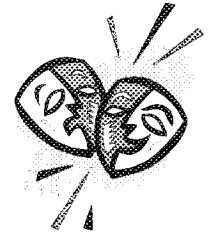


péter's picks & pans



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Britannica.com

Anthropology Review Database

Free Internet Encyclopedia

The picks in this issue include the free version of the venerable Encyclopaedia Britannica, which has the entire text and all the illustrations of the fee-based version, but uses a different software interface. The other pick is the Anthropology Review Database, a free Web-born database, proving once again that small is beautiful. The pan is the Free Internet Encyclopedia, which is certainly free, but not an encyclopedia. It is a hodge-podge of often outdated and erroneous links to an eclectic variety of Web reference sources with haphazardly selected topics.



the picks

BRITANNICA.COM

Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. rocked the Web when it announced a free online version last year (<http://www.Britannica.com>). There has been much misinformation on various newsgroups and discussion lists about the content and sponsoring of this site. For weeks after its launch, it still could not

The screenshot shows a search interface with a search bar containing 'zaire'. Below the search bar, there are several columns of results. The first column is titled 'The Web's Best Sites' and includes links to 'Zaire - A Country Study' and 'Conflict and Ethnicity in the Democratic Republic...'. The second column is titled 'Encyclopaedia Britannica' and includes 'ZAIRE From Year in Review 1993: world-affairs' and 'ZAIRE from Year in Review 1996: world-affairs'. The third column is titled 'Magazines' and includes 'The last days of Mobutu, Economist' and 'Stored wealth, Economist'. The fourth column is titled 'Related Books' and includes 'Historical Dictionary of Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire)', 'The Okapi: Mysterious Animal of Cong-Zaire', and 'Your Sorrow Is My Sorrow Hope & Strength in Times of Suffering'.

The results of my search on Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) are displayed as a smorgasbord of appetizers.

be accessed, since the host system crashed under the enormous load generated by the news of its appearance. The enthusiasm for the content is well placed. Britannica has long been considered the most respected of print encyclopedias. The free and fee-based online versions are based on the same Encyclopaedia text, but the text is integrated with the Yearbooks and the Merriam-Webster Collegiate dictionary (10th edition). The home page also contains the present day's news, supplied by washingtontimes.com.

In addition to the Encyclopaedia Britannica text, there are three other major components to the free site. There is a purportedly editorially groomed directory of Web sites, an excellent collection of magazine and journal articles licensed from EBSCO, and a link to the Barnes & Noble Web site. Interestingly, the free version integrates the Web directory better than the fee-based one. In theory, the design of presenting results from the four sources, labeled Web's Best Sites, Encyclopaedia Britannica,

Magazines, and Related Books, in four parallel columns is a no-no, but it works very well, particularly on larger monitors.

The results from my search on Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) are displayed as a smorgasbord of appetizers. The user can immediately see the variety of information from the four categories of sources with short excerpts. Either click on one of the promising titles to display the entire entry in full-screen mode, or keep scrolling down to see what else is there in any of the four categories.

The only change I would make is to list the Encyclopaedia Year in Review articles in reverse chronological order with the most recent articles first. This way the initial item in that column would be the *Congo, Democratic Republic of (Zaire) Year in Review 1998* article, followed by the *1997 Year in Review* article about the country, and so on.

The quality and wealth of information is breathtaking. Among the Web sites you will find country reports by U.S. and Canadian government agencies and departments, the Stockholm-based International Peace Research Institute, and transcripts from PBS. There are full-text articles from the

Economist, *Commonweal*, *Time*, and *Discover* magazines. Among the books you will find such current titles from 1998 and 1999 as the *Historical Dictionary of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, *Congo in Pictures*, *The Okapi: Mysterious Animal of Zaire-Congo*, a country report, and a history book: *From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of Congo*.

Some of the Web site links in my tests did not seem to be chosen by editors and did not work when I tested them. Despite these problems, enough excellent sites are live to make this a worthwhile source. One can also get pleasantly sidetracked, for example, by book reviews of the selected books at the Barnes & Noble site. I find the links are better presented in the free version than in the fee-based version.

The difference between the free and the fee-based versions is in the interface and search software. The free version is powered by Excalibur Technologies (<http://www.excalib.com>). Only the fee-based version has the superb feature of displaying a list of words that are alphabetically the closest to the term you enter, or that sound like it—in case your search produces no results. Only the fee-based version allows proximity operators,

but you can work around this by choosing the exact phrase option, such as “police state,” to avoid retrieving articles about state police. In my tests, I found exactly the same text and images and related Web sites in both online versions of the Encyclopaedia. The free version has banner ads, but they are not at all obtrusive. The fee-based version at \$5 per month has been a superb deal, so what superlatives can I use to describe the free version? It is awesome.



ANTHROPOLOGY REVIEW DATABASE

(<http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD>)

ARD is the acronym for Acute Respiratory Disease, Acoustic Research Detachment, Advanced Resource Development, and Audible Recall Device. It is also an archaic word for the plough and the acronym of a Web-born database that includes information on reviews of books, videos, software, and Web resources from the field of anthropology. The Anthropology Review Database (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD>) contains 1,400 references in its collection, many of them full-text reviews by ARD volunteers who represent both the academic and the real world and are identified via brief biographies. Most of the references are to printed materials, but nearly 10% of the reviews are about analog audio-video and digital resources that are rarely reviewed in the traditional review journals. The day I submitted this manuscript, for example, a substantial review of the CD-ROM database *Virtual Dig: A Simulated Archaeological Excavation of a Middle Paleolithic Site In France* was added (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD/showme.cgi?keycode=344>).

There are also links to full-text reviews published in digital resources, such as *Archaeology on Film*, *Archaeology Online*, the *Bryn Mawr Electronic Resources Review*, and the *Internet Archaeology*. The coverage is not perfect. While there

The search form is simple and intuitive allowing you to search the title, author, subjects, publication year, medium type, and reviewer name fields.

are three references to reviews of the CD-ROM database about the Excavation of Occaneechi Town, there is no link to the most comprehensive and excellently illustrated review published in Internet Archaeology (<http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue6/bateman.html>). Citations to Reviews in Anthropology and American Antiquity represent a significant portion of the database.

The search form is simple and intuitive allowing you to search the title, author, subjects, publication year, media type, and reviewer name fields. The software supports string searching. If you don't know the exact spelling you can enter a segment of the word. As the database grows, the capabilities of the software will have to grow as well. The subject terms are browsable, but they cannot be picked from the list and plugged in the query form. In spite of its growing pains, ARD is a good example for Web-born databases.



the pan

FREE INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA

What am I to make of this Free Internet Encyclopedia (<http://clever.net/cam/encyclopedia.html>)? Attractive title, clever URL, but painfully amateur content. The cam part of the URL stands for Cliff and Margaret (<http://www.cs.uh.edu/~clifton/cliff.html>), the chief compilers of the site: a computer science PhD student and a reference librarian. A promising combination for a small-scale project, but not for an encyclopedia. Although it bears the Encyclopedia name, Free Internet Encyclopedia is more a hodge-podge of links to an uncomfortably eclectic mix of Web resources with haphazardly selected topics. It is also excruciatingly incomplete. The compilers acknowledge the limitations in their introduction, suggesting that a more

Zusmanite

Mineral Data

Zvyagintsevite

Mineral Data

Zweiselite

Zweog, Stefan

**Austrian Biographer, Poet, and Novelist
Known for Biographies of Marie Antoinette and Mary Queen of Scots**

Zwingli, Huldreich (Encarta Link)

Zworykin, Vladimir (Kosma)

Father of Modern Television

Zydeco

Zydeco Linke

Zykeite

Mineral Data

Document Date

Luckily, among the misspellings, ill-chosen, and dead links, there are some links to good sources, such as the Encarta Concise Encyclopedia. Sometimes they are explicitly mentioned in the list, mostly they are not. The link for Huldreich Zwingli spells out the source, but the links above it to Marie Antoinette and Mary, Queen of Scots do not.

accurate title would be the Free Internet Encyclopedic Index. Most Web directories, even the ones that claim to examine the sites that they recommend, classify Free Internet Encyclopedia under encyclopedias and give it various star awards. So do thousands of users who happily share with the world their own favorite links. No wonder that many believe that Free Internet Encyclopedia is Nirvana. I disagree.

Free Internet Encyclopedia consists of two major parts: Macro Reference (with a Macro Index) and MicroReference. The former is the usual collection of classified Web sites with links that obviously cannot and do not come close in comprehensiveness, content, or currency to the Netscape Open Directory (which uses over 20,000 volunteers), or the LookSmart or Yahoo! classified directories, which have a large number of paid employees dedicated to the task. I would not pan this source solely for its MacroReference links. It is the MicroReference part that I find irritatingly ill-organized, inconsistent, irrelevant, incomplete, and inefficient.

Essentially, it is a list of a few thousand words that are supposed to be deep linked to an item within a free reference source on the Web. The list can be consulted alphabetically by the first letter of the word to be searched. Each letter of the alphabet has an HTML page with the words starting with that letter.

The major problem is not that there are only a few thousand entry words, but that there seems to be no rhyme nor reason for the selection of words. After perusing this source for a few hours, it seems that exotic and esoteric words have priority. If they are names of minerals or mythological figures, even better. That's why you'll find Zababa, Zinzenite, Zippeite, Zoisite, Zoubekite, Zunyite, Zusmanite, Zvyagintsevite, Zweiselite in the Z section of the alphabet. The asleep at the switch compilers must have gotten fully into their ZZZs by the time they reached Zweiselite, which should have been Zwieselite for those who care about it. No wonder that the definition does not come up from the excellent Mineralogy database. They could really have saved their

energy by having a simple entry like "minerals" and link the users to the two databases that provide splendidly detailed information for several thousand species. They perhaps could have included in the Z section pointers to good entries about zakat (one of the five basic principles of Islam), Zamenhof (the father of Esperanto), Emile Zatopek (the triple Olympic gold medalist), Ferdinand Zeppelin and his zeppelin, the zodiac, the zither, zooplankton, or the Zugspitz, the highest point in Germany, and a venue for a Winter Olympics. Zeus would thunder for having been omitted from this "encyclopedia." I am sure that there must be some users delighted to see the name of actor Billy Zane and actress Renee Zellweger, but perhaps Adolph Zukor (head of Paramount Studio), Franco Zeffirelli (one of the best Italian directors), and Fred Zinneman (director of *High Noon*, *From Here To Eternity*, *Day of the Jackal*) should have also deserved a link.

Links from names of countries are made to a variety of sources, including the much-overrated Atlapedia that is

considerably out-of-date. The article on Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), for example, ends the modern history part of the country in 1993 by stating that "the government introduced a new currency." It is true, but in 1997, the Congolese franc was introduced along with a new government that still cannot end the bloody civil war on its way to become democratic. The link to the non-democratic Republic of Congo takes you to the much more current article in the CIA World Factbook. Go figure.

Links to the Biography.com and Mr. Showbiz sites do not work at all; neither do the links to a Dutch site that is supposed to explain to you the meaning of Zababa and hundreds of other mythological names listed in this "encyclopedia." Luckily, there are some links to good sources, such as the Encarta Concise Encyclopedia. Sometimes they are explicitly mentioned in the list, but mostly they are not. The link for Huldreich Zwingli spells out the source, but the links above it to Marie Antoinette and Mary, Queen of Scots do not. The parent entry about Stefan Zweig

(not Zwoig), the Austrian (not Austian) author is a dead-end street to <http://www.funandfree.com>, which may be free, but certainly is not fun for this link. Ironically, if the compilers had used Encarta Concise Encyclopedia also for Stefan Zweig the user would find a good article about him. For Zworykin, the father of television, the link to Biography.com is wrong, as are all the links to this database that I checked. Encarta would bring up four free relevant articles. All these examples are just from the last page of the Free Internet Encyclopedia. This could easily be changed into a good thing overnight. How? By substituting a single page with links to the free Britannica and Encarta sites and let the users search those splendid sources for substantial and current information rather than Free Internet Encyclopedia.

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