



# Atomica

*The spiffy ready-reference suite*



By Péter Jacsó

One of my favorite reference suites has been GuruNet, which launched in 1999. Its only disadvantage was that it was a client-side application. You had to install a tiny application on your computer that in turn communicated with its own Web site, without even running a browser. I happily installed it on all of my computers at home and in the office, but when I was elsewhere I could not use it unless I got permission to install it on someone else's computer.

It was great news when late last year a new version was launched that did not require any application program—just your browser to reach the same set of beautifully integrated ready-reference sources—and to remember its new name, Atomica.

It has a superb collection of well-known traditional ready-reference sources and an excellent set of non-traditional ready reference sources that were born on the Web. The Atomica software is a masterpiece of design that brings content to you from a wide variety of sources in an absolutely seamless way.

## The traditional reference sources

In the classical category, you find such gems as the very current 4th edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary (AHD)* that was released in September 2000. The 3rd edition of *Roget II* is the thesaurus source. For its general encyclopedia, Atomica licensed the 1999 edition of the *Columbia Concise Encyclopedia*. True, there is a more current and more comprehensive edition, the full *Columbia Encyclopedia* 6th, available on the Bartleby and on the Information Please almanac sites, but the new concise edition would satisfy most of your information needs. And it presents its results in a far more efficient way than either of the alternatives. This is true for all the reference sources in Atomica.

Special dictionaries and encyclopedias complement the definitions provided by the Columbia encyclopedia and *AHD*. If you search for a medical term, you will find definitions not only from the *American Heritage Dictionary* but also from the *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary*. For legal terms, you also get a definition from *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. For computer science terminology, the illustrated *Computer Desktop Encyclopedia* provides additional definition.

For biographical information, Atomica uses a variety of sources beyond the *Columbia Concise Encyclopedia* and the *American Heritage Dictionary*. The largest biographical-only source is the Cambridge Dictionary of American Biography that is part of the AND Reference Database. For finding artists in a variety of fields, there are short biographies from the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. You may have never heard of AND International Publishers, a Dutch company that keeps a low profile but provides the software for some well-known encyclopedias like the *Grolier Academic Encyclopedia*, as well as part of the content for the A&E Biography site. The *Information Please* almanac also often has biographies, although very short ones.

Quotations by and about a person are from Simpson's Contemporary Quotations. The name is a tad misleading as it was contemporary as of 1988, but it is still a valuable source. [See Figure 1.] Country profiles are from the 2000 edition of the *CIA World Factbook*, along with very good (but not detailed) overview maps.

Country profiles are also offered by the *Columbia Concise Encyclopedia* and the *American Heritage Dictionary* along with maps from the latter that are less adequate than the maps from the CIA source.

To keep these ready-reference sources current, there is an update section that displays information about an important event in the life of the person or an important development related to the subject, such as the passing away of Pierre Trudeau after the encyclopedia and the dictionary were updated. [See Figure 2.]

## The non-traditional reference sources

There are many sources in Atomica that do not have a traditional printed counterpart because these sources were born on the Web and are used to answer a variety of reference questions. Sometimes the Atomica sources are complementary to the traditional sources; sometimes they are the only source.

For example, the Who2 database is often used to provide short biographies, especially about celebrities, as well as hyperlinks to a handful of Web sites about the personalities. TheWho2 collection is also directly searchable and browsable at

Figure 1

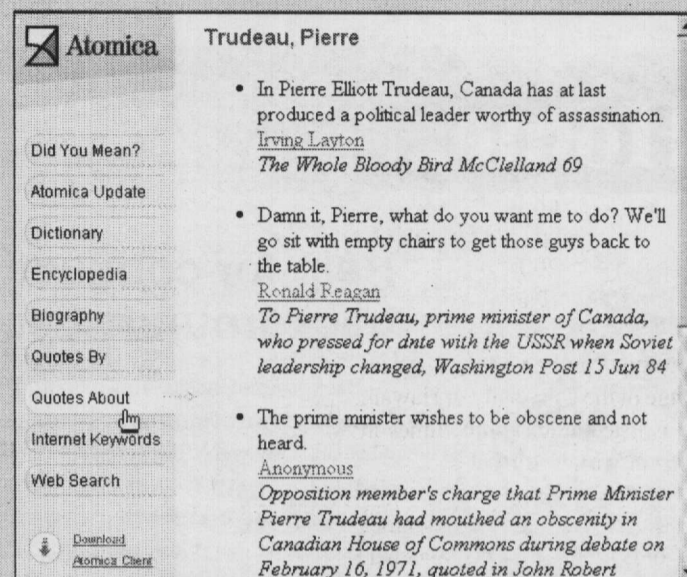


Figure 2

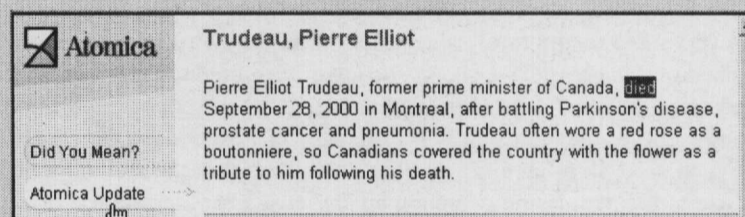


Figure 3

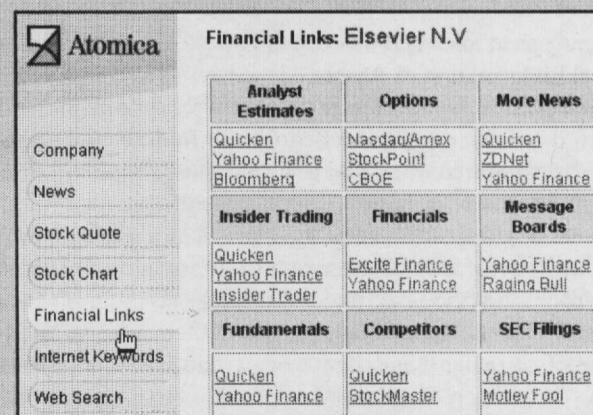
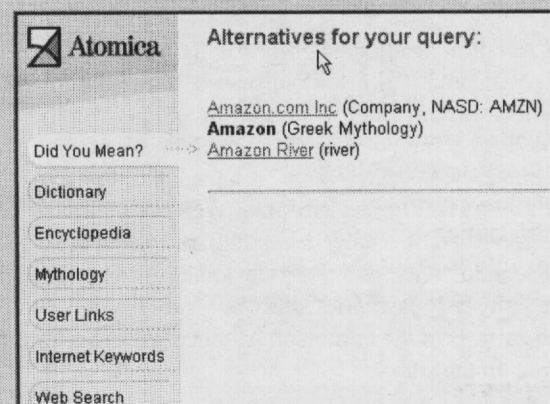


Figure 4





[www.who2.com](http://www.who2.com), but Atomica fetches the relevant content and integrates it with the information from other sources.

For sports personalities, the biographical sources also include the STATS database. Current information about countries is delivered by Moreover, a superb and really international and up-to-the-minute source. Definitions for acronyms come from the excellent Acronym Finder database that has nearly 200,000 definitions.

Another Web-born source that appears for most of the queries is the Internet Keywords database of RealNames Corporation. It lists the Web sites that include your search term(s) in their name or title. For example, your search for Hawaii will bring up links to hundreds of such sites (I stopped counting after 200) from University of Hawaii to Hawaii Pacific University to the Fan Clubs of *Hawaii Five O*. However, the result list can be very redundant. The home page of the University of Hawaii, for example, is listed at least three times in slightly different variant formats.

When you are searching for cities or states, you will be offered current weather reports and forecasts from AccuWeather, Inc., and zoomable city maps from MapBlast (this misbehaves sometimes).

Looking for information about companies pulls up information that you could not even dream about finding in print sources. The most common, though not exclusive, information source is Inlumen Inc., which feeds the data to Atomica. You will find a succinct and factual summary about the company, recent financial news, stock quotes from the last day of trading, and a stockchart snapshot from Stockpoint, Inc. If you need further charts of the stock's performance, you can be taken to the Stockpoint site by clicking on the snapshot and then produce customized charts to your heart's content.

If this is not enough about a company, than the Financial Links section of Atomica offers finance heaven by linking to the most respected sources of Quicken, Bloomberg, Insider Trader, Stockmaster, Raging Bull, Motley Fool, and the Finance sections of Yahoo! and Excite. You can get analyst estimates, Fundamentals, SEC Filings, Message Boards news, AMEX and NASDAQ information, to name some of the possibilities. [See Figure 3.]

In those rare cases when Atomica does not have information about the company (because it is privately held), or about a person or issue because it is so obscure (like the mythological figure Scirus), then it forwards your search to Google. Earlier, Atomica used Oingo, and it was its weakest point. Web searching is always displayed as an option, so in the unlikely case where you still need further information, clicking on the Web Search button will launch a search in Google. Teaming up with Google has added even more value to this awesome reference tool set.

### The Atomica software

I can't help gushing about the software. It makes navigation in the infor-

mation jungle simple and intuitive. You always know where you are and how you can return to the previous point. This is partly due to the fact that Atomica typically does not take you to other sites, but rather brings the information to you and presents it in a consistent and standard format, surrounded by the Atomica navigation frame.

The frame has tabbed sections labeled as Encyclopedia, Dictionary, City Map, News, Financial Links, etc., and this labeled frame remains on the screen. The actual section labels vary depending on the result of the search. Clicking

on them will display the information in the largest pane of the frame from the Encyclopedia, the Dictionary, etc. Exceptionally, as in the case of Financial Links or Internet Keywords, you are taken to the destination site selected, because the framing strategy would not work well with humongous sites like NASDAQ or Bloomberg.

The software is exceptionally accommodating and also polite. When you misspell a word, it offers you similarly spelled word(s) to choose from, instead of just blurring out a message: Invalid word. For example, if you type protozon it will

respond with this: "Perhaps you meant: protozoon, protozoan, protozoa"—and when you click on any of them it will offer the definitions from the relevant sources.

If a word has multiple meaning, such as Amazon, then Atomica displays the Did You Mean? label and displays the homonyms with a qualifier, like Amazon (company), Amazon (river), Amazon (Greek mythology). [See Figure 4.]

There are other ready-reference suites that I regularly use, such as Xrefer, Encarta, and Bartleby. The Web version of Atomica now adds another dimension to my ready-reference searches. ♦

# The INSPEC Database

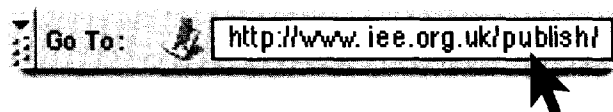
For Physics, Electrical & Electronics Engineering,  
and Computing & Control



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