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In 2019, the highest paid athlete in the world was an Argentine footballer named Lionel Messi. And his talent? Dribbling a ball down a pitch and booting it past a goalkeeper. It's a skill so revered by fans and corporate sponsors alike, that in 2019, Messi took home 104 million dollars. That's almost two million dollars for every goal he scored in season. He's a pretty spectacular athlete by any standard. But why is it Messi's particular skills are so valuable?

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Sure, there are obvious answers. We just have enormous respect for athletic prowess, we love human competition, and sports unite generations. You can enjoy watching soccer with your grandfather and your granddaughter alike.

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But growing up, I admired a different sort of athlete. I didn't just want to bend it like Beckham. I loved video games and I was floored by the intricate strategies and precision reflexes required to play them well. To me, they were equally admirable to anything taking place in stadia around the world. And I still feel that way. Today, I still love video games, I founded successful companies in the space and I've even written a book about the industry.

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But most importantly, I've discovered I'm not alone, because as I've grown up, so has gaming. And today, millions of players around the world need to compete in gaming centers like this helix, and large gaming tournaments, like the League of Legends World Championships can reach over 100 million viewers online. That's more than some Super Bowls.

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And Lionel Messi isn't the only pro getting [paid] for his skills. Top gaming teams can take home 15 million dollars or more from a single tournament like Dota's Invitational. And all this is why traditional sports stars, from David Beckham to Shaquille O'Neal, are investing in competitive games, transforming our industry, now called esports, into a 27-billion-dollar phenomenon, almost overnight.

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But despite all this, the skills required to be a pro gamer still don't get much respect. Parents hound their gamer-loving kids to go outside, do something useful, take up a real sport. And I'm not saying that physical activity isn't important, or that esports are somehow better than traditional sports. What I want to argue is that it takes real skill to be good at competitive video games.

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So let's take a look at the skills required to win in Fortnite, League of Legends, Rocket League, some of today's most popular esports. Now, all of these games are very different. League of Legends is about controlling a magical champion as they siege an opposing fortress with spells and abilities. Fortnite is about parachuting into 100-person free-for-all on a tropical island paradise and Rocket League is soccer with cars, which, while it may sound strange, I promise, is incredibly fun. And yet, all of these three esports, despite their differences, and most competitive games, actually have three common categories of skill. And I'm going to take you through each in turn.

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The first type of skill required to master esports is mechanical skill, sometimes referred to as micro. Mechanical skill governs activating and aiming in-game abilities with pixel-perfect accuracy. And I'd most liken mechanical skill to playing an instrument like piano. There's a musical flow and a timing to predict in your opponent's actions and reactions. And crucially, just like piano, top esports pros hit dozens of keys at once. Gamers regularly achieve APMs, or actions per minute, of 300 or more, which is roughly one command every fifth of a second and in particularly mechanically demanding esports, like StarCraft, top pros achieve APMs of 600 or more, allowing them to literally control entire armies one unit at a time.

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To give you an idea of how difficult this is, imagine a classic game like Super Mario Brothers. But instead of controlling one Mario, there are now two hundred, and instead of playing on one screen, you're playing across dozens, each set to a different level or stage. And now Mario can't just run or jump, but he has new powers, teleportations, cannon blast, things like that, that have to be activated with split-second timing. Yeah, it is really hard to play mechanically demanding esports like StarCraft well.

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Now the second category of skill required to master esports is strategic skill, sometimes called macro. And this governs the larger tactical choices gamers make. And I'd liken and strategic skill to mastery of chess. You have to plan attacks and counterattacks and manipulate the digital battlefield to your advantage. But crucially, unlike chess, esports are constantly evolving. A popular esports like Fortnite can patch almost every week. And even the most competitive esports like Rainbow Six Siege update every quarter, and these changes aren't just cosmetic. They introduce new abilities, new heroes, new maps. Constant change requires adaptivity. It asks esports pros to do more than just practice but to theorize and invent.

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Now, gamers call this constantly evolving suite of strategies the meta, short for the "metagame." And it would be like if every few weeks the rules of basketball fundamentally evolved. Maybe three-pointers are now worth five points, or NBA pros can dribble out of bounds. If this happened, basketball would permit for new strategies to win games and the teams that discovered these new strategies first would have a big, if temporary, advantage. And this is exactly what happens in esports every time there's a patch or update. Competitive gaming rewards its most creative and unconventional thinkers with free wins.

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Now, the last category of skill required to be good at esports is leadership, sometimes referred to as shot calling. Esports pros are constantly in private voice-chat communications with their teammates, supplemented by a system of in-game pings. This is what allows a team of League of Legends pros to coordinate a spectacular barrage of five-man ultimates, flashing in to capitalize on a minor mispositioning by their opponents. And leadership skill is also what allows game captains to rally their teammates in moments of crisis and inspire them to make one last risky all-in assault on the opposing base. And I'd argue this is the same type of leadership exuded by executives and team captains everywhere. It's the ability to seize opportunity, clearly and decisively communicate decisions and inspire others to follow your lead.

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And all these three categories of skill, mechanical, strategic and leadership, they have a crucial element in common. They're all almost entirely mental. Unlike my ability to have a basketball career at five-foot-ten, esports doesn't care how tall I am, what gender I identify as, how old I am. In fact, esports controllers can even be adapted to pros with unique physical needs. Look at gamers like "Brolylegs" who can't move his arms or legs or "Halfcoordinated," who has limited use of his right hand. And these pros don't just compete, they set records.

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Now, I'm not here to argue that esports is some sort of egalitarian paradise. Our industry has real issues to address, particularly around inclusivity for women, marginalized groups and those without equitable access to technology. But just because esports has a long way to go, doesn't mean its skills don't deserve respect. And what particularly bugs me is how often we ascribe such enormous value to traditional athletic talents off the field. How many times have we been in a job interview setting, let's say, and heard somebody say something like, "Well, John is a phenomenally qualified candidate. He was captain of his college lacrosse team." Really? John is going to be a great digital marketer because he can hurl a ball really far with a stick? Come on, we would not apply that logic anywhere else. "Stand aside, scientists, Sarah is my choice to repair this nuclear reactor. After all, she played varsity soccer." No, what we mean when we say John or Sarah is phenomenally qualified for a job is that because of their experiences playing traditional sports, they have developed traits with real value in the workplace: diligence, perseverance, teamwork. And think of how I've just described esports to you. Doesn't it sound like mechanical skill, strategic skill, leadership, wouldn't those develop all those same traits too? And more to the point, in today's fast-paced digital-office environment, I think I might rather have a pro gamer on my team than a traditional athlete. After all, I know they can be charismatic and decisive over voice chat and I'm sure doing a lot of Zoom calls today in my business.

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So maybe now I've convinced you that esports and video games deserve a little more respect. But if not, let me try to make one last final appeal. Because look at it this way. Our society is changing. Technology is fundamentally infiltrating every aspect of our daily lives, transforming everything from how we work to how we fall in love. Why should sports be any different?

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You know, I think of my own childhood, you know. I grew up watching the World Cup with my family, and I learned to love soccer in large part because I watched it with my dad. And I would have loved doing anything with him. And now I think of my own sons. But instead of soccer, we're watching esports, not the violent ones, mind you. But I'm building the same sorts of memories with my kids that my father did with me. We're marveling at the same skill and reveling in the same victory. It is an identical feeling of pure awe and excitement. It's just a different game.

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Thank you very much.