

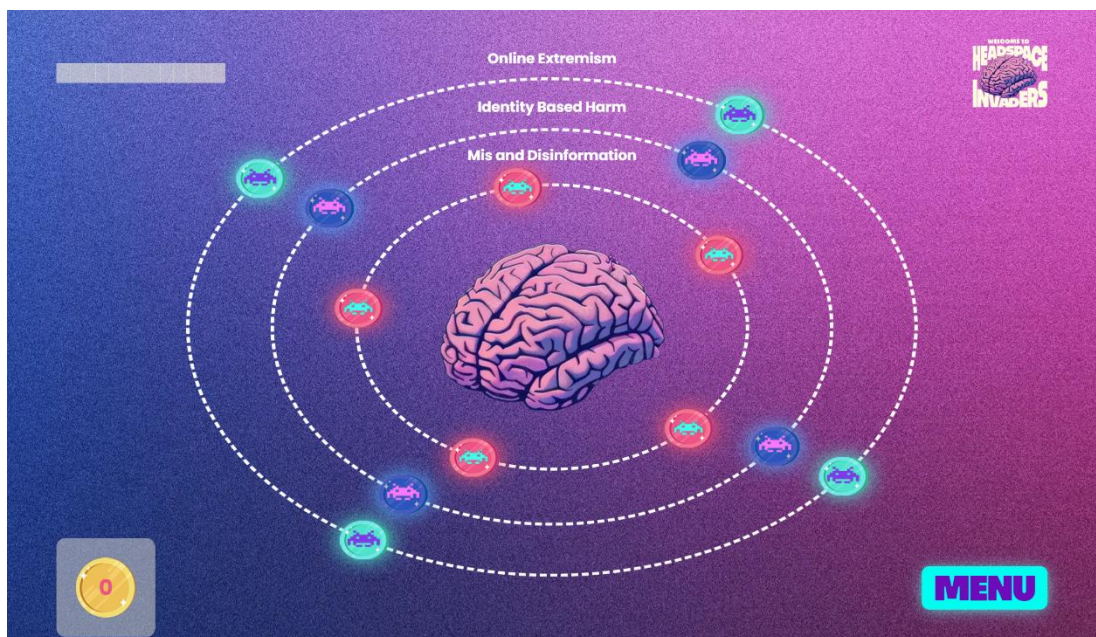
Game On! Headspace Invaders turns retro arcade style into platform against online harm

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Headspace Invaders is a new interactive platform that helps 12–16-year-olds build online resilience, critical thinking, and the confidence to respond early when they see something that feels wrong or manipulative online. The platform has been launched today in Wellington, at an event opened by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Brooke van Velden.

Designed by Netsafe, with input from young people, educators, Youthline, and subject matter experts, the free platform features three fast-paced, gamified modules that echo the look and feel of 80s arcade game, Space Invaders. Each section includes games, videos, and realistic examples designed to support young people to notice emotional manipulation and polarising content; reflect critically before reacting or engaging; respond safely and support others when harm begins to appear and recognise that early action can help prevent escalation. Additional resources enable teachers to use the platform in the classroom, and parents to have conversations at home.



The Headspace Invaders platform that gamifies learning around potentially harmful content online.

Chief Customer Officer for Netsafe, Leanne Ross, said young people are exposed to emotionally charged, polarising, or pressuring content online. Examples include viral misinformation and emotionally charged posts, identity-based slurs, memes, or humour that normalise exclusion, polarising narratives or secretive groups promoting “us versus them” thinking and signs of extremist influence, especially in social feeds led by algorithms, chat and gaming spaces.

“Many say they want help understanding what they’re seeing and how to respond safely. Headspace Invaders fills a gap between basic digital safety and more advanced intervention tools. It focuses on

the moments where confusion, pressure, or manipulation starts to take hold, well before someone might become involved in serious harm,” said Ross.

This is one of the first youth-facing tools in New Zealand to explore online extremism, identity-based harm, and misinformation from a youth-led educational prevention lens. “It reflects growing concern from schools, whānau, and frontline services about online content that isolates, manipulates, or gradually shifts young people’s beliefs and behaviours. The platform is accompanied by teacher and parent guides, and grounded in prevention, not fear,” said Ross.

Headspace Invaders was co-designed with 13 to 15-year-olds, including a dedicated Youth Co-Design Team and support from Netsafe’s Youth Action Squad. Youthline contributed sector research and developed the platform’s written content, ensuring that every section is evidence-informed, inclusive, and grounded in youth wellbeing. The process was guided by an academic steering group and informed by subject matter experts from across the prevention and countering violent extremism (PCVE) sector.

Distinguished Professor Emeritus Paul Spoonley (MA MSc PhD ONZM FRSNZ), Honorary Research Associate at Te Kura Pukenga Tangata / College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University was one of the steering group members.

“All the evidence indicates that early interventions are the most effective – and none more so than when it comes to online safety and appropriate behaviour – and that co-design with young New Zealanders is critical if these interventions and guidelines are going to work,” said Spoonley.

Dr Philippa Smith, an expert in digital media literacy and online harms, provided research-based advice during the development of Headspace Invaders and was also on the steering group.

“The more we can strengthen young people’s media literacy skills, so they can critically assess what is credible versus what is false, manipulative or harmful, the more we equip them to participate safely and confidently in digital life. This resource empowers young people to navigate a minefield of negative online behaviours,” said Dr Smith.

The platform is made up of three self-guided interactive modules:

1. Misinformation and Disinformation: how false or manipulated content spreads and why people fall for it
2. Harmful Online Behaviour: how online comments, jokes or patterns can become isolating, harmful, or prejudice-based
3. Online Extremism: how extremist thinking often begins subtly, and how to recognise early warning signs

Explore, a national provider of Mental Health and Wellbeing Services and part of New Zealand Health Group, partnered with Netsafe for the launch as part of their collaborative work under the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) Fund. Alongside the Headspace Invaders platform, they launched educator and front-line training on recognising and responding to online extremism at today’s event. This is the second year Netsafe and Explore have worked together.

Explore’s NZ Health Group Director of Disability, Amanda Bleckmann, said the organisation is proud to launch PCVE Positive Online Interventions at the event today. This is a suite of eLearning modules designed to reduce the risk of radicalisation by equipping frontline professionals with the tools to

engage early, safely, and effectively. “This initiative is the result of a powerful and enduring collaboration across government agencies. We have worked closely with international experts, including the Violence Prevention Network, and with our workforce development partner MySkill. Most importantly, we’ve drawn on the wisdom of cultural and community leaders, because context and connection are key to making this work effective and safe,” she said.

Headspace Invaders is now ready for use in classrooms and communities. We invite you to share it with educators and youth networks.

The platform can be found at <https://netsafe.org.nz/headspace-invaders>

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Background information

As New Zealand’s independent online safety organisation, Netsafe works at the intersection of digital safety, youth development, and education. Netsafe was well positioned to lead this work, with trusted relationships across schools, youth networks, and government, and a proven track record supporting rangatahi and whānau through online harm prevention and response.

Headspace Invaders was funded through the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) Fund, administered by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) with input from agencies including NZSIS, DIA, and New Zealand Police.

The fund supported practical, community-based initiatives to prevent radicalisation and build resilience to violent extremism. Headspace Invaders was selected for its early intervention focus and co-design with young people.

The academic steering group included:

- **Distinguished Professor Emeritus Sir Paul Spoonley ONZM**, Massey University
- **Associate Professor Helen Sissons**, Auckland University of Technology
- **Dr Philippa Smith**, Honorary Research Fel at the University of Auckland

Subject Matter Experts from the PCVE Sector

Contributed insights into early prevention, digital influence, and online radicalisation. These experts represented a broad range of practice-based and policy perspectives across the PCVE field.

Notes to the editor:

The State of Online Extremism in New Zealand

Government agencies continue to monitor the risks posed by violent extremism online. While the threat landscape in Aotearoa is different from other countries, local and global agencies consistently emphasise the importance of early prevention, especially in the digital spaces where young people spend time.

New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS)

In its most recent public threat assessments, NZSIS states that a terrorist attack in New Zealand remains a realistic possibility (NZSIS Threat Environment Report, 2024). They have observed an increase in individuals, including young people, engaging with violent extremist content online. This engagement often begins with emotionally charged posts, identity-based grievances, or messages of exclusion, rather than explicit threats.

NZSIS emphasises that radicalisation is rarely linear. Individuals may disengage when life circumstances shift, such as gaining employment or new social connections. Their *Know the Signs* guide was created to help identify early indicators that someone may be heading toward a harmful worldview, such as increased secrecy, intense loyalty language, or withdrawal from previously important relationships.

Department of Internal Affairs (DIA)

The DIA's 2023 Digital Violent Extremism Transparency Report recorded a 25 percent increase in referrals for online content that may contain violent extremist messaging. Around one third of these referrals related to content deemed objectionable under New Zealand law. In 2025, the DIA launched a new database of violent extremist digital material to support faster review processes and reduce harm to analysts. Their focus is on limiting the reach of this content and ensuring early detection of digital materials that may pose a risk to individuals or communities.

New Zealand Police

The Police report a growing number of concerns raised in school contexts related to hate or extremist ideologies. These reports often involve young people engaging with harmful narratives online that focus on grievance, identity, or perceived injustice. While many of these situations do not meet the threshold for legal intervention, they are treated seriously as potential early signs of vulnerability or risk. Police work closely with schools, Netsafe, and other partners to provide early support rather than relying only on criminal pathways.