

PlayVs Attempting to Monopolize the High School Esports Space

By: Chase Neukam (@chaseneukam)

Introduction

Well, they have finally overstepped so far, it has caught the attention of the entire scholastic esports space. The claims on exclusivity, shady business practices, and threats of cease and desists from PlayVs have rallied a majority of the scholastic esports space to speak out. Let's discuss...

In case you haven't been following, PlayVs the [self described](#) "ONLY varsity high school esports leagues in the United States and Canada" in recent news sent pseudo-cease and desist letters to state high school organizers such as [Esports Ohio](#) and The Texas Scholastic Esports Federation ([TEXSEF](#)). In emails, PlayVs claims to have exclusive rights to high school varsity competition for the games they offer: these games include League of Legends, MarioKart, Splatoon 2, Super Smash Bros, Overwatch, and Hearthstone. These emails are being sent directly to leaders in the high school esports space in an intimidating manner.

This act of harassment is even more egregious when you consider the shared knowledge and distribution of information to folks entering the esports space. Not every high school will have a well-informed coach and some will take what PlayVs says as law because that's all they've ever known. This is why speaking out is extremely important to spread awareness to the remainder of the space

Update 2/4/2022

[Brian Hummel](#) (@Little_B_Man), the Director of Esports for Bay State College, spoke with personnel at Activision Blizzard who clarified their exclusivity contract with PlayVs. Brian referenced their position as:

“Organizers can still operate within the scope of community guidelines but official school vs school varsity seasons are PlayVS exclusive.” This clarification adds specificity and doesn’t change much of my views on this situation.

From this update, it is clear PlayVs is making a play on monopolizing the high school esports space. The clear path for high school leagues is to market their competitions as ‘open high school leagues’ or ‘varsity and club high school leagues’; this doesn’t alter their infrastructure or affect them much in the short term. The terrifying portion is the act of PlayVs attempting to monopolize the high school space and aggressively emailing high school organizers.

If you are a high school educator who wishes to learn more about Activision Blizzard’s involvement with PlayVs, Bryan has encouraged the scholastic community to message him and he will provide the contact information of an [Activision Blizzard contact to create a dialogue](#).

From a Collegiate Director Perspective

I engage the collegiate community through my positions in NACE and the NECC. The experience, wisdom, and perspective I’m able to gather through interacting with members of the scholastic community in these meetings have defined my growth in the space. Transparently, whenever we are preparing for a season, there are a majority of us coaches/directors who intentionally want to collaborate with and around other leagues to

allow for the most opportunity possible for our communities. Even personally, I have bent over backwards at times to ensure collaboration between leagues/conferences to work around schedules and ensure the most competitive opportunities for all. I, alike many other coaches/directors, fight for these opportunities because we want to cultivate genuine growth in the scholastic space catered towards the students and the schools.

It's refreshing to see the [collegiate community unify](#) and surface discord on shady corporate predators in the high school space. Specifically, leaders like [James O'Hagan](#) (@jimohagan) have been advocating for high schools and posting advice for administrators.

State High School Esports Association administrators have also spoken out daily using the hashtag #PlayVsNever to shine light on the situation. These folks genuinely care about the future of scholastic esports and are the heart of the effort exposing PlayVs. Educators and leaders in the high school space such as [Alene Vandermyde](#) (@vandermydesci), [Nate Thompson](#) (@NateShowww), [Todd McFarlin](#) (@derdrom_TJM), and [Mike Dahle](#) (@MrDahle) are posting the hashtag daily to express their disdain for the current situation. Esports orgs rise and fall on the whim of the community, and PlayVs have played themselves into a corner. If the organizer scholastic space as a whole (high school and collegiate) continues to expose these awful business practices, eventually PlayVs will have a tainted reputation with no quality competition.

From a Event Organizer Perspective

This is wrong and they deserve the backlash given. When I create an event, whether it be a league, tournament, or otherwise, I try to be as inclusive as possible. This

means allowing flexibility for participants to compete in multiple brackets (sometimes too many) so cultures can mix. In my time in esports, I have never bound myself or any other organizers to exclusivity contracts preventing further opportunities in the space. An example I have of this is when I run tournaments and participants are traveling from/to another event in the same area: in those situations I'm transparent about the schedule and keep an open line of communication on expectations. This has rarely come up and is a stretch to compare to 'exclusivity' in the context of the PlayVs situation.

Another example would be scheduling tournaments or events while coordinating with the surrounding regions so as to not overlap events. As tournament organizers (TOs), we attempt to cross-promote with one another to ensure regional rivalries and timely dates for travel. If I am running an event with Chase DeWitt (@realchasedewitt) in the Davenport, Iowa we are generally communicating with TOs from the surrounding states (or regions) in the Midwest such as Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska to ensure we are not double booking events on the same days and providing the most competitive outlets for our communities.

PlayVs is also NOTORIOUS for not responding to submissions on their platforms; I've seen cases since 2019, but I'm sure it goes further back. Whether it be no shows, reporting other teams, or disputing false match submissions, a ton of educators are left on read. @SalsaShark21 posted [their experience with PlayVs reporting](#) in light of these events. This is unacceptable from the organizer who is facilitating the competition and adds so much unnecessary stress to the teams/coaches. If you are running events of any sort, it is your responsibility to ensure the environment is as optimal as possible in

regards to competitive integrity, ease of access, platforms, quality of life, streams, and safety....which brings me to my next point.

The data and privacy of students involved in PlayVs is not protected; I've unfortunately experienced it secondhand. I have a close and well-respected friend in the esports space (who shall remain anonymous), who, with limited CS experience, was able to extract data from PlayVs with all the schools and students information. They did it to prove a point to me that the students' information was not protected and immediately deleted the copy of the data they pulled.

Allow me to repeat once more: the emails, addresses, and any other data submitted by high school kids is subject to be compromised. Whether it be by outside sources OR PLAYVS THEMSELVES. Who brags about [compromising students' data](#)?! High school teachers and administrators go to distant lengths to ensure students and their data is protected; so far, some high schools won't even allow colleges access to their Discords for recruitment purposes. Delane bragging about utilizing student data to maximize profit seems like a spit in the face to educators.

From a Grassroots Community Perspective

Most organizers or personnel in the grassroots space desire to see the space grow and cultivate more opportunities for their communities. Even when I was creating Cardinal Esports at Ball State, we wanted to lay the foundation for collegiate esports in Indiana; that is how Battle for Indiana started (a legacy event which was founded in 2018). We invited Purdue, IU, Notre Dame, Butler, Ivy Tech, and more to compete in a LAN at Ball State on crowdfunded equipment and a VERY limited (next to nothing) budget.

I'm not saying events should be free (because it's not always sustainable) but the intentions should be transparent. When leaders collaborate in a meaningful cause, there is generally a mission/vision statement embedded in the event. Consider the marketing or promotion behind fundraisers, crowdfunding, or charity events: you know EXACTLY what your entry/payment is going towards because of the transparency behind the purpose.

You can transparently tell the vision and direction of an organization from their mission statement. The [HSEL mission statement](#) is, "To provide an organized high school level esports league, in a comfortable environment with healthy competition. We believe that e-Sports (barf) should be available to every student as a legitimate varsity level sport in high schools across the nation." While some of the high school community has mixed feelings on the HSEL, they back their mission statement through their actions. Comparatively, the [PlayVS mission statement](#) is, "to provide gamers with the most competitions and the best competitive experience." This mission doesn't align with their actions, because if they wanted "the most competitions and the best competitive experience" then they would be collaborating with their communities, not trying to limit their opportunities.

A vision statement is meant to convey the world the organization lives in after they accomplish their mission. The PlayVS [vision statement](#) is, "power competition for everyone, everywhere". If they wanted to power competition for everyone, everywhere, why do they seem to target the high school demographic? Earlier this year they [pulled out of their collegiate initiatives](#) and they haven't invested in any open events. The actions of

these con artists are not matching the vision and mission they are promoting to their communities.

This is almost as corporate and money-grubbing as it gets. Even when I ran a local league at a LAN center, the most we charged for in-person, 8 week leagues was \$60 per person and that included warm up time. If students couldn't afford it, we even offered them a discount. When I run most events to this day, some of the entry goes toward a prize pot for that specific game so the competitors contribute to the payout for top 8 or even more. PlayVs charging \$60 for a high school student to play exclusively with them, with little to no transparently structured payout is an irredeemable precedent to set.

Conclusion

PlayVs has shown through their actions in the past year they have set their sights on monopolizing the high school esports space for monetary gain. Based on the submitted evidence, it is quite clear PlayVs as a company does not truly have the interests of their community in mind. If this infuriates you and you want to speak out, join the scholastic esports community on twitter with #PlayVsNever in an effort to bring awareness to PlayVs business practices.

Author's Note

I wanted to roll this out a week or so ago before I went to the Dominican Republic, but I wasn't able to finish in time. It's been a wild ride the past couple weeks for me. I've updated and rewritten this article more times than is necessary. This is an informative opinion piece and should be engaged as such. The purpose of this is to notify and spread

awareness to the scholastic community about PlayVs schemes and the impact it could have on their communities. I am open to any dialogue with varying perspectives surrounding this situation so I encourage folks to engage my twitter @chaseneukam with their thoughts. If you have any questions, I encourage you to reach out to myself, or any of your local/state esports leaders.

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