the wonders of lands never before dreamed by humanity, the team agrees to represent Earth and its universe in the Destiny League. They compete against many strange beings and develop wondrous skills, but the stakes soon become higher than they bargained for.

Characters

Between the towering lights and meticulously manicured grass of the local sports stadium, hundreds of fans cheer as two rival high schools once again duel for the city championship. A few blocks away, a dozen kids play a made-up game in an empty field, with sticks acting as makeshift goals. These are the protagonists of Betterball - not the glorious athletic heroes, but those who were excluded from organized sports, or who grew unsatisfied with their demands. Though each has his or her reason not to attend the high school game, they are united in a much more important competition: the Betterball Championship of the Universe. Though none of them know it, their game will have consequences of galactic import, catapulting them into an adventure beyond their substantial imaginations.

Alan Cadca is the inventor of betterball. He holds a great love for sports, but because he lacks natural athletic talent, his tryouts for all of the school sports teams ended in failure. Instead of giving up on playing, he decided to make a new, better sport. With that goal, he established betterball, and founded the first betterball team with his friends, called the Guardians. Alan is a natural leader, and the team captain of the Guardians. On the field, his cleverness and instincts more than compensate for his slight frame and modest athletic talents. His greatest challenge over the course of the game will be keeping the team unified and optimistic despite the adversity and conflict they will face.

Z.A. Cadca is Alan's younger brother by two years. Though he is a prodigiously talented athlete, and already taller than Alan, he despises the pressures and politics of organized sports. Z.A. is a quiet, peaceful individual without much of a competitive side. He wears glasses, which he hopes hide his athletic side. Though he finds sports enjoyable, that fun is always outweighed by the burden of expectations placed upon him. In betterball, Z.A. finally found a game where he can enjoy the camaraderie and activity without reservation. However, in the coming days he will have to struggle with the once-peaceful betterball attaining consequences far greater than a city championship.

Wren Masters is one of the top students at the high school. She enjoys betterball as a break from her numerous academic clubs and advanced classes. The ulterior reason behind her joining the Guardians is the budding attraction between her and Alan. A romance between them develops over the course of the game. Though Wren is not much for the physical action of betterball, she is a brilliant cardmaster and invaluable to the team in that capacity (see Mechanics section). More than anyone else on the Guardians, she is thrilled at the chance to visit new worlds, and spends much of her time cataloging the wonders they encounter.

Morris Splintercat has been Alan's best friend since childhood. He can be stubborn, but he is a devoted friend with a kind heart. Though at first he only joins the Guardians as a favor to Alan, he soon finds that enjoys betterball more than he expected, and that his large size makes him a formidable defender.

Ashley Rampant is a fiercely competitive athlete. She believes that the only reason she wasn't chosen as the starting quarterback for the school's football team is because she's a girl. Because of that, Ash decides to boycott the school's sports. In their stead, she gives

betterball a try, and soon vows to become the best betterball player ever. Her steadfast determination and exceptional speed make her claim to that title as likely as any of the Guardians.

Cyrus Varrot is a childhood friend of Alan, Z.A. and Morris. Though he has drifted apart from the Cadcas during high school, he volunteered to fill the last spot on the Guardians. He is competent at betterball, but his estimation of his own skills is quite a bit higher than is justified, often to the detriment of the team. His egocentric and intolerant tendencies tend to provoke him into arguments with the rest of the Guardians. After one such argument early in the game, he decides to leave the Guardians as a free agent in search of another betterball team. Cyrus's bitterness prompts him to appear throughout the game as a recurring antagonist.

As with most sports games, the Guardians can sign **other players** as well. Success points, which are earned from winning games and completing other goals, can be spent to acquire additional players. The Guardians have a maximum roster size of twelve players, and the departure of Cyrus early in the game forces them to sign at least one external player. As betterball enjoys interdimensional popularity, the list of available free agents includes some extraordinary and fantastical figures. Using a free agent enough in gameplay unlocks a sidequest in which the Guardians learn more about that player. These sidequests are determined based on the player's land of origin.

World

When the Guardians built their makeshift betterball field, they had no idea that they were expanding an existing stadium complex. Destiny Stadium is comprised of the primary betterball facility in each of dozens of participating worlds, linked together in a grand interdimensional nexus. The first betterball game on Earth created a portal to Destiny Stadium, where virtually all of *Betterball* takes place. The corridors of the Stadium span space and time, and teams and spectators alike can travel to sporting events in disparate lands without ever leaving its walls.

There are representatives of a wide variety of civilizations competing within the Stadium. The Destiny League is a competition founded on goodwill and exchange of values, like a perpetual Olympics. A large portion of *Betterball's* narrative comes from the opportunity to delve into the history and culture of the myriad worlds within Destiny Stadium. There are cutscenes in which the Guardians first learn about each other team, and the player can read more about these teams at any time. However, all this information is optional, and the player is welcome to skip it entirely in favor of just playing games.

The main plot of *Betterball* follows the Guardians' quest to reach the top tier of the Destiny League, called the Alpha League. The Destiny League features a relegation system, meaning that it is comprised of multiple tiers based on skill. There are six teams in each tier, and ten games in a season (each team plays each other team twice). At the end of the season, the first place team advances to the next tier, and the last place one is demoted. The four remaining teams are placed in a tournament to determine a second team to be promoted and demoted. (With two different ways to be promoted, players with a strong regular season won't be cheated out of a promotion due to a fluke tournament game, but teams that were middling during the season will still have a shot at advancement.) The relegation system provides *Betterball* with a natural narrative curve: as the Guardians grow in skill, they will advance through the tiers and face increasingly challenging opponents. If the Guardians reach the Alpha League, Earth will be granted the secret of interdimensional travel, as such success in betterball would doubtlessly prove the worth of terrestrial culture.

The key to making *Betterball* continually compelling is an interesting and distinct cast of opposing teams. There are twenty teams other than the Guardians in the Destiny League (four tiers, with five teams per tier). Some of them will become close friends with the Guardians, and others will become bitter rivals. Here is a brief sampling of teams that the Guardians will encounter:

Umlaus Daybreak - The Umlautians are responsible for the upkeep of Destiny Stadium, including the recruitment of new dimensions. As such, they are the beings that first step from an interdimensional portal to invite the Guardians to the Destiny League. The Umlautians are altogether alien yet nonthreatening in appearance, vaguely bowling pin-shaped with large eyes and squidlike beaks. Their small statures and tentacled appendages make them rather incompetent at betterball, but being an admirably diplomatic species, they field a team in the lowest tier of the Destiny League nevertheless. They provide a manageable first challenge for the Guardians, but their larger role is ensuring that the League runs smoothly and fairly.

Steelgate Glaive - In the land of Steelgate, society has advanced to the point where disputes between nations are handled by games of betterball instead of war. Because of this, the Glaive is a militaristic team that treats every game as seriously as a life and death struggle. Their main strength is their teamwork and organization, executing offensive plays and defensive formations with efficiency. The Glaive's players wear futuristic helmeted armor, which boosts their physical capabilities. They will force the Guardians to reevaluate their motivations for playing betterball, and ensure that they can only triumph through true determination.

Nithog Blaze - Most of the Guardians' opponents are humanoid in appearance, but Nithog is populated by creatures best described as dragons. Specifically, quadrupedal winged dragons in the medieval style, the kind one might find guarding rare treasure in other video games. Despite their grimly fearsome appearance, the Blaze are a rowdy and exuberant bunch, much like archetypal human jocks. Not everyone in Nithog has a personality like that, of course, but the competitive fraternal culture present in many human sports is more pronounced in draconic athletes. On the field, their behemoth qualities make them a difficult opponent. Rather than producing magical effects, the Blaze's cards bend the rules of betterball to allow players to use their natural talents, including flight and breathing fire.

Black Basilisks - The Basilisks are easily the most notorious team in the Destiny League, and the ultimate antagonists of the Guardians. They are run by the diabolical Manager Snakeman, a serpentine tycoon of indeterminate origin. Dark rumors abound about the Basilisks, including manifold accusations of cheating, though Snakeman always manages to avoid prosecution. The Basilisks do not represent any particular dimension, instead acquiring the best players from other worlds by any means necessary, from bribery to dark magic. Snakeman owns a second team, the Vipers, used to tryout and scout players from the lower tiers - they serve as the midboss of *Betterball*. The most alarming of the rumors about Snakeman is that he is searching for another dimension to invade and take over. If those rumors prove true, the final Alpha League confrontation between the Guardians and Basilisks could determine the fate of the Earth. (Spoilers: they are, and it will.)

Secret Teams - The multiverse nature of Destiny Stadium makes it extraordinarily easy to justify a cameo from other works of fiction. If an established game company develops or publishes *Betterball*, characters from that company's other games could appear as hidden teams.

Mechanics

The primary mechanic of *Betterball* is, of course, **playing betterball**. Betterball is a game most similar among terrestrial sports to team handball, a sport popular in Europe but virtually unknown in America. Like team handball, the sport centers around two teams trying to throw a volleyball-sized ball into opposing goals. Players can only take three steps before passing or dribbling, and there is a semicircular “crease” around each goal that only the goalie can enter. Unlike team handball, Betterball only has four players on the field for each team, plus one goalie and one cardmaster. Betterball has larger goals, a larger crease, and a larger play area than team handball, to allow for more dramatic play. A game is divided into four quarters of five minutes each, and the team with the most goals at the end of the game wins (extending into sudden death overtime in the case of a tie).

On offense, betterball players can move freely without the ball, performing acrobatic maneuvers to evade defenders. With the ball, players can pass, shoot, or dribble. With each of these options, players must determine whether to use a standard maneuver or one of various trick maneuvers, which have a greater chance of failure but can misdirect the defense. In both handball and betterball, jumping forms an important part of offensive strategy. Players cannot shoot while standing inside the crease, but they can jump towards the goal from outside the crease, releasing the ball in midair. On defense, betterball players can move freely. They can attempt to block the path of an adversary moving forward, steal the ball out of an adversary's hand, or intercept a thrown ball. The latter actions have a chance to change possession and go on the offensive, but they risk leaving the offensive player with a clear path to the goal. Players of *Betterball* can choose whether to “lock” onto a particular player, controlling that player's actions throughout the game, or switch between players with a button press. The goalie is generally controlled by artificial intelligence, but confident players can switch to the goalie to attempt an amazing save.

Betterball is as much about strategy as physical skill. Many sports games feature in-depth tactical management, choosing plays and formations - the “Xs and Os.” *Betterball* chooses to instead abstract the tactical side of sports into a collectible card game. Instead of a coach, betterball teams each have a **cardmaster**. In the game the Guardians first play on their makeshift field, cards cause simple rule changes, such as calling a timeout to restore players' stamina or forcing the opposing team's goalie to leave the crease for ten seconds. In Destiny Stadium, cards channel the energy of the onlooking fans into magical effects. Cards are earned through feats of daring, exciting the crowd. Penalties and unfair play incite the crowd's ire, causing the opposing team to gain cards.

Cards are divided into three ranks: green cards, yellow cards, and red cards. Green cards have small effects, such as calling a timeout or causing a player to become invisible for a few seconds. Yellow cards have significant effects, such as granting players a speed boost for the quarter or summoning a spectral dragon to aid the team for a brief time. Red cards have game-changing powers, such as turning the opposing team's best player into a small puppy for the duration of the match or causing players' passes to become electrified, stunning the opposition. Three green cards can be traded in for a yellow card, and three yellow cards can be traded in for a red card. Each team draws a yellow card and two green cards at the start of each quarter, and additional cards are rewarded for special feats (such

as scoring from a specified area) or as penalties. The cardmaster can play a card at any time. If no human player (controller-player, not in-game player) takes on the role of cardmaster for a team, its players can still activate cards through a simple overlain graphical interface.

Betterball offers a variety of different play modes. Players can play a quick match either online or offline, selecting any two teams in the Destiny League. Quick matches can support up to six players playing against a computer-controlled team, or up to twelve players playing competitively. Another play mode is a quick league, in which one or more players control teams in the playthrough of a ten-game season culminating in a tournament. The league can feature existing teams, or hold a fantasy draft, wherein teams take turns choosing from a pool of players. Quick matches and quick leagues can be played online, where a ranking system maintains a leaderboard and matches players against others of appropriate skill level. Players can also view information about teams, cards, and players from the main menu. However, the flagship mode of *Betterball* is Destiny League mode, the “story mode,” in which players experience the story of the Guardians’ journey. Destiny League mode can be played by a single player or a team of up to six players.

In Destiny League mode, players control the Guardians as they advance through the tiers of the Destiny League. *Betterball*’s embedded narrative is on full display in this mode, with dialogue and cutscenes showing important plot points. Beyond playing through the Guardians’ matches, players in Destiny League mode can handle the team’s **management and development**. Players each have a set of statistics affecting their performance on the field. These stats include speed, agility, ballhandling, stamina, and many others. The more time players spend on the field, the more experience points they gain, which can be used to upgrade those statistics. In addition, winning games and accomplishing other goals earns the team Success Points (SP), which can be spent on various improvements. SP can be used to sign free agents to the Guardians, from a pool of players that increases with each new team the Guardians defeat. SP can also be used to buy new packs of random cards, or specific individual cards for a higher price. Finally, SP can unlock bonuses, such as hidden teams and fields for quick play mode. Successful management of experience and SP is key not only to improving the Guardians, but also to customizing the team to fit the desired playing style.

Betterball can be a fast-paced action game, a tactical battle, a role-playing management simulation, or all three at once. It allows friends to engage in friendly competition or band together on an epic journey. *Betterball* provides a genuine sports experience for core sports game fans, while using strong narrative elements and some gameplay twists to attract new audiences. Its storyline is warm and magical enough for children, but deep enough to offer real engagement. *Betterball* is a new type of sports game, one that does not rely onto an existing sport to provide context and meaning, but instead builds an original world and story for all to enjoy.