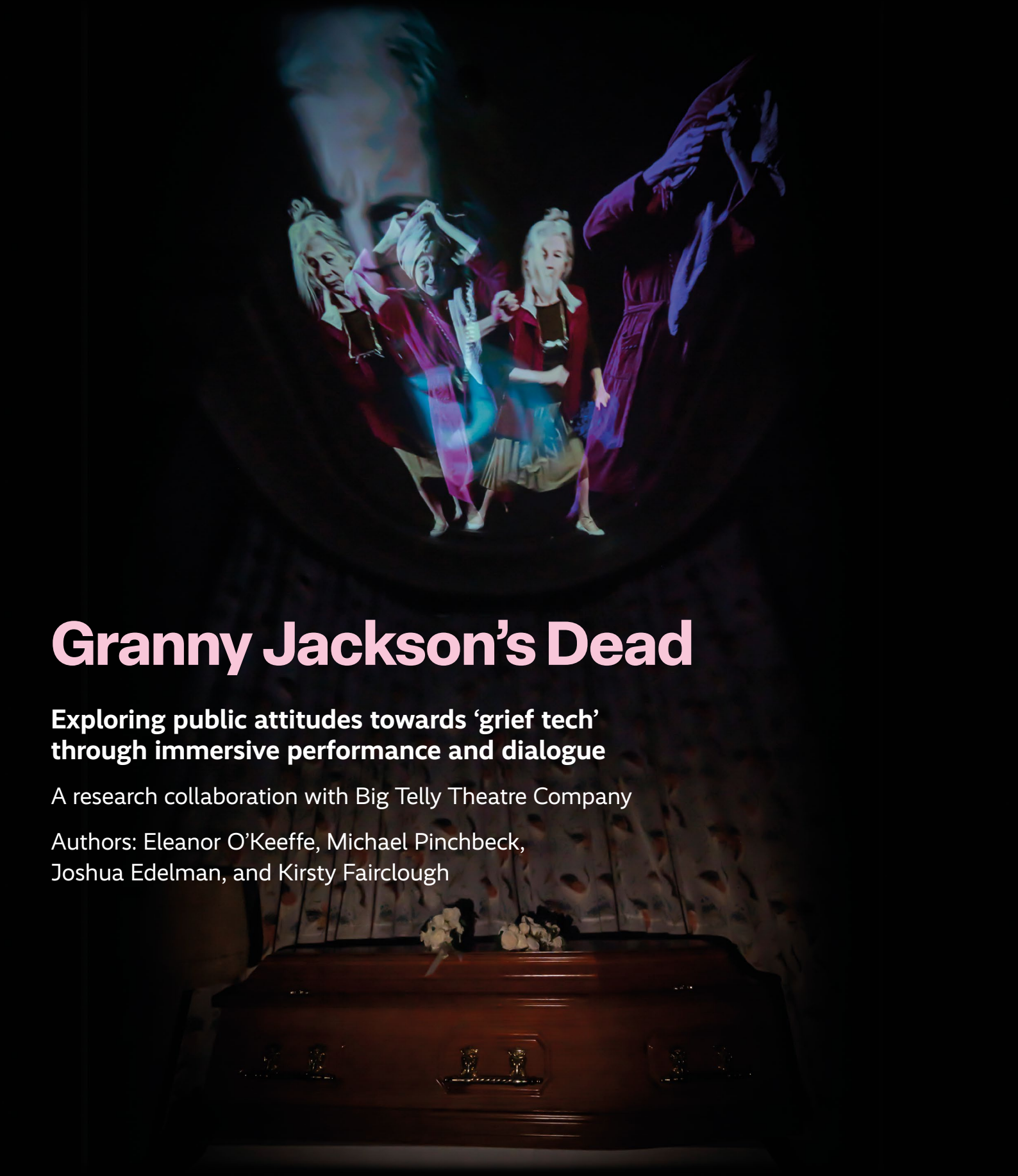
Manchester Metropolitan University



Granny Jackson's Dead

Exploring public attitudes towards 'grief tech' through immersive performance and dialogue

A research collaboration with Big Telly Theatre Company

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Executive summary

Granny Jackson's Dead is a pioneering interdisciplinary project that demonstrates how immersive theatre can function as a rigorous, ethical, and impactful method for public deliberation on emerging technologies. Developed by Big Telly Theatre Company in collaboration with researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University and qualitative researcher Eleanor O'Keeffe, the project combines immersive performance, creative technologies, and social research to explore public attitudes towards 'grief tech' – digital tools that mediate memory, mourning, and memorialisation.

At a moment when AI-enabled grief technologies are rapidly proliferating, yet remain under-regulated and poorly understood in public and policy discourse, *Granny Jackson's Dead* offers a timely and necessary intervention. Rather than approaching grief tech through abstract debate or attitudinal surveys, the project situates audiences within a familiar yet emotionally charged social ritual – the wake – allowing them to think, feel, and deliberate collectively about the ethical, cultural, and social implications of these technologies.

Central to the project is the methodological innovation of embedded dramaturgy, in which researchers were integrated into the creative process from development through performance. This approach enabled immersive theatre to operate not simply as a vehicle for representation, but as a live research instrument capable of generating rich, situated evidence about public values, concerns, and expectations. The integration of AI, VR, motion capture, and audience interaction – developed with the School of Digital Arts (SODA) – further extended the project's capacity to probe how digital technologies reshape experiences of presence, loss, and care.

Across a national and international tour, including the UK, Ireland, and the United States, the production engaged broad audiences and generated substantial qualitative data through observation, post-show dialogue, and survey responses. Findings reveal widespread ambivalence towards grief tech: while some participants recognised potential therapeutic benefits, particularly in maintaining bonds with the deceased, many expressed deep concern about commercialisation, loss of communal ritual, ethical oversight, and the erosion of collective care practices. Notably, audiences consistently framed grief tech as a social and communal issue, rather than a purely personal or consumer choice.

Beyond its research findings, *Granny Jackson's Dead* demonstrates the cultural value of arts-led dialogue as a means of fostering informed public conversation on complex and sensitive issues. The project encourages us to see the productive synergies between the audiences in immersive theatre and the temporary 'mini-publics' of deliberative events, in which participants engage thoughtfully, emotionally, and ethically with technological change – in this case, often continuing conversations long after the performance ends. As such, it provides a compelling model for how the arts can contribute meaningfully to policy development, ethical technology governance, and public understanding.

How to read this report

This report speaks to many interests. We hope you find it interesting as a whole, but here are some suggestions for which sections to focus on, depending on your background and specialisms.

For decision makers in health, cultural policy and other fields

This report is one of the first interventions to explore what people in the UK think about an area of technology (grief tech) that is fast proliferating and becoming pertinent to public health. It shows clearly that publics want more of a say in the development of technological changes, and demonstrates where and how immersive theatre offers a valuable channel for public engagement to support informed decision making, so technologies become aligned better with publics' needs and values. Key sections for you may include:

- Executive summary
- Why grief tech matters
- Arts-led dialogue as method for the times
- Findings: Deliberating grief tech
- Conclusions and Future directions

For developers or designers of grief tech

This report demonstrates some expectations, hopes and concerns that people have in relation to grief tech; particularly, how they understand the consequences of commercialised, profit-driven logics embedded in many of these tools. Using immersive theatre as a method, it demonstrates the effects of grief tech within a grieving community, not just for isolated individuals. To learn more about how participants made sense of the therapeutic value of grief tech in relation to wider societal needs, please read:

- Executive summary
- Findings: Deliberating grief tech
- What immersive arts-led dialogue enables
- Conclusions and Future directions

For creative and theatre practitioners or people interested in the role of the arts in public life

This report offers a case study of an innovative partnership between Big Telly Theatre Company and an academic research team. It shows how we used this partnership to produce evidence and engagement of interest to policymakers and civic authorities. It does not offer a blueprint for this to happen, but we explore a particular model of it which we call 'embedded dramaturgy'. It strongly advocates for the arts-led research and arts-led dialogue that centres knowledge of the arts, in cohering and surfacing debates relating to complex social issues. If you are interested in what this report says about how to do this, and what we found, please read:

- Executive summary
- Project design and development
- Methodological insights
- What immersive arts-led dialogue enables
- Conclusions and Future directions

For people working in relation to death care and death care practice

This report shows where and how the public's values may not align with the use of some technological tools in grieving, and what remains important to people when they consider these tools, especially AI-enabled ones. Particularly, the report highlights how important communal ritual spaces remain for people, and how much they value the solidarity and collective compassion that arises in them. If you are currently thinking about how to manage technological or digital interventions within your practice, you may want to read:

- Executive summary
- Why grief tech matters
- Findings: Deliberating grief tech
- Conclusions and Future directions

For people who are interested in how technology is changing their lives

This report documents how people are responding to technological transformation in one important aspect of their lives, both as individuals and as families and communities – memorialisation and grieving. Based in Belfast, this project does not claim to capture all diversities of views and experiences in relation to technology, but if you have seen or used AI-enabled tools yourself you may find it interesting to explore how others, who may be like or unlike you, are thinking about the ethical, social and communal challenges of the widespread use of these tools. These stories are conveyed most clearly in the following sections:

- Executive summary
- Why grief tech matters
- Findings: Deliberating grief tech
- What immersive arts-led dialgoge enables
- Conclusions and Future directions

Terminology

This report draws together the thoughts, observations, evidence and conclusions from people who work in creative practice and researchers from different disciplines. During the project, we have often found that language or terms has meant very different things to each of us, and many of our conversations have revolved around the different ways we interpret concepts like 'dialogue' and 'participatory'.

For simplicity, while we do reflect on some concepts in more depth (e.g., 'deliberation' and 'embedded dramaturgy'), we are adopting the following terms and their meanings in the report.

Audience/audience member – when we think about how people responded to the conditions of immersive theatre, we talk about people as an audience (collective) or an 'audience member'.

Participant/participants – when we think about how people responded in the after show environment, within our dialogue spaces, where we talked to people about the research and engaged them as researchers, we talk about people as 'participants' in our research, acknowledging that, at that moment, they were making an active choice to participate in the research process.

Respondents – when we discuss evidence from the survey, we refer to people as 'respondents', acknowledging that they responded within a structured process, and that their reflections are recorded only in so far as the survey questions allowed.

I. Why grief tech matters

Grief tech: a societal issue

Digital technologies are increasingly shaping how people grieve, remember, and maintain relationships with the dead. In recent years, a growing range of consumer-facing tools – often described as 'grief tech' or 'death tech' – have emerged to support mourning and memorialisation (Walter et al, 2011). These include online memorial platforms, QR-linked grave markers, social media legacy tools, and, more recently, AI-enabled applications that generate posthumous messages, voices, or avatars of deceased individuals, which are now increasingly entering the market as consumer products. Some estimates put the size of the grief tech market at over $120 billion (Liu 2025).

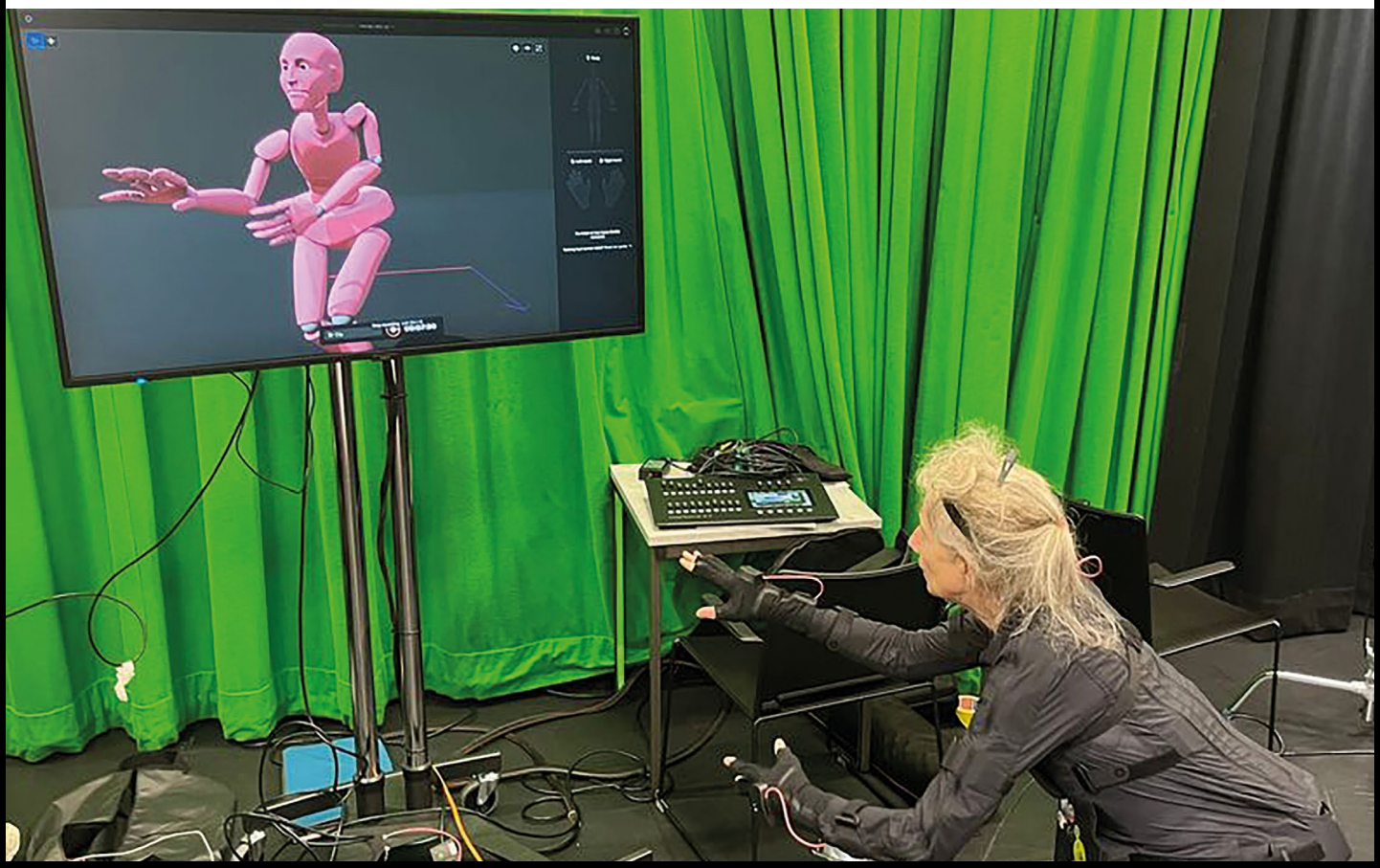
What distinguishes recent grief tech from earlier forms of digital memorialisation is not simply its scale or accessibility, but its generative capacity. Rather than preserving existing traces of a person's life, some AI-enabled tools actively produce new content that appears to originate from the deceased. Using personal data such as messages, images, or voice recordings, these systems simulate ongoing communication, offering bereaved users the experience of a continued relationship rather than a finite memory. In doing so, they raise profound questions about authenticity, consent, and the boundaries between remembrance, replication and consumerism (Elder 2020; Stokes 2021; Kneese 2023).

These technologies are developing rapidly, often outpacing public understanding, social norms, ethical oversight, and regulatory frameworks (Recuber 2023) and creating new belief systems (Hurtado 2023).

While grief is widely recognised as a public health issue – particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic – it is also commonly treated as a deeply personal and private matter; a question of culture or conscience in our pluralistic society. This duality creates a governance gap, one that can be seen with respect to many other technologies, such as AI.

On the one hand, bereavement support is understood to have collective consequences for wellbeing, mental health, and social cohesion. On the other, decisions about how to grieve are often seen as individual choices, beyond the appropriate reach of policy intervention.

Grief tech places us uneasily within this tension. Its design and marketing typically address individual users and their emotional needs, positioning comfort, continuity, and personalisation as primary values. Yet grief is rarely experienced in isolation. It unfolds within families, communities, faith traditions, and cultural rituals that shape how loss is shared, interpreted, and endured. When technologies intervene in these spaces, they do not merely affect individual coping strategies; they also interact with and potentially reshape communal practices of care, solidarity, and remembrance.



This is particularly significant because grief tech, with its focus on the individual consumer, is often designed to bypass traditional intermediaries that have historically supported people through mourning, such as counsellors, clergy, community elders, or extended family networks. In some cases, the technology itself assumes an intermediary role, mediating relationships with the dead while operating within commercial logics that prioritise engagement, retention, and monetisation. This raises questions about accountability, power, and vulnerability, especially at moments when individuals may be least equipped to critically assess the long-term implications of technological interventions.

Public debate on grief tech remains limited in comparison to other domains of AI use, such as healthcare, education, or employment. Existing studies have illuminated the personal and aggregated social significances of these interactions using sociological or psychological analysis of media discourse, market trends, surveys or interviews (Recuber 2023, Hurtado 2023, Muldoon 2026). These interventions have provided greater understanding of how individuals within society are interacting with these tools, but they struggle to account for the socially situated and relational nature of grief. They tell us relatively little of these tools catalyse action, and of what kind, within families, kinship networks or communal rituals.

Grief tech presents a particularly acute ethical test case in regard to these technologies. It exposes tensions between personal comfort and collective responsibility, innovation and restraint, remembrance and forgetting. It raises questions not only about what technologies can do, but about what societies want them to do – who should benefit, under what conditions, and with what safeguards. These are not questions that can be answered through technical design alone, nor through abstract ethical principles detached from lived experience; or from knowledge of their individuated or personal significances.

Taken together, the rapid expansion of grief technologies, the vulnerability of bereaved publics, and the lack of socially grounded evidence about public values point to a clear need for new ways of understanding how people make sense of these tools in context. This project responds to that need by treating grief tech not solely as a private consumer product, but as a shared social concern – one that demands collective reflection, dialogue, and care.

The rationale for deliberation

Grief is rarely experienced or expressed in isolation. It unfolds and becomes mediated within shared rituals, family dynamics, cultural norms, and moments of collective care. Decisions about how to remember the dead, what is appropriate to preserve or let go, and how technology should – or should not – intervene are often shaped through interaction with others. These judgements emerge socially, through conversation, observation, discomfort, humour, and disagreement, rather than through abstract reasoning.

Research methods that privilege individual rational reflection can therefore miss important dimensions of how people make sense of grief technologies. They are poorly equipped to capture ambivalence, contradiction, or moral ambiguities – particularly in emotionally charged contexts where people may feel uncertain, conflicted, or unwilling to articulate definitive positions. In the case of grief tech, this is compounded by ethical sensitivities: grieving individuals and families are often vulnerable, unpredictable in their needs, and understandably cautious about participating in formal research settings.

At the same time, conventional deliberative methods, which ostensibly promise a collective apparatus for reflection on complex social issues, can struggle to accommodate the emotional and affective dimensions of grief. Many deliberative formats prioritise reasoned argument, evidence presentation, and consensus-seeking, which may inadvertently marginalise forms of knowledge grounded in embodiment, memory, ritual, and care. This creates a methodological gap: grief tech raises social and ethical questions that demand collective reflection, yet existing methods offer limited ways of supporting people to explore those questions safely and meaningfully.

This project proceeds from the premise that new forms of public engagement are required – approaches that allow people to encounter grief technologies not as abstract propositions, but as lived, relational possibilities situated within familiar social settings. Such approaches must enable participants to think and feel through ethical questions together, recognising that uncertainty, disagreement, and emotional response are not obstacles to understanding, but central components of it.

Deliberation, understood in this broader sense, offers a way of supporting informed public reflection without requiring premature resolution or consensus. Rather than seeking to extract fixed opinions, deliberative approaches can surface values, tensions, and trade-offs as they are experienced in context. For grief tech in particular, this means creating spaces where people can explore how personal comfort, family dynamics, cultural tradition, and social responsibility intersect – and where the implications of technological intervention can be examined collectively rather than privately.

The challenge, then, is not simply to ask the public what they think about grief tech, but to create conditions in which people can meaningfully deliberate its role in their lives and the impact on their communities. Addressing this challenge requires methods that are ethically sensitive, socially grounded, and capable of engaging with grief as a shared human experience. It is in response to this evidence gap that the project developed an arts-led, immersive approach to deliberation, described in the following sections.

Grief is rarely experienced or expressed in isolation. It unfolds and becomes mediated within shared rituals, family dynamics, cultural norms, and moments of collective care.

II. Arts-led dialogue as method for the times

How it has been used

The term arts-led dialogue is used across a range of contexts, and it carries different meanings depending on disciplinary, institutional, and practice-based traditions. It is therefore important to be clear about how the term is used in this project, and how that usage relates to existing bodies of work.

Within arts practice and cultural policy, arts-led dialogue is often used to describe creative initiatives that open public conversation around complex or sensitive social issues. In this sense, the arts function as a catalyst: performances, installations, or participatory artworks create spaces in which people encounter new perspectives, reflect on shared concerns, or feel licensed to talk about topics that might otherwise remain difficult or marginal. The primary aim in these contexts is typically cultural or civic – raising awareness, fostering empathy, or encouraging public conversation – rather than generating formal research evidence.

Within participatory and community-engaged arts traditions, the term can also refer to collaborative processes in which communities are actively involved in shaping artistic work, with dialogue understood as an ongoing, relational practice. Here, emphasis is often placed on co-creation, reciprocity, and the redistribution of voice and authority, with dialogue valued as a social good. This can and does generate new knowledge and understanding about a topic for artists, researchers and publics alike (Hammet et al 2020).

In deliberative and policy-oriented contexts, by contrast, *public dialogue* has more specific methodological meaning. Public dialogues are structured participatory processes designed to support informed reflection on contested issues, often with the explicit aim of producing evidence that can inform decision-making (Sciencewise 2013). These approaches are guided by established norms and standards concerning inclusion, facilitation, learning, and transparency, and they are typically evaluated in relation to their capacity to surface public values, trade-offs, and areas of agreement or disagreement.

In recent times, and particularly in the context of increasing recognition of the value of creative methods in deliberative work (Craig 2023), the role of the arts in deliberative practice has been more considered. For some, arts-led dialogue is where an artistic component can generate more powerful moral reflection on a difficult topic (Edwards et al 2016). Others take a more expansive view of how theatre-led practice informs deliberative processes, such as accommodating differences in values and outlooks (Heinemeyer et al 2022). Such developments have encouraged both deliberative and creative communities to think more deeply about the synergies between artistic and creative practice, such as their parallel and shared aim to foster civic competencies (Drama School Mumbai 2023).

The approach adopted in this project draws selectively on all these traditions but does not fully align with any single one. When we use the term arts-led dialogue, we refer to a form of public engagement in which artistic practice leads the design, framing, and experiential conditions of collective reflection, while remaining intentionally oriented toward the generation of evidence. In this model, the artwork is not simply a prompt for discussion, nor a vehicle for communicating pre-existing research. Instead, it operates as a deliberative environment – a shared situation in which participants encounter ethical questions through embodied, emotional, and relational experience.

Crucially, this understanding of arts-led dialogue does not place a hierarchy on artistic and deliberative elements. Rather than staging a performance and then inviting audiences to discuss it, the project has aimed to integrate dialogic and deliberative possibilities within the

performance itself. Dialogue emerges through interaction, observation, discomfort, humour, and care, and continues in more explicit conversational forms after the shared experience has taken place. This is paradigmatic for immersive performance.

This definition recognises that arts-led dialogue may not produce the same kinds of outputs as formal deliberative exercises, such as consensus statements or policy recommendations. Instead, its value lies in its capacity to surface how people make sense of complex issues together, particularly in contexts – such as grief – where emotion, uncertainty, and moral ambiguity are central. In this sense, arts-led dialogue complements rather than replaces existing deliberative methods, extending the range of approaches available for understanding public values in socially and ethically charged domains.

Immersive theatre and embedded dramaturgy

> *"We'd decided that we were going to make a theatre piece but did not know where. We started batting ideas around with the researchers. When the idea of doing it in a house emerged, you could feel the energy in the room. We began a search for an academic partner and were really delighted when Manchester Metropolitan University came on board.'*
> – **Zoe Seaton (Big Telly)**

Arts-led dialogue, deliberative research, and practice research are all relatively well-known forms of research, even if aspects of their methods are still debated. The innovation of this project was to put them together in a new and productive way. Our approach, which we call 'embedded arts-led dialogue', provided the apparatus to conceptualise and actualise the performance space as a deliberative one, gathering people to consider urgent and intellectually fraught topics (here, the relationship between memory, memorialisation, and technology). This innovative method of artistic research is a major output of this project.

Firstly, we focused our methods of arts-based dialogue not just on theatre in general, but on a specific form of theatre known as 'immersive.' Immersive theatre is a performance form where the audience members are not observing a performance from which they are separated (physically, narratively, or most likely both), but are 'inside' of it, often on their feet and (at least somewhat) free

to move around and pay attention to what they want, often (but not always) being assigned a role to play within the fictional world of the play. Adam Alston, one of the leading scholars of this genre, calls these pieces 'experience machines,' which he describes as

> ... enclosed and otherworldly spaces in which all the various cogs and pulleys of performance – scenography, choreography, dramaturgy, and so on – coalesce around a central aim: to place audience members in a thematically cohesive environment that resources their sensuous, imaginative and explorative capabilities as productive and involving aspects of a theatre aesthetic. (Alston 2016, 2)

Big Telly, as a company, has a history of doing this kind of work, but rather than the overwhelming sensory explosion of companies such as Punchdrunk or De La Guarda, their work tends to start with a much more known environment (visiting a department store or cafe, for example) which then develops and changes in unexpected and fascinating ways. The company calls this 'hijacking the familiar' (Seaton 2023).

We realised that immersive theatre is an especially conducive medium for deliberative research. Because the aesthetic of immersive theatre centres on the actions, choices and experiences of the spectator, it is well suited to the sort of intellectual and emotional familiarisation that separates deliberative research from simple public surveys. Therefore, in *Granny Jackson's Dead*, we developed the performance as a deliberative space in which audience members could be safely enabled to think through the questions of the use of technology in grief, with all the emotional and intellectual information they needed.

Second, that work of shaping the performance to a particular end is a mainstay of practice research, and is generally called 'dramaturgy.' Dramaturgy can be thought of as the shaping of drama in the same way that metallurgy is the shaping of metal. It is particularly useful as a term for understanding devised work and how it is made. We adapted and expanded an innovative methodological approach called 'embedded dramaturgy,' which was developed as an intellectual and structural frame for practice-research (Pinchbeck 2020), in order to incorporate the range of expertise needed to study the consequences of technological transformation (digital culture, memory and ritual studies, qualitative methods) within Big Telly's dramaturgical processes.

What makes dramaturgy embedded, and creates a research method out of it, is that the audience experience is the aesthetic form, not just the outcome, of immersive theatre. Therefore, during the development process, the researchers put themselves in the position of audience members and shaped the performance around the experience they had there. Through this disciplinary exchange, we tested how immersive performance and elicitation techniques can co-exist or interrelate as ways of supporting informed public dialogue, and how what happens in these spaces can be made more visible as evidence. The resulting creative framework, the project's

major output, refined previous understandings of arts-led dialogue into a much more performative, immersive, and potent form.

The team drew on Adrian Curtin's notion that, in the case of *Granny Jackson's Dead*, 'death and dying are represented… using dramaturgy and aesthetics that challenge audiences' conceptions, sensibilities, and sense-making faculties' (Curtin 2019). This approach focuses on the tension between pre-existing ways that audience members have of making sense of the world and challenging the shapes, forms, and meanings of those conceptions in order to examine how they could be different and genuinely new. This report allows the research team to reflect on the outcomes of the performance in relation to themes of grief, commemoration and mourning. The project asks how immersive theatre might be an appropriate vehicle for audiences to consider their own applications of, or reservations about, grief tech, especially in the moment of dramaturgical tension between 'the one seeing and what is seen' (Bleeke 2008, 2). Ultimately, it proposes in its design how embedded dramaturgy allows us both to witness the process of creation and the response audiences might have to it. This is supported by the positive reviews evidenced in the appendix. As Karen Fricker argues:

> I believe strongly in the potential of embedded criticism in a number of areas: it helps critics and audiences better understand and appreciate the work that goes into making theatre. It promotes an understanding of theatre not as a fixed product but as fluid and ongoing creativity, and it nuances and renders less hierarchical the critic-artist relationship. (Fricker 2016, 45)

Our method of bringing embedded dramaturgy to bear on immersive theatre and the dialogue it engenders was our attempt to actualise the potential that Fricker identifies. This method of immersive arts-led dialogue showed promise as a valuable tool that can be used in many different contexts where informed, sensitive public dialogue is necessary.

III. Project design and development

Project background and partnerships

Granny Jackson's Dead was developed through an interdisciplinary collaboration between Big Telly Theatre Company and researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University, with creative technology support from the School of Digital Arts (SODA). The project was conceived from the outset as a shared inquiry rather than a linear process in which research was translated into performance or evaluated retrospectively.

Big Telly Theatre Company led the creative vision and production of the immersive performance. With a longstanding practice of site-specific and audience-centred theatre, the company brought expertise in creating intimate, socially grounded experiences that place audiences inside familiar yet emotionally charged environments. This artistic approach was central to the project's ambition to situate grief tech within everyday social rituals rather than abstract or speculative futures.

Researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University contributed expertise in performance studies, dramaturgy, digital culture, memory, and ritual, working closely with the company throughout development, rehearsal, and performance. Their role was not observational but collaborative: shaping research questions alongside creative decisions, contributing ethical and conceptual provocations, and participating in the ongoing refinement of the work as it toured.

Dr Eleanor O'Keeffe contributed expertise in digital ritual and memorialisation as well as deliberative research and public engagement on contested social and technological issues. This perspective informed how the project understood dialogue, evidence, and public reasoning, and supported the development of approaches that could surface public values without imposing consensus or extractive research practices.

SODA supported the integration of creative technologies – including AI-driven avatars, virtual reality, and motion capture – into the performance. Their involvement ensured that digital elements were not treated as spectacle alone, but as integral components of the dramaturgical and ethical inquiry, mirroring real-world debates around digital legacy, consent, and posthumous data use.

This partnership structure enabled artistic, technical, and research perspectives to be held in productive tension throughout the project. Rather than separating creative production from analysis, the collaboration allowed questions about grief, technology, and care to be explored through shared experimentation.

Co-inquiry, co-making and co-witnessing

The design of *Granny Jackson's Dead* was structured as an iterative collaboration between Big Telly and researchers drawing together creative technology, dramaturgy, and deliberative social research. The project evolved through an intentionally open framework that prioritised mutual inquiry over linear production, enabling artistic and academic methodologies to unfold together rather than in sequence.

This model was built around three overlapping phases – co-inquiry, co-making, and co-witnessing – ensuring that research questions informed artistic creation and that performance practice, in turn, generated new insights into public attitudes toward grief-tech. The design positioned immersive theatre not as a vehicle for representing research findings, but as an active method of research, a site where publics could think and feel through emerging questions of technology, memory, and ethics. The project was intentionally designed so that the research inquiry and the creative process developed concurrently, rather than following the conventional model of 'making first, analysing later'. From the outset, theatre-making and research were treated as mutually generative activities, allowing us to explore not only how grief-tech could be represented 'on stage', but how immersive performance might operate as a live method for public thinking and feeling about technology, memory, and loss. To achieve this, the project followed a three-phase iterative structure:

Co-inquiry – establishing a shared conceptual ground through fortnightly online research labs, where researchers and artists exchanged provocations from digital afterlife ethics, ritual studies, AI cultures, memory, and mourning practices. Rather than produce static research findings to feed into the work, these discussions actively shaped the dramaturgical architecture and tensions built into the performance (e.g. comfort vs disruption, legacy vs forgetting, spectacle vs care).

Co-making – during rehearsals in Belfast, the team worked within a model of 'embedded dramaturgy' (Pinchbeck 2020), in which researchers were not observers but collaborators, contributing question-led scenario triggers and ethical provocations during the devising process. This ensured that the performance was not illustrative, but genuinely thinking in real time with the research questions. It is important to note that Big Telly takes a research-led approach and, as a result, there was an intellectual kinship between artistic process and research process within the project.

Co-witnessing – once the production opened, researchers adopted the position of 'embodied dramaturgs', present among the audience and capturing affective temperature, conversational drift, behavioural responses and ethical hesitation as live data. Learnings from early performances informed subtle iterative adjustments, maintaining the work as a living research ecology rather than a fixed theatrical text.

This design moved beyond conventional 'evaluation after performance' models, positioning *Granny Jackson's Dead* as a dynamic research instrument – one able to generate situated knowledge through sensory, affective, and relational experience. In doing so, the project advanced research into arts-led dialogue, demonstrating how immersive theatre can serve not only as cultural representation, but as methodological infrastructure for exploring socially and ethically charged technological futures.

Characters, perspectives and ethical tensions

Any grief tech tool – although designed for and marketed to individual users – takes on new and multiple significance in a specific social environment. In the wild, digital objects create new and networked 'entanglements' (Pitsillades 2017); they may perform multiple, enmeshed intermediary roles between individual people and their personal grief, as well as become placed within relationships with non-users, and other material objects of the internet of things.

This project had a unique research and design challenge to make grief tech visible as an embedded social-technical reality, experienced by families and communities as well as individuals; and invite audiences to move away from binary judgements of appropriateness (i.e., is grief tech good or bad?), towards somatic understanding of how differing perspectives, moral agencies, politics, and emotions might compete around, interrelate and even become coordinated through grief tech in perhaps chaotic and unpredictable ways.

The key social structure of grief that allowed *Granny Jackson's Dead* to do this work was the wake: an Irish tradition where the family gathers in the home to watch over the body of the deceased and celebrate their life. While religiously grounded, wakes are major family and community gatherings, often with drink, food, song, and dance. Wakes are also such a regular part of (Catholic) Irish culture and an established and culturally visible method of mourning that we were able to assume the audience's familiarity with them to a greater or lesser degree.

Scenarios were designed by Big Telly working with the three commissioned writers on the project: Bernie McGill, R. B. Kelly and Owen Booth. These included structures in which characters could improvise during the immersive performance. At several points, the researchers involved in the project were invited to provide input into this scenario planning. Much of the discussion focused on what arguments, moral positions or dilemmas were considered most useful to look at or explore in this context. A meeting in December 2023 decided 32 potential scenarios including the following:

- Ronnie burns sage/artefacts/memories (does it set off the fire alarm?) Do we burn a USB stick, or granny's memories?
- Last rites for Granny's laptop
- Joe changes locks and keeps everyone there until they give him the deeds
- Ceilidh – patterns

- Session – songs/music – finding Granny's favourite music on an old tape deck, but then finding her voice (audio diary) on there as well mixed in with the music.
- A missing cat. Calling it by mimicking Granny's voice/ using one of Darren's audio clips.
- Phone goes off in the coffin
- A mourner realises they're at the wrong funeral

In the end only 3-4 of these scenarios were taken forward by the writers for their character development. Threaded through these scenarios was the idea that different characters had different perspectives on the event of Granny Jackson's passing. For example, Ronnie, a pagan, was keen to let Granny's spirit move on unencumbered by her material past and was involved in a ritual in the back garden, burning sage as above. Joe Grimes, who inherited the property was keen to get the deeds and sell the house, he was a 'roaming' performer and would give an impromptu sales pitch to audience members while guiding them around to different rooms. All characters had a 'super objective', which guided both the writing process and the improvisations of the actors.

As the audience members only encountered the performers one at a time during the first part of the performance, they had to 'piece together' these objectives themselves. It was only in the final 'eulogy' section of the piece that everyone's intentions became clear until the audience were left with questions about the role of grief-tech in events. These questions were best addressed through the fictional company Unforget, a grief-tech start-up led by Darren Jackson, the grandson of the deceased and his business partner, Chad. Both characters introduce the company in different ways. Darren, clearly distraught about losing his granny, talks about it as a coping mechanism. Chad sees it more as a business opportunity. It is between these emotional and commercial poles that the audience is invited to consider grief tech.

Technical design and digital integration

> *"There's an entire industry growing around grief tech and digital memory. It starts in small ways, like receiving or sending messages from a bereaved person's social media or making a hologram of the deceased'* – **Zoe Seaton (Big Telly)**

The design of the research project enabled interdisciplinary input before, during and after the performance took place following the embedded dramaturgy model. All researchers were present during the initial Research & Development phase which then led to them informing the devising process with specific question-led scenario-building. In this way, research questions could be integrated into the process rather than retro-engineered into a reading of the work when finished. Online meetings addressed specific themes around the work and digital commemoration including discussion of readings suggested by the project team. This enabled the researchers to develop understanding of both the company's work and the cultural context in which it

operates. The researchers created a Miro board, as an online tool, to gather thoughts and reflections, which was used to inform the devising process.

The rehearsal process for *Granny Jackson's Dead* took place in Belfast, integrating SODA's creative technology and the team's creative and critical input with Big Telly 's innovative immersive theatre techniques. The rehearsal phase was crucial for refining the interplay between digital and live performance elements.

Technology Integration & Testing: The early rehearsals involved experimenting with motion capture technology and AI-driven avatars, ensuring integration between the performers and digital projections.

Character Development & Improvisation: Given the immersive nature of the performance, rehearsals involved extensive improvisation to refine character interactions and audience engagement. Actors worked closely with SODA's team to explore how digital elements could enhance or disrupt audience perceptions of memory, presence, and grief.

Site-Specific Staging & Audience Flow: Since the performance took place in a house, rehearsals included spatial testing to ensure smooth transitions between the six performance rooms. The team evaluated how digital interventions, like VR headsets and MoCap projections, would function within the constraints of a domestic environment.

Audience Interaction Simulations: To prepare for the unpredictability of immersive theatre, rehearsals included simulated audience interactions. Performers adapted their responses based on real-time cues, and the research team analysed these interactions to gauge the effectiveness of technology in eliciting emotional and intellectual engagement.

Final Technical Rehearsals: The last phase focused on synchronising lighting, soundscapes, and digital effects with live performances. SODA's technical specialists collaborated with the theatre production team to fine-tune elements like the 'tech-pocalypse' eulogy sequence, where voiceovers and projection mapping created a haunting digital afterlife for Granny Jackson.

Final shape

In the end, the performance was realised as a site-specific immersive theatre event in a residential townhouse in South Belfast. The setting – a lived domestic environment – offered an authentic architecture of grief, intimacy, and disarray, while also providing a flexible spatial matrix for the exploration of digital mourning rituals. The production unfolded over three weeks, with multiple daily performances, each witnessed by small rotating groups of audience participants.

The piece was designed in two acts. **Act One** was the opening 30 minutes where audience members were taken to six different rooms on arrival for a 5-minute scene (this was performed on rotation for up to six groups of people – 3-4 in each group). This section was designed to enable audience members to 'get to know' each character and they were given specific agency in each room to act or interact with the performers. In summary, the rooms and characters involved were as follows:

Front room: Neighbour Maureen sitting with the coffin

Kitchen: Daughter Susan's catering for funeral

Front bedroom: Grandson Darren's bedroom describing Granny with minecraft

Middle bedroom: CEO Chad's bedroom pitching UnForget with VR

Back bedroom: Unforget expo with MoCap footage and Granny in jar – taken to room by Joe/Chad

Backyard: Niece Ronnie's pagan ritual

Act Two was the closing 25-minute eulogy section that took place in the front room where all audience members were invited to hear the family speak about their loss. Audience members huddled together on eclectic furniture and listened to eulogies before joining in with singing and dancing in honour of Granny Jackson. In this section, the lights went out and a 'tech-pocalypse' took place where a distorted soundscape of Granny talking and images of Granny dancing appeared on the ceiling, as well as echoes and motifs from the show and the building's past (air raid sirens etc.). At one point in this scene Granny appears as an LED hologram which would often elicit gasps from the audience. This technological haunting was introduced by Big Telly as a theatrical device to disrupt the traditional conventions of a wake and enable the audience to question what role grief-tech played in Granny's life and death. The audience is led out into the street at its conclusion, as Granny's body has disappeared from the coffin and the family run outside to find it.

IV. Methodological insights

> *'The performance brought a kind of immersiveness that many of my audiences are unaccustomed to, so it was an introduction to a new way of experiencing theatre as well as an exploration of loss.'*
>
> **– KC Macmillan (Inis Nua CEO)**

This section of the report will address the different methods of arts-led dialogue and immersive theatre making that we used in creating *Granny Jackson's Dead*, and reflect on our experience of using them. While this project's primary findings relate to the subject of grief tech, we also gained considerable insight in the abilities, tendencies, pitfalls and patterns of the methods of embedded dramaturgy and immersive arts-based dialogue we developed, as discussed in the previous two sections. Even those with no interest in grief tech may find these methods worth considering and adapting to other uses. We present those insights here.

Creating spaces for dialogue

As discussed above, the model of immersive arts-led dialogue that this project developed and pursued emerged through collaboration between creative practitioners and researchers and was shaped by multidisciplinary expertise and sustained methodological reflection.

This section outlines how and why we understood dialogue as a relational, embodied and situational process, rather than rational verbal exchange. It also documents the main tenets that steered the development of these ideas, and how these were negotiated and resolved pragmatically through performance making and research in practice. As deliberative scholars emphasise, all deliberative work takes place and is constrained by operational dynamics (Curato et al. 2017). Here, creative pragmatism was a core dynamic in how dialogue could be imagined and enacted.

Inclusivity

One challenge that traditional methods of deliberative research face is their exclusivity. A relatively small part of the general public can take part in deliberative research, which can take time and social resources that many people cannot give, and the demographics of this group can be predictable: older, whiter, richer, more educated, more urban and suburban than rural. Deliberative practitioners have struggled, often successfully, with these participatory inequalities in research.

By conducting research via theatre, our project expanded audiences for participation in interesting ways. If nothing else, the fact that far more people were able to attend *Granny Jackson's Dead* than would typically be part of a deliberative research panel expanded the project's reach.

However, we are not blind to the degree to which theatre and the arts embed their own forms of exclusion. British theatre audiences, in general, do tend toward the richer, whiter, and more educated. Like many small theatre companies, Big Telly has worked hard building community relationships to develop its reach and relevance, and widen its inclusivity

Though their use of familiar environments, non-theatre spaces, and many outreach projects. Placing the initial performances of *Granny Jackson's Dead* within the NI Science Festival and touring it to large and small communities across Ireland and the UK expanded that audience further. Immersive arts-led dialogue can be a useful tool in addressing problems of inclusivity, though it is still wise to keep an eye on what barriers might remain.

Arts-led/information-led

For the research team, arts-led dialogue meant a commitment to honouring the director as the ultimate creative authority, and to centralising the practice-based expertise of performers in shaping both the performance and its dialogic possibilities. Arts-led dialogue, in this sense, was not only a question of leadership or governance, but a methodological stance: privileging affective, embodied, and relational forms of engagement over informational transmission or structured facilitation.

For Big Telly, audience safety and enjoyment ('craic') remained paramount. Maintaining the integrity of the immersive performance as performance was a central concern from the outset. This required careful negotiation of how information or evidence could be incorporated, so as to avoid the experience tipping into 'Theatre in Education' or an informational workshop.

Knowledge exchange within the rehearsal space became a primary mechanism for embedding evidence within the performance.

Pragmatism and creativity

All deliberative work takes place within constraints (time, budget, institutional remits) or contexts (venues, places) which often drives design choices in ways that cannot be predicted (Curato et al. 2017). Our collaboration with creative practitioners heightened the uncertainty and opportunism of deliberative planning, which both benefited and constrained outcomes.

The choice of venue (an apartment) and the eventual (condensed) run time, for instance, which came to light after the rehearsals had begun, profoundly shaped the dialogue's possibilities in important ways. These factors condensed the time and space audiences had to sit with scenarios and exchange their views and perspectives with characters and each other, within the immersive space.

Working with a dynamic and responsive creative team, used to overcoming challenges in situ, however, allowed us to adjust quickly to these realities. The creative team negotiated the use of the next-door community bar, set inside a similar apartment. This not only provided a post-performance social venue, but also the opportunity to expand the space for dialogue within the world of the performance.

Undoubtedly, this allowed us to mobilise the mutuality and conviviality that had developed between people during the show, and offer a productive venue where people felt comfortable to exchange their thoughts and perspectives on the issues the show raised.

Spaces for sense making

The team were profoundly aware of the scope and intensity of sense making for their audiences within their immersive spaces (Machon 2016). They were sensitive to how they, as performers, could safely and ethically ground their audiences in a domestic world, with high sensory (technology) and emotional (grief) inputs; and their responsibilities to meet individual needs and preferences for communication, within their immersive spaces.

Their perspectives allowed the research team to consider how different people engaged in sense making, and from an embodied perspective; how audience members made sense of the performance dilemmas through small gestural or other forms of social communication, such as touch, emotional response, as well as highly engaged forms of role play.

Evidence and data

As researchers, we had to make the conversations within the artistic space legible as research material in ways that fitted the ethos of the performance. We needed methods that were ethical, non-extractive, and respectful of the sensitivities that the topic of grief might evoke.

In the main, we relied on the ethnographic reports of the researcher-observers to do this, who held short post-show interviews with the performers to incorporate their observations and insights. This, of course, has a trade-off in terms of undermining slightly the 'arts-led' ethos, and putting the power for analysis and interpretation more fully in the hands of the research team. We off-set this through sharing notes and audio recordings and notes on WhatsApp, but this did not bridge this gap that developed between research and creative teams over the ownership and generation of 'evidence'.

One of the learnings we realised too late was the need to 'rehearse' evidence and data generation during the workshopping phase, to create better synergies between performer and researcher processes of meaning making. This integrated approach may have invited other possibilities, including a more concerted discussion of what 'evidence' meant for different people; for instance, inviting the performers to generate forms of evidence more grounded in their practice.

This may have also boosted the success of the Padlet site, which the research team put together just before the performance, partly to meet standards of evidence and information but also as a public site for dialogue and exchange. Following the 'arts-led' ethos, we had embedded this in the logic of the performance as much as we could, linking it to the website of Darren Jackson's fictional company, Unforget (www.unforget.co.uk). But this would have needed a longer-term design path, for it to have been properly embedded in the creative team's understanding and production workflows.

Documenting the audience experience

> *'We didn't hammer it home about grief – and actually we're just here to be connected and grief happened to be the thing that we're connecting about but most of the time what people left the experience feeling was 'I felt connected and I haven't felt that immediate connection' for a while.'*
> – **Crissy O'Donovan (Big Telly)**

As a research method, immersive arts-led dialogue treats the audience experience itself as its principal form of data. Collecting that data is thus of key importance, but it must be done in a way that does not disrupt the performance itself.

During the performances, the research team joined the audience, and their observations were collated using an online folder and reveal a range of responses to different performance during the run, over a three week period. The form they are in reflects the pace of the project with often two-three shows per day with a short turnaround between them.. One such exchange sees a researcher document their place in the queue outside the townhouse before the show and then describe how they were asked by an audience member 'Is this the wake?'. At other times researchers were asked to hold a mobile phone and bring virtual audience members into the performance via Zoom – thus enabling the researchers to observe an audience online observing the audience in the room and vice versa. This 360-degree perspective enabled the team to see how the piece could be mediated in the future.

During the initial run in Belfast they also interviewed some of the cast and creative team about their experience of the audience's response.. Some of those responses include:

> Rosie McClelland (playing Maureen): How the audience responded to grief within my room was very much the standard way that you would expect people to respond to grief at an Irish wake I guess. My room has zero technology at all so it's the completely stripped back of that and just explores a body being put to rest. In some cases they were able to tell me true stories as well and what they experienced from wakes so it was a lovely gathering and a lovely sharing and where the audience got involved and played along with pretending to know Sylvie it really helped the story along.
>
> Ciaran Nolan (playing Joe): I think the audiences have been relatively enjoying it. It's strange for them to come into a live wake where they essentially don't know someone and some of them feel like they have to play a role to be a part of it which they don't you know 'cause that's our job as actors to make them feel part of an immersive theatre experience. I don't know if we can say that it's going to help people deal with grief because that's a big claim to make for each individual but I think it might give people a different way of of looking at it.

Other striking moments captured in the researchers' notes include:

"Is this the wake?" – audience member queueing outside, before realising it was theatre

"That's her spirit." – whispered during the first digital projection of Granny above the coffin

"I don't know whether to laugh or intervene." – quietly spoken by a participant while watching Chad pitch Unforget to grieving relatives

"She looks like herself" – spoken by audience member on seeing photograph of recently deceased who they had never met.

There was a recurring pattern of laughter as defence, followed by sudden quiet when technological elements broke ritual expectation.

Researchers also noted a moment where an audience member instinctively reached to comfort Ronnie mid-ritual – a moment that encapsulated the performance's central achievement: dissolving the line between witnessing and responsibility.

The unpredictability of audience behaviour – from reverent stillness to leaning forward and interrogating characters – became part of the dramaturgy. The research team notes also capture the moment where a spectator instinctively reached to comfort Ronnie mid-ritual, blurring the line between theatre and care.

Inviting digital visitors to the wake

As well as the real-world audience encountering the wake live, in some of the 2025 performances, Big Telly developed a new way of inviting audiences to attend *Granny Jackson's Dead* online. This was useful for audience members who could not attend the performance in person. Called 'distant relatives,' the dramaturgy for these virtual encounters is built on the now-common experience of overseas relatives attending family gatherings and rituals remotely.

Audience members were given the role of an overseas cousin, aunty or uncle, and joined via teleconferencing. They were taken around the performance by mobile phone by one of the performers or researchers involved in the event. The mobile phone also enabled the distant relative to be 'passed around' between rooms and offered a glimpse of each characters' scene. This technique resembles film director Paul Greengrass's approach of having 'a camera that doesn't know what's happening' and led to a surprising and enjoyably disorientating experience of the show.

This hybrid approach chimed with recent innovations in live streaming funeral ceremonies since the pandemic, as explored in Edelman and O'Keeffe's research for BRIC-19 (Edelman et al 2021). But where funeral ceremonies are often filmed by fixed cameras the wake-cam was a roving reporter, travelling from room to room, often commentated upon by different voices at different times with different viewpoints. At one point visitors were told they were going 'to spy' on a character. At others they were told that 'you'll be wanting to see the coffin' and taken to the front room. In this sense, the holder of the phone actively curated the online spectator's experience.

At the initial run in Belfast in 2023, one of the researchers was asked to hold the phone at the back of the room for the eulogy and kept asking the 'distant relative' if they

could see. 'Susan' also then thanked the online visitor for joining the family at the event so the traditional fourth wall of the theatre was broken and the live stream acknowledged, in the same way as a priest/minister might at a real funeral. However, when the show eventually breaks down during the 'techno-pocalypse', the researcher told the distant relative 'I don't know if you can see this, but the eulogy seems to have stopped'. The two later discussed the spectator's online experience of the performance.

Big Telly explored how to link the distant relatives' experience to those of in-person visitors in three phases: welcoming them, interacting with them, and referring to them. Occasionally, live spectators would be asked to hold (and thus control) the phone. This, in itself, added another layer of interaction to the hybrid experience of wakes as well as the real-world encounter between two guests who did not know each other, bonding or connecting over an event commemorating someone who had died. The fictional frame offered up a set of conventions that people adopt in these encounters, even when online (saying 'sorry for your loss' as a greeting, for instance.).

Regular check-ins with the digital guests enabled the performers to ensure that the remote audience was paying attention and happy. Even a simple 'can you see this?' or an introduction to other members of the audience in the room e.g. 'Do you remember this person? You must remember this person?' served to maintain a connection.

We saw something similar in our research on pandemic-era online rituals; the live chat that accompanied live-streamed rituals created a sense of connection and participation for online worshippers, even if what was said in it was nothing beyond simple greetings. These call-outs served as an open invitation to create another fictional layer of engagement in the act of remembrance.

Broadly speaking, this method of engagement was successful – it allowed a much wider range of people to engage with the work. Interactivity was limited when many people were on the call together, but the casting of the audience was clear, and it made the experience comprehensible and engaging. Initial audience feedback was positive. This method of distant participation could be used in other contexts.

We noticed that the experience ended abruptly, as the performance itself ends with actors running out of the house. This was problematically disconcerting for online visitors. In this case, we addressed this issue by setting up a post-show conversation with the researchers that followed on immediately from the performance on the same feed. In general, however, this suggests that questions of how to frame performance accessed remotely is of key importance to audiences. Creating both a soft exit and a soft landing into the world of the work as well as offering aftercare to anyone who may have found the subject matter challenging needs to be considered both dramaturgically and technically.

V. Findings: Deliberating grief tech

Awareness and understanding of 'grief tech'

> *'Digital legacy is part of the Department of Health NI policy For Now and For the Future an Advance care planning policy for all adults. This theatre piece is a highly effective and impactful way to generate reflection and conversation on this topic. Excellent production.'*
>
> **– Corinna Grimes (former National Deputy Director at NHS England)**

Most spectators we spoke with had a sophisticated grasp of the place and significance of technology and technological change in relation to grief and grieving. They were familiar with different technologies which had both gradually and suddenly become part of the memorialising landscape in recent years. They reflected on how social accelerators such as the COVID-19 pandemic made technology such as the smartphone ubiquitous in grief and grieving. Some spectators talked about seeing QR codes in cemeteries and following links (sometimes broken) to family photo albums or videos. Others mentioned new trends, such as 'grief TikTok' and influencers.

At the time of the performance (February 2024), most participants had a limited understanding of the function and range of AI enabled technologies. They were unfamiliar with some of the central products already on the market, such as large language model-powered 'thanabots' or synthetic personas, and what these could be (or were being) used for, although some people had seen news related to AI-enabled avatars of deceased celebrities. A few referenced that UK news media had reported on how George Carlin's estate was suing the creators of an AI avatar of the comedian in the weeks before the beginning of the run.

Most participants, however, either from their prior knowledge of grief tech or from the information gained during the performance, identified some core social challenges and ethical debates around these technologies. For instance, many identified potential tensions between commercial imperatives of technology and the relational, cultural and emotional needs of grieving people. One pointed out that this wasn't unique to new AI-powered tools, reflecting negatively on TikTok adverts where funeral homes posted videos of funerals with faces blurred out ("I mean, would you let your mother's funeral go like that?' they said).

Most audience members also grasped other fundamental social and interpersonal challenges that resulted from the technology, which were clearly set out in the performance, such as who exerts control over the memory of the dead

through these technologies. Many extrapolated the potential for malign influence over vulnerable people. Because the performance did not probe technical dimensions of grief tech – such as the construction of avatars through data and their probabilistic (rather than humanistic) character, participants did not talk about trust – and the trustworthy-ness of the technology, 'hallucinations' or the accuracy of 'personas'.

Perceived benefits and opportunities

Many participants believed the innovation represented by these technologies was exciting. They talked about grief tech within the wider context of rapid technological change, reflecting a sense of living through an era of invention, and possibility. Some participants saw in them a significant therapeutic value, especially as a short-term substitute in the immediate period following a loved one's death. Being able to maintain that connection with a lost loved one was seen as positive and useful – a view which reflects the currency of the 'continued bonds' model of managing and bearing grief and loss.

Some participants interpreted grief tech as an extension of photographic or video technologies, which could enhance family relationships in important ways. Two participants, separately, reflected on the experience of losing their parents at a young age, and how AI enabled avatars could help introduce their children to grandparents they could never meet, as a more 'realistic' and interactive photo or video. This was seen as having a therapeutic value (repairing the injury of the absence of grandparents) and a social value (for the children).

Identified risks, concerns and ethical tensions

Statements about benefits were always accompanied by others where participants were sceptical or less sure of what the promises of grief tech could be. Many participants, drawing on specific episodes in the show, thought grief tech would complicate already fraught family dynamics, escalate conflicts over inheritance, or create new zones for competition over a loved one's identity.

Some participants became concerned about the potential detrimental public impacts of the use of post-mortal digital avatars. They thought about the misappropriation of identities for political uses, or commercial gain, for instance. They speculated that it would further atomise society.

Some participants took a philosophical approach, asking whether grief tech interfered with the fundamental human right and social value to forget and be forgotten .

Fewer people grappled with issues about data ownership, which *Granny Jackson* did not directly address. Even so, a few people did raise concerns about how to assure an individual's right to control their digital legacy after their death and, in one case, therefore declined to take part in the performance's VR activity, as they said the (fictional) Granny had not been properly consulted.

Disagreement and ambivalence – unresolved questions

The relationship between tradition and technology was a contested area of discussion. Some people believed that technology was disruptive to 'good' traditional mechanisms for grieving and, therefore, felt strongly that AI tools should not be employed in grieving and especially collective rituals. These arguments also often referenced smart phone use as in a fundamental ethical conflict with social and communal norms.

Others believed that technological change was inevitable, and ritual, as an evolving apparatus to deal with social change, would become reworked to incorporate these technologies in ways that met evolving needs. These arguments tended to place a high degree of autonomy in individual and societal actors, although many were also appended with questionings about the moral choices involved: 'but would you…' was a frequent refrain in these conversations.

Benefits and risks were themselves often contested, with conversations exploring how to balance individual or familial needs (for comfort or solace) with wider social needs without reaching a resolution. Many people understood that 'grief tech' involved difficult trade-offs between individual, familial and communal needs or beliefs, and that these may be irreconcilable.

Call for safeguards

The project did not implement a formal, consensus seeking process where participants could co-create recommendations on the future of grief tech and policies they wished to implement. But we do have good evidence that speaks to our spectators' comfort levels and hopes, as expressed by individuals and through group conversations, as well as evidence from the survey of attitudes.

Survey respondents expressed a high level of agreement (87%) that there should be tighter controls over how companies design, deploy and market technology for grieving people. Participants were surprised to know that there were in fact very few protections for consumers and no focused regulation of grief tech at all.

What concerned participants was not just individual vulnerabilities, but the wider implications for communal values, beliefs and social norms. Many thought that this technology, its market-driven logic, and focus on consumers, represented a value system that conflicted with other values that they felt were important. They believed that regulation was necessary, therefore, to protect communal values and societal relationships, not just individual people.

Some participants became concerned about the potential detrimental public impacts of the use of post-mortal digital avatars.

VI. What immersive arts-led dialogue enables

Knowledge, emotion, collective sense making

We had hoped our conception of immersive arts-led dialogue and the wake-based framework of the performance, would create a safe and readable social space for people to explore the interconnections between emerging technology and grief in ways that made sense to them.

What surprised everyone was how much this was achieved. People understood and used the ritual form to navigate both the topic and their relationships with each other and the characters. In doing so, they were able to engage in dialogue with each character and other people in their groups, creating a wealth of social interventions, from physical and facial cues, laughter, whispers, and post-performance conversation to respond to the debates and tensions that *Granny Jackson* brought out.

Throughout, audience members cultivated practices of care and solidarity that arise from the informal social ritual of the wake. They made sandwiches, hoovered, restocked toilet roll, and carried tea and biscuits to grieving family members. They recognised that mourning processes often spark family rows and emotional disconnections; some stepped in to comfort characters, or repair relations between family members. The wake became a site where differences could be aired, accepted, negotiated and, in some cases, repaired.

Researchers and cast witnessed repeated instances of this. Shelley Atkinson (in the role of Susan), who led the eulogy scene, would often find audience members standing with her, helping her through the first part of the speech. During the blackout, she told researchers, 'people would touch my back, or hold my hand. We were all squashed together, it was so familiar, feeling so close to people at an event which brings strangers together.' She saw that the performance highlighted the need for human touch, social cohesion and connection in grief.

Temporary publics – and shared rituals

We found, too, that the framework of the performance, where audience members stayed in small groups for the first half hour, often (if not always) formed the basis for small group cohesion, which is accepted as so important in deliberative work.

We discovered people, who had not known each other but had fallen into conversation during the show, still engaged in heated discussion on the questions that *Granny Jackson* had raised for them, outside on the pavement. Sometimes, we saw that larger groups of ten or more (again, people who had not known each other) sometimes congregated in the bar afterwards, sharing personal experiences and perspectives around these issues of grieving and technological futures.

Many told us that they had felt part of something unique by participating in the show. Most of them had not seen these technologies before up close; and many of them had not taken part in immersive theatre. This shared experience, the intensities of their emotional connections with the characters, and the enclave nature of the performance (limited tickets had sold out quickly) gave them a powerful sense of being in a temporary community.

Many participants shared that they felt the performance had unlocked something for them and others: it had created social licence to talk about grief. Participants were candid with researchers and each other about difficult experiences. One pulled out her phone and showed the researcher a video of her mother's funeral – it had been on her smart phone for years, and while she had wanted to show it more to people, she had to this point felt that she could not. Another participant, talking to a group of seven others, shared that she had been trying to talk about her own grief with colleagues at work, but had felt embarrassed when people responded so awkwardly; she was relieved that *Granny Jackson* gave permission for people to talk about something that happened to all of us.

Contribution to deliberative systems

We found, too, that these temporary 'mini-publics', which arose and existed through the performance, often had a distinct and powerful sense of themselves in relation to Belfast's public sphere. Some audience members shared that they felt they had participated in a city-wide conversation on a topic that had relevance and importance for the community at large. One participant, in conversation with another, reflected they'd been excited and relieved to tickets – everyone was talking about Granny Jackson, and the issues it raised.

Mansbridge et al. (2012) have used the term 'deliberative systems' to think about public reasoning as an institutional and networked activity, moving away from the notion of a 'one-off' deliberative fora, and towards an ecosystem where different actors can make significant contributions to democratic public engagement.

Granny Jackson demonstrated that these networks and relationships that sustain public reasoning are strongly grounded in local place-based communities, and (especially) in the creative industries. Big Telly created a hyper-local, safe and communal ground where dialogue around a fundamental moral and existential topic flourished, but it grew communicative channels through it that created a much wider reach for these conversations: via audience members on their social media feeds; Belfast bloggers; local and national media; and the NI Science Festival's media.

Conclusion

The show was an absolute hit on every level, and the ripe use of comedy and character to explore a subject where people often fear to tread was inspired. Audiences were intrigued by the idea of grief technology, and the topic brought an out of the box approach to thinking about loss that genuinely enabled different conversations to open up after the show, aided as well no doubt by the Irish spirit that infused audiences and performers alike. Knowing how much technology has changed in our lifetime, it's of course going to impact upon life and death in some capacity sooner or later – the ethics and the ramifications catalysed some fascinating conversation.

Fiona Matthews (Super Culture)

Immersive theatre offers a compelling framework for interrogating the emerging phenomenon of grief tech. Audience responses reveal tensions: while some perceive virtual encounters – such as dancing with a deceased relative in VR – as potentially comforting, others say that grief should remain anchored in memory and material artefacts rather than digital simulation.

Arts-led dialogue, situated within an immersive framework, facilitated a vital exploration of cultural, communal, and temporal dimensions of mourning, raising questions about how technological interventions will intervene in, replicate, or disrupt these practices. It made room for ethical exploration of issues such as consent and ownership of digital legacies, as well as recognising lived experience of grief as a fundamental part of the human condition.

These are emotionally and intellectually fraught issues that are difficult for people to talk about and think through in ordinary life, but they are increasingly pertinent. Even during the project, policies such as the NI Department of Health's Advance Care Planning acknowledge the growing relevance of digital afterlife management. And there are an increasing number of tech start-up companies entering what is becoming a promising market for consumption and public contracts.

These topics can be too emotionally loaded for traditional deliberative research methods to address. But in this project, we were able to create a space that was safe and effective for public deliberation. Our audience was able to grasp complex information, consider it critically and emotionally, and develop informed views on this subject. Within this novel approach, it has been difficult to produce detailed policy recommendations to take forward. But participants articulated a clear rejection of wholly individuated and commercialised grief tech and demonstrated care for communal values that can and should be read as a mandate for future research and design action, by policymakers and leaders of both governments and tech companies.

We hope these findings contribute to wider acceptance of the value and possibilities offered by the creative industries; their importance in offering people sustained and communal reflection on technological transformation; and their unique abilities to build evidence that recognises the holistic nature of how people make sense of these changes and what their needs are.

As this method was productive for grief tech, there is no reason to think that it cannot work for other complex and personal issues that are experienced in the context of family life. And, indeed, we are hoping to develop further episodes in the Jackson family's saga to explore other difficult issues around technology, human relationships, and how to make technology work for us.

These topics can be too emotionally loaded for traditional deliberative research methods to address. But in this project, we were able to create a space that was safe and effective for public deliberation.

Future directions

- Grief tech is a growing but under-examined area of technological development. Public awareness of AI-enabled memorial technologies is uneven, and regulatory frameworks remain limited, despite high levels of public concern about potential harms.
- People do not experience grief tech as a purely individual choice. Audiences consistently understood these technologies as affecting families, communities, rituals, and social values, not just individual users.
- Commercialisation is a central concern. Participants were particularly uneasy about profit-driven models of grief tech, questioning who benefits, who controls digital legacies, and where accountability lies if harm occurs.
- Ritual, presence, and collective care remain vital. The performance highlighted the enduring importance of embodied, communal practices of mourning, which many felt could not – and should not – be replicated by digital simulation.
- Arts-led dialogue enables forms of understanding unavailable to conventional research methods. Immersive theatre created safe, emotionally literate spaces in which people could grapple with ethical uncertainty, disagreement, and ambivalence.
- The public want greater public and policy oversight of grief technologies. Survey data shows strong support for tighter controls and clearer ethical safeguards governing the design and deployment of grief tech.
- Immersive theatre can function as deliberative infrastructure. When combined with embedded research expertise, it offers a powerful model for generating evidence that is meaningful, situated, and policy-relevant.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Public Bodies

- Recognise grief tech as a public and cultural issue, not solely a private consumer matter, and ensure it is considered within health, digital ethics, and cultural policy frameworks.
- Support further public deliberation on grief tech through participatory, arts-led methods that surface social values alongside technical considerations.
- Develop clearer regulatory guidance and ethical standards for grief-tech developers, particularly around consent, digital legacy, accountability, and harm.

Recommendations for Cultural Funders and Institutions

- Invest in arts-led dialogue projects as legitimate forms of research and public engagement, particularly on complex or emotionally charged topics.
- Build funding models that explicitly support embedded researchers, allowing evidence generated through artistic practice to be consolidated, analysed, and communicated effectively.
- Recognise immersive and socially engaged theatre within deliberative civic infrastructure, capable of contributing to policy conversations, through core funding models

Recommendations for Technology Designers and Developers

- Engage publics early and meaningfully in the design of grief technologies, recognising that acceptability depends on social, cultural, and ethical alignment – not just functionality.
- Move beyond individualised user models to consider familial and communal impacts, especially in contexts of vulnerability.
- Ensure transparency around data use, ownership, and post-mortem digital rights.

Recommendations for Researchers and Practitioners

- Further develop and test embedded dramaturgy and arts-led deliberation as scalable research methodologies.
- Acknowledge the limits of traditional surveys and interviews when addressing affective, moral, and relational issues such as grief.
- Build interdisciplinary collaborations that treat artistic and creative practice as a site of knowledge production, not merely one of dissemination.

Appendix

Granny Jackson's Dead tour dates

Belfast – N.I. Science Festival, 15-25 Feb 2024.

Weston Super Mare – Good Grief Festival, 10-13 Oct 2024.

Liverpool – Netherley Valley Community Theatre, 18-19 Oct 2024.

Dundalk – An Táin Arts Centre, 24-26 Oct 2024.

Belfast – Belfast International Arts Festival, 31 Oct – 3 Nov 2024.

Philadelphia – Inis Nua Theatre Company, 17-20 Apr 2025.

New York – American Irish Historical Society, 24-26 April 2025.

Ballymoney - Lislagan Farm, 1-4 May 2025.

Cavan – Cavan Arts Festival, 18 May 2025.

Wraparound outputs

1. Joshua Edelman (Manchester Metropolitan) & Zoe Seaton (Big Telly) presented at the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange in June 2024 as part of the 'Technology for Social Good' collaboration and knowledge exchange event. https://ncace.ac.uk/2024/07/04/culture-collaboration-and-knowledge-exchange-technology-for-social-good/
2. Joshua Edelman, Kirsty Fairclough, Michael Pinchbeck, Alasdair Swenson and Zoe Seaton (Big Telly) presented a panel on 'Our Digital Afterlives' at the ESRC Festival of Social Science on 6 November 2024 at HOME. https://ahead.mmu.ac.uk/event/our-digital-afterlives-at-esrc-festival-of-social-science/
3. Michael Pinchbeck presented at the BRAID / RAI roundtable event *Ensuring Responsible AI Through Methodological Diversity* on 6 March 2025 at the University of Edinburgh. https://www.tickettailor.com/events/responsibleai/1495746
4. Centre for Cultural Value project report by Maria Radeva https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/granny-jacksons-dead-exploring-grief-memory-commemoration-technology/
5. Michael Pinchbeck in conversation with Zoe Seaton. Bunker Talk #136. Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. https://www.art.mmu.ac.uk/bunkertalks/talk-136/
6. Michael Pinchbeck invited to deliver keynote on *Granny Jackson's Dead* and grief tech at 3rd International Conference on Brand Communication (ICBC 2026) at Zhejiang Wanli University, Ningbo (China) in October 2026.

Critical acclaim and press coverage

Best Production, Origin 1st Irish Theatre Festival Awards, 2025
https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/news/northern-ireland-s-big-telly-w-16415

The Stage's Top 50 Shows of 2024
https://www.schoolofdigitalarts.mmu.ac.uk/manchester-met-research-led-immersive-theatre-experience-...

Radio interviews on BBC Radio Ulster, Q Radio, Downtown Radio, and Cool FM.

Television interview on UTV Life, filmed at the performance site and aired 16 February 2024.

Belfast Telegraph piece by Aine Toner, 'Big Telly Theatre Company's latest work combines best in technological advancements with relatable multi-theme plot,' 9 February 2024.

Irish News piece by Sophie Clarke, 'Granny Jackson's Dead: The Irish wake that combines tech and tradition,' 6 February 2024.

Alan in Belfast post: 'Granny Jackson's Dead – join the mourners at this sad time of loss,' 17 February 2024.

The Even Hand post: 'Granny Jackson's Dead', 28 February 2024.

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Project credits

Original cast: Shelley Atkinson, Gavin Peden, Emily Tracey, Ciaran Nolan, Rosie McClelland, Michael Dorsano.
Additional cast: Aidan Crowe (in certain performances), Cara MacMahon

Concept and Direction: Zoe Seaton

Producer: Crissy O'Donovan

Writers: Owen Booth, R.B Kelly, Bernie McGill

Sound Design: Garth McConaghie

Set and Costume Design: Rosie McClelland

Digital Assets Curator: Gavin Peden

Researchers: Joshua Edelman, Kirsty Fairclough, Eleanor O'Keeffe, Michael Pinchbeck and Alasdair Swenson

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For more information on AHEAD please visit ahead.mmu.ac.uk

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