Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename project (museum, archaeological site and monument) (Belgium)

Marie-Claire Van der Donckt (*)

* Provincial Archaeological
Museum (pam) Ename
East-Flanders, Belgium

Abstract:

The Provincial Archaeological Museum (pam) Ename, working closely with the Flemish Heritage Institute and the Ename Center for Public Archaeology, has embarked on a major heritage initiative that will develop and disseminate new presentation technologies and educational techniques among the members of a large consortium of regional heritage sites and museums.

Resumen:

El Provincial Archaeological Museum (pam) Ename, en estrecha colaboración con el Flemish Heritage Institute y el Ename Center for Public Archaeology, se ha embarcado en una importante iniciativa que pretende el desarrollo y la difusión de nuevas técnicas educativas y presentaciones tecnológicas entre los miembros de un amplio consorcio de yacimientos arqueológicos, monumentos y museos de la región.

I. BACKGROUND: ENAME AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PRESENTATION TECHNOLOGY

Virtual Reality and multimedia are central components of the heritage presentation programme at Ename. These techniques have been developed over the past ten years both at the Ename Archaeological Park, the Provincial Archaeological Museum Ename, and the Saint Laurentius Church to help the visitor understand and experience the past as it has been revealed through extensive archaeological and historical research.

Ename is located in Flanders, about 50 km west of Brussels, and 25 km south of Ghent, on the eastern bank of the River Scheldt, one of Belgium's two major rivers. The village of Ename is today a district of the city of Oudenaarde. During the 10th and 11th centuries, Ename was an important settlement situated on the medieval boundary between the French Kingdom and the Ottonian Empire. From the 11th century till the 18th century Benedictine monks built here their abbey. The intensive archaeological and historical research carried out at Ename since 1982 has revealed the exceptional richness of its archaeological heritage. Ename's ruins have preserved evidence of the material world of three important classes in medieval Flanders: those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked. It was therefore decided to develop the site into an open-air archaeological park, to establish an innovative museum, and to make the 10th-century Saint Laurentius Church and the nearby "Bos t'Ename" forest reserve accessible to visitors from both Belgium and abroad.

The major aim of the project was to communicate new insights about archaeology, history, and conservation to the general public with great attention to scholarly accuracy and by means of multimedia

Figura 1. TimeScope 2 at the Saint Laurentius Church. © pam Ename.

technologies. Among the most important of these technologies are on-site virtual reconstructions, museum multimedia and educational projects.

II. ON-SITE VIRTUAL REALITY

Among the challenges faced by the planners and designers of the Ename **Archaeological Park** was one shared by archaeological interpreters all over the world; namely, to make complex archaeological remains comprehensible to the general public. However impressive or picturesque those remains may be, they are rarely recognizable as specific structures (such as houses, churches, or workshops) and they thus fail to capture the fascination of most visitors to the site.

In the case of Ename, visitors see a labyrinth of partially preserved architectural remains. These are the foundations of the Benedictine abbey that dominated life in Ename from 1063 to 1795. The remains of the early-medieval trade settlement (975-1050) are not visible, since they consisted largely of soil layers and traces of decomposed wood that were removed in the process of excavation. Ename has attempted to avoid the interpretive and ethical problems of physical reconstruction by offering visitors a picture of ancient life at Ename through the use of an on-site Virtual Reality installation. A first prototype of this new VR technology, called TimeScope 1, was opened to the public on September 2, 1997.

The TimeScope 1 system, superimposing a 3-D model of the abbey church over a real-time video shot of the exposed foundations, allows visitors to see the church as it appeared in its original state. An accompanying multimedia presentation offers additional information about the site and the people who lived there.

In 1999, a second TimeScope installation was designed and placed in the garden of the Ename Museum to interpret the significance of a standing monument, rather than archaeological remains. Its focus is the nearby early romanesque **Saint Laurentius Church**, which has remained nearly unchanged since the year 1000—and which has undergone extensive excavation and interior restoration. Since this

MARQ, ARQUEOLOGÍA y MUSEOS, 03
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Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename ...

monument was closed to the public, the TimeScope 2 system permitted visitors to monitor the progress of the excavations and restoration work. An accompanying multimedia presentation highlighted the historical importance of the church and explains the rationale and stages of the restoration project.

In the summer of 2002, the restoration of the Saint Laurentius Church was completed and the Time-Scope 2 installation was adapted for use within the church structure itself. With this, a major phase of the technological development work of the Ename Project will have been concluded. Yet the public reopening of the restored monument and its associated multimedia interpretation technologies offers an opportunity to cooperate with the professionals and scholars at other significant sites to create a dramatically new kind of heritage initiative.

In addition, Virtual Reality has been used at Ename to present a rare—and highly vulnerable—natural area to the general public. The nearby "Bos t'Ename" **Forest Preserve**, accessible on-site to only a limited number of visitors on guided tours, can now be explored by means of a virtual walk, allowing Internet visitors open access to otherwise restricted areas, with their visits posing no danger of physical damage to this precious and delicate ecological area. This virtual tour, mainly based upon panoramic VR, shows Bos t'Ename in different seasons, highlights the rare flora and fauna found in the area, and shows the historical elements, still visible in the landscape. It follows the route of the walking trail which starts and ends at the museum.

III. NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE MUSEUM

The Provincial Archaeological Museum Ename has also placed great emphasis in stressing interactivity and in its use of computer-controlled DVD, multimedia, and virtual reality technologies—in addition to traditional presentation techniques.

One of the highlights of the museum's displays is a character-based multimedia presentation of Ename's history, entitled **"Feast of a Thousand Years"**. It links selected archaeological artifacts with 24 personal historical viewpoints, portrayed by prominent modern Flemish actors in period dress, on a large video display. Meticulously researched and accurately costumed, these historical interpretations add a powerful emotional dimension to the presentation of Ename's history. Moreover, they provide the exhibited objects with a human context that is often lacking in traditional archaeological displays.

The selection of characters for the Feast of a Thousand Years was based both on historical criteria and narrative interest. They span time, social rank, and personal background—from the 10th-century Lord

Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename ...

133 MARQ. MUSEOS

MARQ, ARQUEOLOGÍA y MUSEOS, 03
2008: 131-136   ISSN: 1885-3145

Figura 3. Archeolab.
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of Ename to a simple villager from the same era; from a sick monk of the 15th century to the monastery's abbot of the 17th century; from a traveling gypsy woman of the 19th century to an archaeologist of the present day.

Another interactive system developed for the Ename Museum is the **TimeLine**, which utilizes 3D reconstructions of an area measuring 3 by 3 km over a timespan of 1000 years. This interactive installation is operated by a touchscreen and shows one millennium of evolution of the selected area through interactive 3D visualisation. In addition, archaeological artifacts and historical objects exhibited in a standard chronologically-arranged exhibition are given spatial and historical context by being visually linked to the TimeLine reconstructions. Visitors are therefore able to obtain supplementary visual and textual information on the precise place and era in which many of the exhibited artifacts were found.

A similar approach is taken in the **TimeTravel** system, linking historical and archaeological sources with virtual reconstructions. The characters of the Feast are represented in this application, in which users can, for example, explore the harbour where the 11th century Frisian merchant "character" has just arrived with his boat, or see the gardens and orchard where the 17th century gardener "character" works. This application highlights 20 locations in Ename through panoramic VR visualisation and see, from each spot, one millennium of evolution pass by.

In the **ArcheoLab** of the museum, visitors can learn about archaeology through hands-on experience. Digital video sequences give background information on how archaeology can help date and analyze ancient plants, bones, and man-made objects of antiquity. Interactive multiple choice questions stimulate the visitor to actively examine and discover information about the objects and samples in the ArcheoLab.

In the **educational department**, individual (children) visitors as well as organized school groups can learn about the history of Ename through theater, video and hands-on workshops. Through a series of age-level-designed presentations, young visitors can become "archaeologists for a day", learning for themselves how scientists think and work with archaeological materials and objects.

IV. THE FRANCIA MEDIA HERITAGE INITIATIVE

The Francia Media Project will combine the goals of scholarship, heritage preservation, and local economic development. It will utilize the advanced multimedia presentation techniques of Ename together with the

134

MARQ, arqueología y museos, 03
ISSN: 1885-3145   2008: 131-136

Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename ...

scientific, architectural, communications, and management expertise of the other consortium partners to create a comprehensive cultural project.

It seeks, therefore, to stimulate scientific research, advanced heritage presentation, and a wide range of cultural events throughout the historical core of Francia Media (Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy) to study, commemorate, communicate, develop, and preserve this rich European legacy.

It is hoped that this multi-disciplinary framework can serve as a model for other multi-cultural heritage presentation projects that seek to stress both the universal and the local values of historical patrimony. The planned activities include:

- An **international exhibit** is planned for the coming years in ename. This exhibit will highlight the shared heritage of Francia Media and will place its emphasis not only on spectacular elite cultures and artifacts, but also on social life in every stratum of society. A highlight of this exhibit will be the use of innovative multimedia and Virtual Reality applications to bring to life the society and culture of the regions and cities in Francia Media in their various historical periods.
- Establishment of a select **international scientific committee** and academic working group to cooperate in the formulation of new historic approaches to the history of Francia Media—both for the development of exhibition content and for the general historical and archaeological study of the period.
- **Cultural Tourism Itinerary through Francia Media** will link and promote the special events in all the consortium cities and regions. This route will offer visitors information on the history of the various roads and trade routes that crossed this region as well as highlight special events at the historic sites along its course. A website and special publications will also offer practical touristic information.
- **International seminars and workshops** of academics, government officials, and heritage professionals.

Figura 4. TimeScope 1 at the archaeological site. © pam Ename

Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename ...

MARQ, ARQUEOLOGÍA y MUSEOS, 03

V. THE ENAME CHARTER: TOWARD INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES IN HERITAGE PRESENTATION

The Francia-Media Project is an experiment in international cooperation in the development of new methods and media for heritage presentation. Yet in the course of early discussions with consortium members, it became clear that there is a real need for international guidelines for Authenticity, Intellectual Integrity, and Sustainable Quality in the Public Presentation of Archaeological and Historical Sites.

In many parts of the world, tourist authorities, private firms, and international organizations invest in expensive and technologically advanced presentation systems are being increasingly used as a spur to tourist development. And while there are a large number of international charters, declarations, and guidelines to maintain the quality of the conservation and restoration of the physical fabric of ancient monuments, there is no generalized international oversight of the methods and quality standards public presentation.

Therefore, as an accompanying action to the organization of the Francia-Media Project, the Ename Center—with the support of Ministery of the Flemish Community and the Government of the Province of East-Flanders—and the active participation of the consortium members will begin to work on the formulation of international guidelines on public presentation standards and techniques.

The Ename experience has shown that multimedia can indeed become an important tool in communicating heritage information to the general public. The next stage envisioned for the enhancement and development of these interpretive technologies is the Francia Media Project with its construction of a consortium of development sites, working together to develop new presentation technologies, focused on a common cultural theme. As mentioned, the work of this consortium will be guided by the principles of a new international charter focusing on accepted standards of professional practice and scientific accuracy in public heritage presentation techniques. This charter will further enhance the objectives of the Francia Media Project, not only as a test of the new multimedia presentation technologies in a linked network of culturally and historically-related sites. It will hopefully encourage scholars, professionals, and heritage officials to look upon public presentation as a serious intellectual and cultural activity that must always be closely linked to scientific standards of archaeological and historical research.

The Ename Project has shown that it is possible to combine archaeological research, multimedia presentation technologies, and community development into a single long-term enterprise. The aspect of community development is especially crucial, as an increasing proportion of funding sources for cultural heritage projects comes from public funds—in which educational and communication aspects are often central elements.

136

MARQ, ARQUEOLOGÍA y MUSEOS, 03
ISSN: 1885-3145   2008: 131-136

Marie-Claire Van der Donckt - Innovative presentation techniques in the Ename ...