Virtual reality (VR) and multimedia are central components of the heritage presentation program at Ename, Belgium. These techniques are designed to help the visitor understand and experience the past as revealed through archaeological and historical research. The program uses different VR approaches to bring to life for visitors archaeological remains, standing monuments, and elements of the historical landscape.

Ename is located in the province of East-Flanders, in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. It is situated about 20 kilometers south of Ghent, on the eastern bank of the River Scheldt. The village of Ename is today a district of the city of Oudenaarde. Geographically, it is located in the Flemish Ardennes, a hilly region in southwestern Flanders.

The archaeological site of Ename is situated on the medieval boundary between the French kingdom and the German empire. The intensive archaeological and historical research carried out at Ename since 1982 has revealed the exceptional richness of its archaeological heritage. Researchers have found preserved in Ename’s ruins 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 (see Figure 1) and the nearby Bos t’Ename Forest Preserve accessible to visitors from both Belgium and abroad.

We named the overall project Ename 974 to commemorate the foundation date of the first medieval settlement. Its major aim is to communicate new insights about archaeology, history, and conservation to the general public with great attention to scholarly accuracy and by means of multimedia technologies. Among the most important of these technologies are on-site virtual reconstructions, museum multimedia, and educational projects.

Since 1998, a new organization, the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation (http://www.enamecenter.org), has served as an international extension of the Ename 974 Project. Its goal is to develop new technologies and new standards for heritage presentation. It also coordinates heritage presentation projects and educational programs for partner sites around the world.

On-site VR

The Ename 974 Project with the support of the province of East-Flanders developed the archaeological site of Ename (see Figure 2, next page) into an open-air museum. Among the challenges we faced in this effort is one shared by archaeological interpreters all over the world—namely, to make complex and poorly preserved archaeological remains comprehensible to the general public.

The simple fact is that however impressive or picturesque archaeological 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.

Figure 1. View of the Saint Laurentius Church.