

A place to escape and live a different life

A LEADING researcher on the subject of online gaming has said it is not unusual to meet up with fellow players in real life.

Professor Mark Griffiths, director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University, said: "I think people who don't play these games don't realise that people do actually meet up and form real friendships and, on the reverse, enemies, through them."

He said research carried out by the unit has found that one third of people who play online games have met up with fellow gamers.

"If you're a dragon in a game and you've been talking to an elf the idea of meeting up might seem preposterous, but that is exactly what goes on," he said.

"For them, it is a very common medium to meet people. The latest piece of research we published looked at how people fell in love through online gaming.

"It's not unusual to form relationships and deep bonds with people within the gaming context."

Prof Griffiths said online games often attracted people who may feel marginalised from society.

"The whole point of the success of online gaming is that you can be absolutely anyone you want to be," he said. "You can change absolutely anything about yourself – your gender, your age, even your species.

"People take on other personas and it's that change that gets people feeling really good about themselves – for example, if you are in a wheelchair in real life but you can fly

around in an online world. You take on aspects of your personality that you probably would never do in an off-line reality. It's kind of an arena for exploration, although most people would say there is still an element of their real personality in there somewhere.

"It's not surprising then that people who have got things going on in their lives escape in to this world where they feel alive."

He said it is also common for people who meet online to share very personal aspects of their lives with each other – despite often never having met.

"Ironically, people perceive it to be very safe – it's not face to face, it's non-threatening, even if you are fighting someone.

"The internet is what we psychologists call a 'disinhibiting medium'; people open up about themselves far more quickly online than off.

"People feel very anonymous online, but as soon as someone puts up a profile it's there for everyone to see.

"In a way, you almost forget in this online world that there are people watching. Some people just feel very safe in that environment."

Prof Griffiths added: "The internet does not discriminate between good and bad.

"The medium is there for everyone, regardless, but you can't demonise the internet for that. I think the positives far outweigh the disadvantages."



WEB STUDY:

Mark Griffiths