



Reprogramming the Live Body: Digital Adaptation and Telepresent Spectatorship

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This article examines how digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness on the postdigital stage, with a particular focus on *ABBA Voyage* (2022–), *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* (2023), and *The Hunger Games: On Stage* (2025). By shifting the live body from co-presence to telepresent embodiment, these productions distribute liveness across technological systems, cultural memory, and embodied spectatorship. Through system-driven liveness, recognition as dramaturgy, and complicity as structured participation, the article argues that these adaptations do not merely recreate the original media but reprogramme the relationship between the audience and performance. Drawing on concepts of memory, recognition, and infrastructural illusion, it explores how paratextual campaigns, venue architecture, and digital effects orchestrate audience complicity, making spectators active participants in the narrative. Ultimately, the article contends that liveness on the postdigital stage is produced not by spontaneous presence but by the synchrony of systems, recognition, and complicit bodies, thereby transforming the live event into an orchestrated, networked experience.



Within the postdigital stage, this article examines technologically sophisticated adaptations that mobilise advanced digital systems to rework stagecraft, retime narrative, and reframe spectatorship. In these productions, immediacy is produced as much by system–body entanglement as by co–present bodies. Building on but departing from accounts of digital theatre as either threat to or extension of liveness, this article argues that digitally sustained adaptations—works whose immediacy depends on digital infrastructures—reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness. Central to this is the live body, reprogrammed within franchised ecologies as telepresent embodiment: at once a site of cultural memory and a participant in mediated immediacy.

Debates about liveness and mediation have long organised theatre and performance studies. Philip Auslander’s influential work unsettled the binary between live and mediated performance, arguing that liveness is historically and technologically produced, not ontologically secure. Martin Harries notes that ‘The proliferation of intermedial performance is one of the hallmarks of contemporary theater’ (2012: 8). Recent scholarship has pushed further, refusing to bracket theatre off from digital culture. For W. B. Worthen, ‘theatre is a technology that uses technology to represent a technological interface with the human,’ (2025: 3), an ecology of changing media, devices, and protocols and not a single, timeless medium. Taken together, these accounts dislodge notional oppositions between theatre and media and re-situate stage practice within wider technological ecologies.

Building on this shift, digital scholarship has emphasised that digitality is now a condition of performance instead of a special topic. Sissi Liu and colleagues observe that most contemporary performances depend on digital systems for marketing, production, and sometimes the performance itself, and that digital technologies have become one of the conditions of performance (2024). Developing this line of argument, Jessica Hillman-McCord argues that writing about contemporary performance must grapple with the digital culture that underlies every event, from electronic ticketing and digital lighting equipment to word-processed scripts (2017). Erin Sullivan similarly contends that digital performance does not discard cherished theatrical values of liveness, co-presence, and immersion, but revises them, inviting audiences to reflect on their own status as digital humans and extending the reach of live performance (2022: 9–15). In this context, the article focuses on large-scale, technologically sophisticated adaptations of franchised storyworlds whose immediacy depends on complex digital infrastructures. Drawing on Worthen’s claim that ‘Theatre does not merely use technology – it is a technology’ (i) and Sullivan’s demonstration that digital performance reshapes liveness, co-presence, and emotional resonance, I treat the postdigital stage as already technologically saturated. From that premise, this article

turns to a different problem: what has not yet been theorised in detail is how such franchised stage adaptations use digital infrastructures to reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness for large, mixed publics.

I use digitally sustained adaptation to describe theatre in which the felt liveness of the event depends on, and is inseparable from, the operation of digital systems and networks at scale. These productions do not simply use projection, sound, or controllers in service of a pre-existing text; rather, the infrastructures themselves—media servers, show-control software, sound and lighting networks, ticketing and CRM systems, and paratextual platforms—are integral to how the adaptation is structured and perceived. Here I draw on expanded accounts of dramaturgical practice that move ‘beyond the solely artistic domain into the infrastructural one,’ attending to ‘material conditions, economies and infrastructures’ as part of dramaturgical labour (Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoridou 2017: 3). Dramaturgy, therefore, becomes a mode of engaging with the complexity of creative processes, including the technological, institutional, and economic processes that make a performance possible.

Within this framework, I differentiate several related concepts that are sometimes conflated. Telepresence refers to experiences of co-presence generated when images, sounds, or data are transmitted or rendered across distance. Telepresent embodiment names what happens when those telepresent systems organise how live bodies in the venue appear and are perceived: performers and spectators whose visibility, audibility, and agency are cued and constrained by remote data, pre-programmed pipelines, or responsive media. Networked embodiment extends this further, describing configurations in which embodiment is distributed across human and nonhuman entities—bodies, software, tracking systems, architectural interfaces—such that no single site can be treated as the exclusive locus of the live. Drawing on debates around the archive and repertoire, I also distinguish memory from recognition. Archive here refers to recorded traces (soundtracks, videos, logos, official imagery), repertoire to embodied conventions and fan practices; memory involves the return of personally or collectively sedimented experiences, whereas recognition captures rapid, cue-based uptake of canonical details, motifs, or branding.

The article further proposes infrastructural liveness as a way of thinking about how digital systems themselves generate immediacy—through precisely timed lighting states, sound spatialisation, scene changes, audience tracking, and ticketing architectures that script who is ‘inside’ the event and how. This is not opposed to theatrical illusionism or franchise logic; rather, infrastructural liveness intersects with canon uptake and what I call cue-based dramaturgy, in which sonic, visual, and textual cues regulate tempo, orient attention, and trigger recognition. Across the case

studies, I treat complicity not as a moral judgment but as a description of structured participation: the ways spectators' attention, affect, and behaviour are recruited as resources that keep these infrastructural illusions running.

These questions are explored through three contemporary productions that are exemplary and not exhaustive: *ABBA Voyage* (London, 2022–), *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* (London, 2023–; New York, 2025–), and *The Hunger Games: On Stage* (London, 2025–). Each is an adaptation of a transmedia franchise whose storyworld is already distributed across film or streaming, games, merchandise, and online fan cultures. *Voyage* is best understood as an adaptation not of a single album or tour but of ABBA's concert form and archival corpus: recordings, performance styles, and star personae are reanimated through digitally rendered ABBAatars in a purpose-built arena. Rather than merely transferring a band's repertoire onto a new platform, *Voyage* functions as a hybrid artefact—part concert, part simulation, part data-driven homage—in which a tightly programmed audiovisual pipeline reconfigures the performer–spectator relationship and stages an embodied, system-mediated encounter with ABBA's legacy. *Stranger Things* adapts a streaming series into a stage prequel, converting canon references and serial world-building into recognisable cues that regulate spectatorship in a technically dense environment. *Hunger Games* adapts Suzanne Collins's novels and their film franchise into an immersive, gamified arena in which architecture, seat mapping, and ticketing hierarchies recruit spectators into the Capitol's spectacle, making complicity the explicit driver of its dramaturgy. Taken together, these productions span distinct performance forms—an avatar concert event in *Voyage*, a proscenium narrative drama in *First Shadow*, and a large-scale immersive arena event in *Hunger Games*—yet all are stage adaptations within global franchises whose dramaturgies are inseparable from digital infrastructures and franchised storyworlds.

These productions matter because they occupy a highly visible, commercially ambitious sector of the postdigital stage, where questions of liveness, mediation, and adaptation are worked through in front of large, mixed publics. They also point toward what Laura Karreman, Christel Stalpaert and Kristof van Baarle describe as composite bodies, in which human and nonhuman elements form configurations where 'the composite body is always more than the sum of its constituent parts' (2021: 10). By tracing how digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure the live body as telepresent and networked embodiment within franchised ecologies, the article contributes to ongoing debates about theatre's status as technology, the infrastructural conditions of liveness, and the gamification and commodification of participation in contemporary performance.

To pursue this argument, the article analyses how these productions configure spectatorship at the level of infrastructure and address. Methodologically, I distinguish between the reach of these productions—the scale and visibility of their circulation across audiences, media, and platforms—and their impact, understood as the attitudinal, affective, or behavioural effects on individual spectators. While the latter could be investigated through pre- and post-event questionnaires, interviews, or ethnographic audience research, this article adopts a different emphasis. It examines how these productions are built to structure spectatorship, combining close analysis of performances with attention to trade and technical documentation, venue architecture and ticketing materials, marketing and paratextual campaigns, and selected spectator accounts. Taken together, the case studies function as laboratories for analysing how digital infrastructures, franchised archives, and embodied repertoires meet in the auditorium to organise participation.

The next section elaborates the theoretical co-ordinates sketched here—telepresence, telepresent and networked embodiment; archive, repertoire, memory, and recognition; infrastructural liveness, illusionism, franchise logic, cue-based dramaturgy, and complicity—before the three case-study sections address *Voyage*, *First Shadow*, and *Hunger Games* in turn. The conclusion returns to the broader implications of digitally sustained adaptation for understanding embodiment, memory, and liveness, and for how these shape spectatorship and theatrical labour on the contemporary postdigital stage.

Theoretical Frameworks

This article treats digitally sustained adaptation as theatre in which digital infrastructures condition, but do not determine, what happens in performance. Martin Harries reminds us that attention to media and mediation ‘does not imply that these media determined... one of the ways that media leave their mark on the theater’ (2012: 8). Building on this, and on W. B. Worthen’s insistence that ‘Theatre does not merely use technology – it is a technology’ (2025: i) together with Bernhard Siegert’s observation that ‘Technologies are systems’ (Dhaliwal, Singh, and Siegert 2024), I treat digital infrastructures as situated theatrical systems embedded in broader ecologies of materials, agents, and actions. Within this frame, digitally sustained adaptations are those in which theatre’s technological status is foregrounded: three axes organise the analysis—telepresent embodiment, where bodies are scripted within digital systems; memory and recognition, where archive and repertoire are activated through cues; and infrastructural liveness, where code, venue design, and paratexts shape complicity as structured participation. Drawing on Carlson’s account of theatre

as a ‘memory machine’ and Diana Taylor’s understanding of repertoire as embodied, live transmission, I take memory to name the return of embodied and archival traces—gestures, scores, images—now sustained and circulated by digital systems (Carlson 2003: 142; Taylor 2003). As Taylor writes, ‘The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission’ (2003: 20). This insistence on presence is crucial here: in digitally sustained adaptations, repertoire does not disappear into databases but is re-scripted as audiences participate on-site while their responses are captured, routed, and folded back into the event. Recognition is faster and more indexical: the cue-based decoding of catalogue hooks, logos, canon and brand paratexts that orients spectators as events unfold (Johnson 2013; Meikle 2019). The cases mobilise both modes: memory (archive/repertoire) and recognition (cue uptake) operate together but do different work. I refer to this patterned use of sonic, visual, and textual cues to regulate tempo, orient attention, and trigger recognition at specific moments as cue-based dramaturgy. In *Voyage*, for instance, the collective surge when the opening bars of ‘Mama Mia’ play draws on decades of embodied memory, while the instant uptake of familiar logos and costume style, exemplifies recognition and cue-based dramaturgy in action.

By franchise production I mean theatrical works developed within established transmedia storyworlds. Meikle (2019) shows how adaptation in the franchise era is less a one-off transaction than a condition of participation within a ‘solar system’ of shared worlds. Sophie Charlotte van de Goor (2024) situates this participatory circumstance within convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), where franchising is both industrial logic and participatory practice. In this ecology, spectators become affective labourers; their uptake and repetition sustain the very infrastructures that produce presence. *Voyage*, *First Shadow*, and *Hunger Games* exemplify such franchise dramaturgy: each turns adaptation into world-maintenance, where theatrical immediacy depends on technological, narrative, and affective systems that keep the world legible. Put simply, recognition fuels the franchise’s affective engine, while memory supplies its embodied archive. For example, when spectators attend the *Hunger Games* arena already knowing district colours, slogans, and the mockingjay icon, their prior recognition and willingness to perform allegiance becomes part of the franchise machinery the production activates.

Illusion has always been integral to theatrical adaptation, but these cases foreground infrastructural illusion: credibility sustained by the alignment of hardware, software, and labour and not by image fidelity alone. *Voyage*’s ABBAtars read as presence because a render-and-show-control stack conditions perception at scale; *First Shadow* aligns automation, tracking, and media with recognitional cues, turning canon echoes into

timed reveals so that presence registers when infrastructural liveness and audience uptake fall into sync; *Hunger Games* builds complicity into an arena architecture that scripts spectatorship. What looks like *the effect* is, in practice, infrastructural liveness—synchrony between systems and spectators. This infrastructural dependency distinguishes the postdigital stage from earlier craft-grounded illusion and effect (cf. *The Lord of the Rings: A Musical Tale*, 2006); liveness now operates through a matrix of code, archive, and affect. A jump-scare in *First Shadow*, for example, does not rely only on an actor's timing but on a mesh of automation, sound, and lighting cues calibrated so that audience startle and subsequent hush arrive as part of the same infrastructural event.

Fandom supplies the affective infrastructure through which digitally sustained adaptations operate. As Sara Ahmed (2014) shows, affect circulates between bodies, objects, and images, organising attachment; in transmedia franchises this circulation is intensified by repetition and long-memory participation. Voyage translates musical familiarity into embodied data: rhythmic memory synchronises movement and response, generating telepresent co-presence between live bodies and digitally rendered doubles. *First Shadow* couples anticipation keyed to canon decoding with horror dramaturgy; the mesh of sound, lighting, and automation times gasps, hush, and release so that audience affect becomes part of the score of the night (Halliday 2024; Cochrane 2025). *Hunger Games* extends this logic, as stratified spatial design and marketing materialise complicity by seating spectators as District citizens, converting segmentation into dramaturgy. Across these productions, fandom is not supplementary context but affective infrastructure: it sustains immediacy through collective anticipation, uptake, and embodied response. Audience response becomes structured participation—complicity as dramaturgy—so that affect does not merely accompany liveness but completes it.

Given that the analysis turns on how infrastructures script spectatorship and shape audience response, it is useful to clarify how I am using several terms. I treat telepresence, telepresent embodiment, and networked embodiment as related but non-identical descriptors of mediated co-presence, and I use postdigital stage and infrastructural liveness to name the broader conditions under which such configurations arise. The following working definitions stabilise this vocabulary for the case studies that follow.

I use *telepresence* to describe a dramaturgical/scenographic arrangement whereby bodies and systems appear co-located across physical and digital space (Sermon et al. 2022). Within such arrangements, I use *telepresent embodiment* to describe live bodies whose presence in the room is organised through capture, rendering, and planned audience response. By *networked embodiment* I mean configurations where any sense

of ‘being there together’ depends as much on shared memories, identifications, and digitally routed forms of complicity as on face-to-face contact (Radak 2023; Otto 2023). I refer to the postdigital stage as theatrical conditions in which digital technologies are the default infrastructure across design, operation, and circulation—capture, media servers, show-control, CRM/ticketing, and front-of-house scripting. In what follows I use *algorithmic* in a strictly descriptive sense to denote rule-based computational timing and selection—show-control cueing, media-playback scheduling, CRM/seat-map logic—that condition perception; the term does not imply autonomous decision-making. Throughout, the prefix ‘post’ marks normalisation and saturation, not an after-digital epoch (Savage and Jarvis 2021). These definitions are operative, not exhaustive; they anchor the readings that follow and can be briefly illustrated in relation to *Voyage*. In this production, telepresence is felt in the co-location of ABBAatars, live band, and audience. Telepresent embodiment names the way spectators’ singing, dancing, and filming are organised through those systems. Networked embodiment becomes visible when this arena event loops back into streaming clips, social media posts, and recommendation engines beyond the building.

Taken together, these coordinates clarify the article’s claim that, on the postdigital stage, digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness by reprogramming the live body within franchised ecologies as telepresent embodiment. What reads as liveness is produced by infrastructural alignment and audience complicity, with memory (archive/repertoire) and recognition (cue uptake) doing different but coordinated work. The case studies that follow apply this frame to three routes of digitally sustained adaptation—concert-form, franchise-canon, and pre-production paratexts that mobilise page-and-screen materials.

ABBA Voyage

Voyage exemplifies how digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure the live body as telepresent embodiment. By reanimating ABBA’s 1979 concert personae within a contemporary arena sensorium, the production organises presence through infrastructural alignment and repertoires of fandom. Staged in a purpose-built, 3,000-seat arena deliberately designed to read as a gig rather than a film, it engineers plausibility across venue scale, LED/iMAG, show-control, and audience choreography (Gant 2022; Halliday 2024). Telepresence here is made rather than layered on: hardware, software, and spectator practice are built together (Bengtsson et al. 2025; Michaud 2023). This section traces how distributed embodiment, memory and recognition, and infrastructural liveness converge in this concert-form adaptation.

Voyage functions as an adaptation of ABBA's 1970s concerts and wider archival corpus. Within ABBA's franchised transmedia ecology—albums, the *Mamma Mia!* stage and film adaptations, and decades of brand iconography—the arena's site-specific scenography and audience choreography sustain a concert, not cinema, frame, with the standing zones operating as a designed participation mode. The ABBAtars appear as 1979 versions of the group whose authority derives from the cultural archive of past tours and recordings. The production activates memory—the archive and repertoire returning as embodied practice—alongside recognition—the rapid uptake of catalogue cues, iconography, and paratexts that orients spectators before and during the event. Setlist curation leverages deep catalogue remembrance, while a cue-rich sequence of hits and logo reveals steers real-time uptake; unlike a tribute act or cover band, the archival material is digitally rendered and meticulously staged, embedding the archive directly in the performance.

Repertoire, in Taylor's sense, helps explain how audiences sustain this adaptation. Singing, dancing, and collective gestures re-enact cultural memory not as static recall but as embodied practice; 'being there' is part of the transmission (Taylor 2003: 20). In *Voyage*, the repertoire operates as the embodied counterpart to the ABBAtars' digital archive: musical familiarity functions as embodied data: rhythmic memory synchronises movement and response, generating telepresent co-presence between live bodies and digitally rendered doubles. The collapse of temporal boundaries is enacted not only onstage through avatars but also in the auditorium, where the bodies of 2020s audiences echo the gestures of 1970s fans, generating immediacy through remembrance and complicity.

To show how infrastructural liveness is built into the event, I briefly sketch the show's technical pipeline. Technically, *Voyage* adapts a concert form: a roughly 95-minute set in a custom arena combining a live band with digital avatars, giant screens, animated interludes, and a tightly programmed light show. Present-day motion capture is retargeted to 1970s likenesses and driven through ILM's High Volume Facial Likeness and Performance pipeline, then rendered for a live show-control environment. By technical pipeline I mean the end-to-end chain that keeps the avatars legible at scale. It runs from capture and retargeting, through render outputs, to timecode or show-control playback across LED/iMAG, lighting, and sound. This capture-to-render stack sits inside an event architecture engineered to read as a gig, with LED/iMAG, lighting, and the live band synchronised through show-control (Gant 2022). The result is an infrastructural illusion: credibility flows from the synchrony of hardware, software, labour, and venue control instead of from image fidelity alone.

Timing in *Voyage* is algorithmic in the narrow sense defined earlier: rule-based cueing governs how media, lighting, and sound align. Timecode synchronises media playback, lighting states, and iMAG cuts so that musical beats, lighting hits, and camera movements arrive together. The loop with the audience is human-steered. Show callers and media/lighting operators adjust pacing and shots in real time, front-of-house engineers manage balance and room ambience, and crowd warmers and prompts spark collective swaying, clapping, and singing. Systems hold the grid; people fuel the energy. The responsiveness is operational not generative—the avatars do not adapt content to the crowd, but the crowd’s behaviour is nonetheless folded into how liveness reads.

Spectators frequently report being ‘fooled’ by the figures at a distance, while big-screen close-ups can feel uncanny; the apparatus governs how the illusion reads (Michaud 2023; Reddit r/ABBA threads). Practically, this is a seat-field dramaturgy: the system is calibrated so that mid-range views prioritise volumetric plausibility, while iMAG close-ups amplify spectacle. The show teaches spectators where to look and when to feel scale (Gant 2022; Michaud 2023). Applause, cheering, and dancing are not external to the spectacle but orchestrated by lighting sweeps, iMAG framing, and musical cues, transforming participation into dramaturgical material and preparing the ground for how recognition and complicity will function in the event.

Within this arrangement, recognition operates as a dramaturgical device rather than surface ornament, and complicity is built into the design rather than left as a by-product. Hooks and logos regulate tempo and orientation: chorus-entry stingers, logo reveals, and camera sweeps are placed where bodies already ‘know’ to sing, sway, or applaud, while the standing floor and aisle sightlines make those responses visible and contagious. Audience accounts describe initial technological anxiety giving way to a shared sense of connection in the room (Michaud 2023; Reddit r/ABBA threads). Complicity names the alignment between spectators’ actions and the show’s engineered cues: a willed participation that helps complete presence. The ABBA-tars occupy the stage as distributed presences whose status is secured through recollection across digital rendering, archival authority, and in-room repertoires; spectators are operationally scripted by seating, lighting, and iMAG framings that solicit collective responses and ensure co-presence across human and technical systems.

These infrastructural arrangements depend on, and are amplified by, the affective work of fandom; here, fandom functions not as backdrop but as infrastructure. Singing, dancing, clapping, and furtive photo-taking (despite restrictions) are repertoires that make presence tangible, turning cultural memory into coordinated response. Reddit threads report high satisfaction and a motivation mix of nostalgia, sociality, and novelty, with the standing/dancefloor consistently preferred as the participation

frame (Michaud 2023; r/ABBAa; rABBAb; r/AskUk). Here, franchise participation is constitutive, not merely peripheral: the choruses and riffs guide participation through time-keeping and sing-along hooks, the ABBA brand and visual motifs enable immediate connection, and alignment with the show's cues merges memory and recognition into the visceral 'now' of the performance.

As a concert-form adaptation, *Voyage* demonstrates that liveness is an infrastructural achievement and embodiment is telepresently distributed across ABBA-tars, band, and audience. It collapses temporal boundaries by staging 1979 avatars within a 2020s sensorium, producing a mode of distributed embodiment across avatars, audience repertoires, and digital systems. Memory is sustained archivally (digital rendering) and through repertoire (embodied participation), while recognition orients spectators in the moment; complicity consolidates the effect. *Voyage* exemplifies a shift from preservation to iteration: a programmable residency model geared for update, export, and modular longevity. In this frame, liveness appears as an affective condition distributed across human responsiveness and technical precision—an infrastructural achievement that critics and audiences alike describe as 'convincing' in the room. At the same time, it enacts a form of networked embodiment, looping back into streaming clips and social media posts.

Stranger Things: The First Shadow

First Shadow demonstrates how digitally sustained adaptations mobilise theatrical memory and recognition to reconfigure the live body as telepresent embodiment. Staged at the Phoenix Theatre, and now on Broadway, as a canonical prequel within the Netflix franchise, the production is engineered to read as a 'mega-episode' on stage (Arditti, quoted in Halliday 2024). Tightly integrated illusions, video, sound, and automation align so that presence is felt as system-body synchrony; following my work from elsewhere, presence here is co-produced by algorithmic systems, artists, and audiences, and registers when technical timing and embodied response are in sync (Cochrane 2025). The dramaturgy turns recognition into a condition of belief: televisual characters, motifs, and world-rules are rendered legible in the room, so that co-presence is achieved through their orchestration rather than through proximity alone. Set in a 1950s small-town imaginary that refracts the series' 1980s aesthetic, *First Shadow* makes the live body function as cultural memory, binding archival recall to in-the-moment uptake. Within this article's framework, the case foregrounds telepresent embodiment, treats memory and recognition as distinct yet coordinated operations, and understands liveness as an infrastructural achievement; belief is secured by synchronising systems, cues, and spectators, so that 'liveness' appears as the effect of that alignment instead of an additive gloss.

First Shadow is less a single-source dramatisation than a world adaptation. It transfers characters, tonalities, and serial beats into a stage grammar in which bodies, not cameras, must carry continuity. Carlson's account of theatre as a 'memory machine' clarifies the stakes: the actor's present body becomes the site where earlier iterations return (2001: 142). Taylor's notion of repertoire names the mechanism: mannerisms, gestures, and speech rhythms are re-performed as live practice, so that memory is not simply recalled but enacted (2003). In *First Shadow* this return is doubled. The production stages a 1950s small-town imaginary through, and knowingly refracted by, the series' 1980s aesthetic, so that the prequel is anchored in two temporalities at once with the actor's body bridging them. This double anchoring grants the stage event a historical depth that exceeds plot exposition and lets recall attach to embodied style as much as to continuity of facts, so that memory legitimises presence: spectators recognise the world because bodies reiterate it.

Recognition, however, does different work from memory. In franchised theatre, I use recognition to name dramaturgical labour: fast, indexical decoding of canon motifs, tonal references, logo-like visualities, and paratextual knowledge that orients spectators before language can (Johnson 2013; Meikle 2019). *First Shadow* composes around that labour. Entrances, reveals, and tonal pivots are timed to uptake thresholds; the show assumes the audience will meet it halfway and writes that assumption into pacing. Halliday's analysis and my earlier study highlight the precision with which audience reactions—gasps, hushes, and laughter—are integrated into the performance, as though the auditorium were synchronised with the action on stage (Halliday 2024; Cochrane 2025).

This precision is intentional and shows why the distinction between memory and recognition matters. Memory imparts depth and authority, but recognition dictates timing. The production meticulously positions moments where recognition will peak—through a revealed object, a sonic cue recalling the series, or a character's signature phrase—so that uptake becomes the pivot on which the scene turns. The audience does not merely 'understand' the reference; that understanding is the dramaturgical trigger that shifts intensity from suspense to revelation. Presence is rendered legible at the moment recognition occurs. Effects such as the exploding rat, the first appearance of Vecna/The Flayer, and the spider swarm across the stage floor and walls follow a deliberate pattern—an audible gasp, a collective hush, then release—that propels the scene from decoding to action. Taken together, these sequences show that recognition is not decorative fan service but a structuring device for rhythm and affect.

This is also where franchise theatre departs from generic stage horror. In a non-franchise production, suspense peaks are engineered primarily through

craft—light, sound, choreography. *First Shadow* certainly relies on those techniques, but it additionally calibrates to prior knowledge: rats, spiders, and other motifs carry canonical charge. The same reveal can therefore play differently across an audience: for some spectators, the franchise echo detonates; for others, the sequence works on craft alone. The dramaturgy counts on both, and that dual legibility is one of the production's formal achievements, allowing it to function simultaneously as horror spectacle and as recognitional labour for those already invested in the storyworld.

The recognitional dramaturgy is inseparable from the show's media-stage infrastructure. Across the proscenium, a Holotronica Hologauze turns air into a projection surface, while an upstage LED wall on Brompton processing carries dynamic environments and shock cuts. A triple revolve with lifts and pneumatics enables rapid reconfiguration and vanishings; Disguise servers synchronise mapped content with automation and tracking, and tightly cued pyrotechnics punctuate transitions (Halliday 2024). A show-control mesh coordinates these layers so that movement, media, and light converge with precision. A Meyer Ultra-X rig—with its generous low-frequency extension, zone-timed localisation, and era-evocative textures—places voices and presences within the space (Halliday 2024). Conceptually, this is infrastructural illusion: credibility arises from the synchrony of hardware, software, and human labour, not from image fidelity alone. When all elements converge, the world behaves consistently; headline moments—the battleship vanishing in plain sight, cracking computer screens, shattering mirrors, spiders multiplying in a jar, the first Vecna/Flayer emergence, the collapse of the *Dark of the Moon* school-play set in a cascading double fly—register as shifts in the room's atmosphere instead of isolated technical tricks. This shows how infrastructural liveness underwrites telepresence. The system teaches the eye what counts as evidence and delivers it on cue, so that the fiction holds because the system adheres to its internal logic and the coups appear as ontological shifts in the world, not as pieces of stage gadgetry.

Telepresence in *First Shadow* is thus not an optional enhancement but the condition under which the story is believed. Hauntological overlays, layered projections, and choreographed disappearances make bodies appear co-located across material and projected space: cracks spread across the arch, surfaces seem to 'shed,' and figures slip between onstage and mediated presence. In the terms set out earlier, telepresence names this dramaturgical arrangement of co-location, while telepresent embodiment describes live bodies whose visibility and agency are organised through mapped projections, automation, spatialised sound, and the Hologauze. The live body is telepresently distributed across these systems, so that presence is registered at the junction of flesh, image, and sound rather than at a single physical point.

Audience response in *First Shadow* is framed as structured participation—what I call complicity—rather than incidental background noise. Reveals are timed to recognitional peaks that prompt audiences to lean forward in unison; sequences of gasps, hushes, and laughter punctuate the action as part of the score (Halliday 2024; Cochrane 2025). The production exploits theatrical affordances that television cannot easily reproduce—auditorium scale, shock effects, immersive sound—to script participation through timing, address, and spatialisation. In doing so, it shows how franchising functions as a collaborative act: spectators’ affective investments, formed elsewhere in the storyworld, are recruited as resources that keep the world legible in the room. The show does not simply invite attachment; it relies on it, synchronising cheers at familiar franchise markers, awe during high-stakes moments such as the battleship reveal, and shared laughter or gasps as spectators learn the show’s rhythm and internal logic. In this way, complicity is not merely an emotional by-product; it is a deliberately choreographed resource that propels the narrative forward, shaping how the story is experienced, and understood in real time.

Complicity is both ethically ambivalent and aesthetically productive. On one hand, the affective alignment between spectators and performance can reinforce the authority of the franchise, as spectators help reproduce the world that interpellates them. On the other, that same alignment generates a live social charge that television cannot replicate, producing energy that is immediate and collective. The audience’s intake of breath and shared reactions become integral to the event’s truth-making: not just responses, but co-creations of presence. What matters here is less judging the morality of that charge than understanding its mechanics: identification sets the rhythm, complicity provides the drive, and telepresence binds the two so that co-created affect registers as presence. Audience delight is not mere noise, but the medium through which the illusion is verified and the world is rendered real.

First Shadow exemplifies a franchise-canon route to digitally sustained adaptation. The production operates at the intersection of memory and recognition, where memory legitimises the live reiteration of the world through the actor’s body and recognition dictates timing, transforming decoding into action. These processes are sustained by a media-stage infrastructure whose synchrony produces infrastructural liveness—an infrastructural illusion in which presence is actively manufactured through the integration of systems, bodies, and performance technologies. At its core, the production relies on structured audience participation—complicity—to convert attachment into tempo, aligning affective responses with the performance’s beats. Together, these dynamics show how immediacy on the postdigital stage emerges from the entanglement of infrastructure, memory practices, and spectator labour. The

live body is reprogrammed as telepresent embodiment within a franchised narrative ecology, not because technology replaces liveness, but because liveness itself becomes the outcome of a precisely orchestrated relationship between bodies, systems, and the histories that audiences bring with them.

The Hunger Games: On Stage

This section argues that *Hunger Games* foregrounds complicity as structured participation, composed through venue governance and in-world address. District-zoned seating and tiered pricing position spectators as citizens of Panem; circulation routes, stairs, and 360-degree sightlines choreograph posture and attention; so-called ‘Capitol Communications’ (press releases and emails) extend the diegesis into the inbox and foyer. Screen address by President Snow reintroduces the franchise’s cinematic authority inside the arena, so theatrical action proceeds in the round while authority speaks from the screen. The result is telepresent embodiment distributed across audience bodies and infrastructural control—an arrangement that is ethically ambivalent and theatrically productive.

Hunger Games shows how a digitally sustained adaptation extends theatrical address into the anticipatory and paratextual, scripting spectators as participants before the first cue. Conor McPherson’s version draws on both Suzanne Collins’s first novel and Lionsgate’s first film, yet translates them into an arena grammar—360-degree sightlines, in-the-round reveals, and aerial action. Staged in a purpose-built, 1,200-seat venue at Canary Wharf, the architecture seats the audience inside the Games’ geometry. Pre-show messaging and a district-zoned seat map convert pricing and placement into scenographic address. In this section I read these infrastructures as dramaturgy: they prime identification, time participation, and position the live body within a franchised ecology before any scene begins.

Hunger Games treats spectacle as governance. Digital infrastructures—including district-zoned seat maps and pricing, ticketing and CRM messaging, access control, and show-control timing—work with the purpose-built arena to script spectators as participants before and during the event. These systems are not peripheral logistics but the means by which participation is allocated and paced. Complicity is not only a theme of the storyworld but an operating condition of the event: architecture and systems assign roles, shape attention, and fold audience bodies into the Games’ calculus. The production thereby makes complicity a designed outcome rather than a side-effect of enthusiasm.

The oval 1,200-seat plan installs spectators inside the action. With 360-degree reveals, multi-directional entrances via vomitories, and vertically staged sequences,

the venue replaces frontality with distributed focal points; sightlines, not shots, do the editing. Producers frame the design as proximity—audiences are ‘only ever twelve seats away from the action’ (Wyver 2025)—turning adjacency into a pacing device for anticipation and response. At key moments, seating banks for Capitol-adjacent districts (notably Districts 1 and 2) shift position around President Snow’s addresses (The Hunger Games on Stage | Opening night highlights in London). These movements reorient those spectators towards the screen and materially mark their closeness to power. To remain legible from every block, cues are synchronised across axes (lighting states, sound localisation, performer traffic). This synchronisation allows the house to move as one when required and to fracture into local viewpoints when useful. By design, spectacle should result from the integrated operation of stage and house; early previews, however, reported bottlenecks and constrained egress, indicating that execution was still settling. Where *ABBA Voyage* concentrates attention through a frontal axis and an avatar pipeline, *Hunger Games* binds it through oval address and governance of access, making complicity, rather than nostalgia, the principal engine.

Hierarchy is literalised as placement. District-zoned stands and graded prices convert a purchase decision into a dramaturgical position: vantage is value, and value is affiliation. Franchise memory is spatialised here. The arena recalls page and screen while district-zoned seating and Capitol-style entry rehearse repertoire in the body. Recognition is primed by the map; placement and comportment turn recall into behaviour. Space functions as dramaturgy, scripting complicity in advance.

In this configuration, immediacy becomes a function of system-driven liveness: placement and flow are written as cues that reprogram the live body as telepresent embodiment within a franchised ecology. Ticketing and CRM tools, seat-map logic, access control, and show-control timing together operate as a single governance apparatus. Audience movement is rehearsed in digital interfaces and then routed through stairs, barriers, and aisles; the auditorium itself becomes a programmable surface for attention and affect.

The marketing campaign operates as a form of governance, not mere decoration. ‘Capitol Communications’, pre-registration funnels, and site copy adopt the diction, typography, and salutations of Panem. They address spectators as subjects and rehearse tone, tempo, and comportment before they arrive, producing what we might call anticipatory liveness: participation is practised in advance, and recall is primed as a mode of uptake. Paratext and placement reinforce one another. The auditorium is zoned by Panem districts and price bands map onto that zoning, turning hierarchy into an economy of visibility. For late-December performances purchased in August, premium districts approached £197, while others sat near £39.50; District 11 appeared only as

restricted view, and District 12 was absent from the on-sale map. The point is not fixity but structuration: dynamic pricing operates, yet the plan teaches spectators how to be in Panem and where they belong within it. Patron emails issued during previews advised seat renumbering ‘due to a recent change in the configuration of the auditorium.’ These messages confirm that the seating plan functioned as a live system rather than a fixed map, with audience placement itself treated as adjustable dramaturgy.

A key communiqué (Press release 2025) announced John Malkovich as President Snow and specified that his appearance would be delivered on screen. This choice matters. By integrating a filmed ruler who speaks into the auditorium, the production reintroduces the franchise’s cinematic apparatus inside the live event. Theatrical action proceeds in the round, yet authority arrives via the screen; the work mirrors its sources on page and film while binding the audience into the Capitol’s chain of address. Screen address here is not an add-on but a governing node in the network: mediated command and co-presence coincide.

Audience response scripts participation with complicity engineered at the level of design. District seating, pre-show ‘Capitol Communications,’ and proximity staging choreograph salutes, gasps, and hushes as timing devices within the score of the night (Wyver 2025; Wiegand 2025). During tribute deaths, the production routes live camera feeds of audience reactions onto in-arena screens, folding spectators’ shock, grief, or excitement back into the Capitol spectacle (*The Hunger Games on Stage* | Opening night highlights in London). The system not only records response but anticipates it, building audience affect into the dramaturgy as a resource that confirms and circulates the very violence being staged. This is constitutive participation, not peripheral engagement: audiences help stabilise continuity even as they are enrolled by its apparatus.

Read critically, these same mechanisms can naturalise franchise authority. Affective alignment risks affirming the brand’s moral frame even as the storyworld thematises spectacle and control. Two vectors meet at the threshold. Spectators are invited to consume as the Capitol, relishing scale, shock, and the promise of being ‘in the heart of the Games’ (Wiegand 2025); at the same time, district labels, seat maps, and uneven sightlines stratify them as citizens of Panem in the room. Anticipation becomes pre-embodied role-play, and purchase becomes part of the text. Complicity is not incidental emotion but structural function.

As a case study, *Hunger Games* clarifies how liveness is distributed on the postdigital stage. Technological systems—ticketing and CRM, seat-map logic, access control, show-control, and screen address—set tempo and coordinate the room. Cultural memory drawn from page and film supplies orientation and authority. Embodied spectatorship converts both into action through recognition, compartment, and collective rhythms.

Presence emerges from this convergence as networked embodiment: 'being there' together depends as much on pricing, placement, paratexts, and routed responses as on face-to-face encounter. Within that network, the live body is reprogrammed as telepresent embodiment, situated at the junction of systems, space, and franchise memory. In this production, complicity is rendered most explicitly as the engine of digitally sustained adaptation: the audience does not simply watch the Games; they become the Games.

Conclusion

This article has argued that digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness on the postdigital stage. Presence is composed across bodies, code, and infrastructural design rather than co-presence alone. The live body is reprogrammed as telepresent and networked embodiment within franchised ecologies: it carries cultural memory, answers to infrastructural timing, and reads as immediate through recognition and structured participation.

Each case clarifies a different route. *Voyage* exemplifies system-driven liveness, where an operational show pipeline and concert form stabilise repeatable timing while channelling audience energy into choreographed immediacy. *First Shadow* shows recognition as dramaturgy, converting canon cues into turning points that regulate tempo and belief as technical timing and audience uptake align. *Hunger Games* foregrounds complicity most explicitly, using venue governance, district seat maps and pricing, moving seating banks, and in-world 'Capitol Communications' to recruit spectators into the very structures of power the narrative critiques. Together these productions show how adaptive theatre distributes liveness across technological systems, cultural memory, and embodied spectatorship.

For adaptation studies, the analysis suggests that large-scale franchise performance is not well served by a model that treats adaptation primarily as narrative transfer or intertextual rewriting. The cases examined here frame adaptation as infrastructural world-maintenance: what is 'adapted' is as much a performance form, an archival corpus, and a set of participatory repertoires as a storyline or character. Digitally sustained adaptation names this shift, drawing attention to how source materials are reconfigured through media pipelines, venue designs, and paratextual platforms that script how audiences recognise, remember, and inhabit a storyworld.

For performance studies and digital performance, the article pushes beyond defence or lament of liveness under digital conditions. Rather than positioning theatre against the digital, the case studies treat the postdigital stage as a primary site for examining how infrastructural liveness, telepresent embodiment, and complicity

organise spectatorship at scale. Liveness appears not as an ontological guarantee but as an infrastructural achievement: an affective condition distributed across code, architectures, labour, and the histories that audiences bring with them.

For work on dramaturgy, the article extends existing accounts of processual, relational practice by insisting that CRM systems, ticketing architectures, show-control grids, and arena geometries are themselves dramaturgical materials. Treating these infrastructures as part of dramaturgical labour rather than as neutral background makes it possible to analyse how adaptive projects in franchised ecologies choreograph behaviour long before and after the apparent ‘show,’ and how they convert fandom into an affective infrastructure that keeps presence legible.

As these productions evolved through 2025, their infrastructures continued to reconfigure. *ABBA Voyage* refreshed its set list for its third anniversary, *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* opened on Broadway with expanded illusions and effects, and *The Hunger Games: On Stage* adjusted audience layout and access during previews at the Troubadour Canary Wharf venue. Such changes confirm the central claim: that on the postdigital stage, digitally sustained adaptations reconfigure embodiment, memory, and liveness by making what feels live the outcome of infrastructures, recognition, and complicity working in concert. The contribution here is to treat those conditions as dramaturgy and not context, and to name how adaptation in this register scripts the body as telepresent, affective, and franchised—an understanding that opens further lines of inquiry for adaptation studies, performance studies, and digital dramaturgy alike.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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