



Granny Jackson's Dead – Grief Tech, Theatre and Research

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Introduction

Granny Jackson's Dead is a collaborative theatre production that represents an innovative fusion of immersive theatre, cutting-edge technology, and research into the themes of grief, memory, and the role of technology in contemporary mourning practices. It also demonstrates how the arts can spark innovation in research through co-created knowledge exchange.

Zoë Seaton, Artistic Director of Big Telly Theatre Company from Northern Ireland and Dr Josh Edelman, as part of a team at the Manchester School of Theatre at MMU, were awarded a research grant in June 2023 as part of the second round of the Centre for Cultural Value's Collaborate programme (<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/collaborate-fund>). The fund supported innovative new partnerships between cultural sector practitioners and academics to explore novel questions around cultural value, and *Granny Jackson's Dead* examined commemoration, mourning, performance and the digital – exploring how we can use immersive theatre to look afresh at “arts-led dialogue”. Big Telly are a pioneering theatre company, funded by Arts Council of Northern Ireland, who use creativity as a catalyst to provoke thought and explore the possibility of change. They work closely with communities to establish frameworks which offer new ways to connect and all of their work is interactive, co-created and bespoke. Other team members included Kirsty Fairclough and Michael Pinchbeck from MMU and Eleanor O'Keeffe from the Centre of Deliberative Research at the National Centre of Social Research.

Background: The Intersection of Grief, Technology, and Performance

Grief has traditionally been expressed through cultural rituals and community-based mourning practices. However, the advent of digital technologies has introduced new possibilities—and ethical dilemmas—regarding how we memorialise the dead. Josh Edelman, who has been researching the relationships between performance, ritual and religion for some time, describes Grief Tech as the ways in which mourners and the funerary business interacts with technology. Traditionally this may have included an online commemoration page or digital photos, but with significant advancements in technology and more mainstream use of artificial intelligence, the possibilities for Grief Tech have expanded rapidly. The interactive theatre performance *Granny Jackson's Dead* explores these new paradigms through the integration of VR, AI, and holographic technologies, allowing the audience to interact with the deceased in ways that challenge traditional ideas of memory and loss.

The project also provided an opportunity to examine grief in an immersive, performative context. The dramaturgy was central to the research, just as the research questions were central to the performance - creating a holistic, co-produced, live performative research collaboration that examines how we react to the integration of novel technologies into grieving practices.



*The Jackson Family
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Photography*

Creative Co-Creation

All collaborators engaged in a co-creative approach, which offered the opportunity for a nuanced and entertaining production that had research questions embedded within the play. As Josh Edelman explained, "We were all on the same page when it came to ensuring that the performance had emotional depth and was engaging for the audience. It wasn't just about the technology; it was about creating a compelling theatre experience." The project also benefited from the diverse backgrounds of the researchers, including Michael Pinchbeck, a solo performance artist, and Dr. Ellie O'Keefe, a historian specializing in memory. This variety of perspectives allowed the team to approach the topic of grief from multiple angles, creating a layered and nuanced performance. The performance premiered at the Northern Irish Science Festival and Granny's house was hosted at the Harrison Chambers of Distinction in Belfast.

Granny Jackson's Dead invites the audience to engage with various grief tech elements, such as virtual reality and holograms, to explore the intersections of loss, technology, and memory. The performance takes place within the intimate, domestic setting of a fictional Irish wake, situated in a real family home. The audience is asked to perform small tasks like preparing sandwiches or finding a phone charger, before being presented with different opinions about and approaches to grief tech. Different characters present various ways of engaging with Granny Jackson, from a Minecraft memorial to a VR headset which shows her dancing, to burning sage around a campfire. The performance creates an environment where each participant feels personally involved in the grieving process, whilst the inclusion of technology challenges the audience to experience grief in new, interactive ways. One of the central technological features was the use of an AI-driven chatbot and holographic projection of Granny Jackson, allowing the audience to "interact" with the deceased. This exploration of digital afterlives opened up discussions about the ethical implications of grief tech, particularly concerning the manipulation of memory and the emotional impact of interacting with digital representations of loved ones. Balancing the academic rigour required for research with the accessibility and entertainment value necessary for the theatre experience was central to the collaboration, in addition to ensuring that the technology did not overshadow the emotional core of the performance. The goal was to provoke thought about the future of mourning practices, whilst creating a space where the audience could safely engage with grief in a collective, human-centred and participatory manner.

During the autumn of 2024 the production took on an innovative touring model. Rather than relying solely on the core cast, the project incorporated local artists and community members into the performances which took place in private homes, transformed into the set for Granny Jackson's wake. With elements of the backstory from each location being incorporated into the performances, the production created a more personal, community-based experience of mourning. Zoë reflected on the uniqueness of this approach: "Touring something so intimate and location-specific required us to create a model where the community became part of the story, allowing us to develop a different version of the wake in each location. It made each performance feel deeply rooted in the local context."



Granny Jackson's dead?
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Research Findings: Emotional Engagement and Ethical Dilemmas

In addition to being a theatrical production, Granny Jackson's Dead served as an important research tool to understand how immersive theatre and grief tech could be used to foster informed public discussions about grief and technology. The research team conducted surveys and interviews with the audience after each performance, capturing their emotional responses and thoughts about the role of technology in mourning.

1. Emotional and Intellectual Engagement:

Audience members found the experience emotionally resonant and intellectually stimulating. Many admitted that they had never considered the potential of grief tech before but were moved by the performance's exploration of how technology can both enhance and complicate the grieving process. One notable finding was that while some participants were initially resistant to the idea of grief tech, many changed their views during the performance, recognising the potential for technology to provide a meaningful way to engage with memories of the deceased.

2. Ethical Concerns:

The performance raised significant ethical questions about the use of technology in memorialisation. Some audience members expressed concerns about the authenticity of digital representations of the deceased and the emotional manipulation involved in interacting with AI-driven versions of loved ones. However, the research also revealed that people recognised the value of grief tech in offering new ways for mourners to cope, especially in the face of traditional rituals that may feel inadequate or incomplete.

3. Shifting Perspectives:

Throughout the performance, the audience was encouraged to reflect on their own views about grief and technology. The interactive nature of the performance, where they could engage with the technologies and the characters in meaningful ways, led many to shift their stance. A key moment of reflection came when one of the characters, initially opposed to digital memorialisation, used a chatbot to rewrite her relationship with her deceased mother. This emotionally charged moment sparked debates among the audience about the ethical implications of "reprogramming" grief.

4. Generational Divide:

One interesting finding was the generational divide in attitudes toward grief tech. Older audience members, particularly those less comfortable with technology, were more likely to believe that decisions about memorialisation should be made solely by the family. In contrast, younger participants, who were more familiar with digital tools, were more open to the idea of using technology to prolong or alter the grieving process.



Granny Jackson's Dead
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A Model for Future Interdisciplinary Collaborations

Granny Jackson's Dead represents a groundbreaking example of how theatre, technology, and academic research can intersect to tackle complex emotional issues. The project also offers a valuable model for future collaborations between theatre practitioners, technologists, and researchers, demonstrating that these fields can come together to produce emotionally resonant and intellectually rich work. The success of the project—both as a performance and as a research initiative—has led to invitations to take the show to New York and Philadelphia, continuing its exploration of grief, technology, and community. Future developments, including plans for a sequel and potentially new formats for the Jackson family, promise to deepen the conversation about the future of Grief Tech in both personal and collective contexts.

Further information:

Big Telly – Theatre productions - <https://big-telly.com>

Granny Jackson's Dead – <https://big-telly.com/portfolio/granny-jacksons-dead>

Granny Jackson's Dead - a project about death, memory and technology - <https://padlet.com/EOK2021/granny-jackson-s-dead-a-project-about-death-memory-and-techn-quwnbdcovc6oi00l>

Collaborate: the projects - Centre for Cultural Value - <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/collaborate-the-projects>
<https://performanceresearch.mmu.ac.uk>

Arts Council of Northern Ireland - <https://artscouncil-ni.org>

Let your mind wonder | NI Science Festival - <https://nisciencefestival.com>

The Harrison Chambers of Distinction | Boutique Hotel Belfast - <https://www.chambersofdistinction.com>