The Dinosaur Mating Game

The Dinosaur Mating Game

An Experiment in Dinosaur Aesthetics

Imagination and Identification at the Limits of Knowledge

by

Chris Wildrick

INPUT/OUTPUT PRESS
SYRACUSE, NY

Chris wishes to thank everyone who filled out the *Dinosaur Mating Game* form, including students at G.W. Fowler High School and the many visitors to his exhibitions and performances at the Surplus Gallery, the Redhouse, XL Projects, New York State Fair, and the Museum of the Earth.

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The charts also use **Futura Condensed**.

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INTRODUCTION

Chris is studying the role of dinosaurs in our culture. Each project in this series approaches this subject from a different angle. *The Dinosaur Mating Game* seeks to understand our ideas about dinosaur personalities and relationships.

Methodology

Chris has done this project using two different "delivery systems," but the basic methodology has been the same. In both versions, people are provided with an image of twelve dinosaur skulls in a circle, and are asked to draw a line between the pairs of dinosaurs that they think would be best mates.

One way Chris has done this is by having a worksheet that the participants gets individually, then hands back in to Chris when they are finished. This results in a stack of sheets, each with 6 "pairing" lines.

The other way has been to make a large-format print of the same image, approximately 32" square, and put it in a gallery. All the gallery visitors would then draw their lines on the same image with different color crayons, resulting in one image with hundreds of different color lines on it.

The handout is easier to read and transcribe, but the group poster makes for a more interesting social event, where the participants are more likely to talk to each other about their choices.

The notion of being "best mates" is somewhat ambiguous. It could be romantic or platonic. Strictly speaking, none of these dinosaurs should be mates for each other, since they are all different species, and animals (usually) can't mate outside their species. However, there is more to love than just reproduction--dinosaurs had feelings, too!

Chris has done *The Dinosaur Mating Game* at several art galleries and a high school lecture. In contrast to some other projects, the respondees have almost all been adults.

Objectives

This project, like *Dinosaur Duo*, *Casting Call*, and *Dinosaur High School*, is intended to help us better understand the way we perceive dinosaurs' personas. In this case, it is trying to determine what, if any, statistically significant attractive (i.e., positive) relationships people see among dinosaur species.

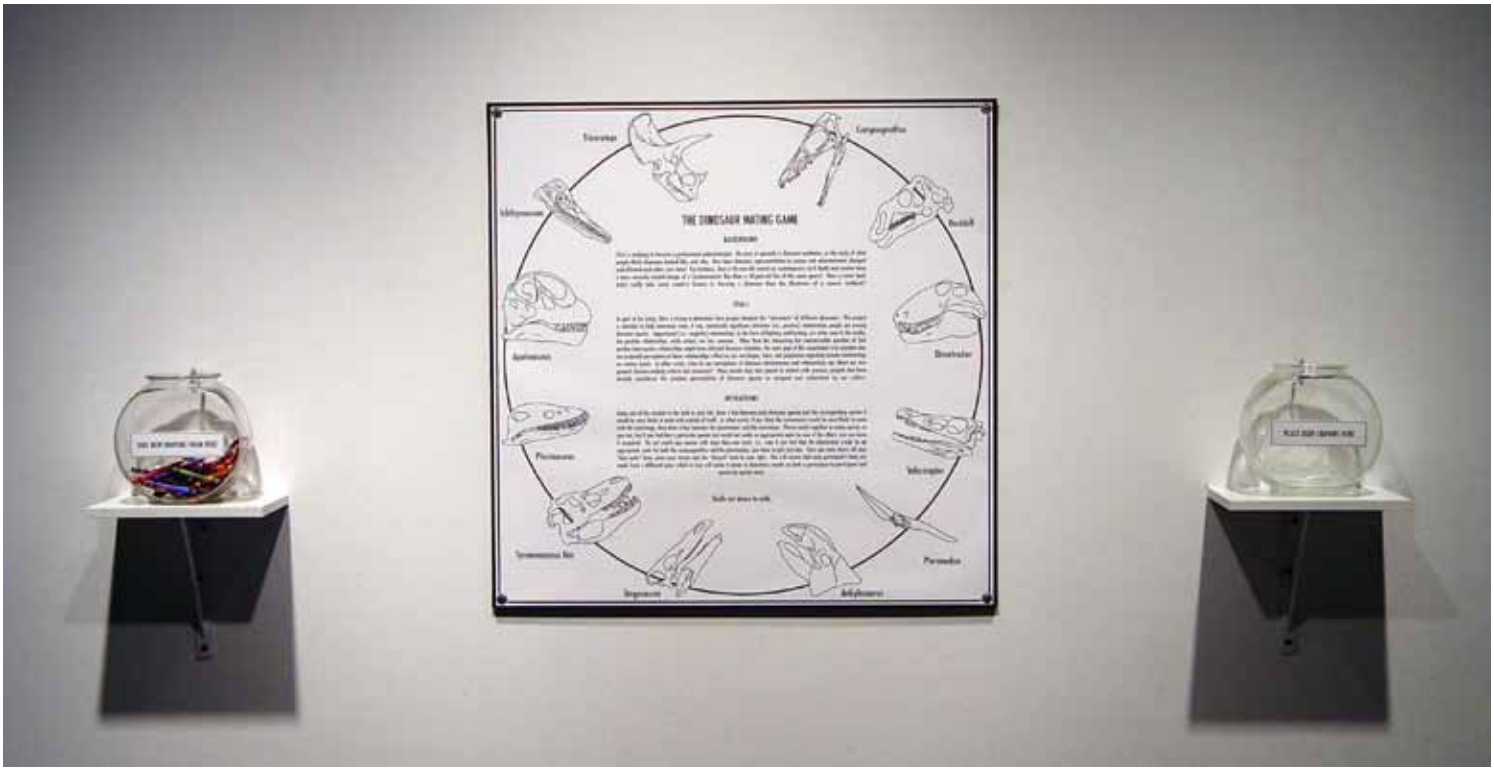
Why do we see some of them as scary and some as nice, why would we see some of them getting along better than others? Is it simply based on the old meat-eater/plant-eater adversarial relationship? This corresponds with the behavior of dinosaurs in most entertainment media, which tend to feature standard match-ups like Tyrannosaurus vs. Triceratops.

Positive dinosaur-on-dinosaur pairings are much less common in entertainment--and even scientific--imagery. So the question is, what pairings will people create when forced to focus on dual-protagonist dinosaur relationships?

As with those other projects, the answer perhaps lies more in us than it does in the dinosaurs. By looking at how we make decisions about dinosaur relationships, we can also learn about how we make decisions about our own relationships.

The following sections of this book provide the original data supplied through the experiment, then analyze that data for answers to the above questions.

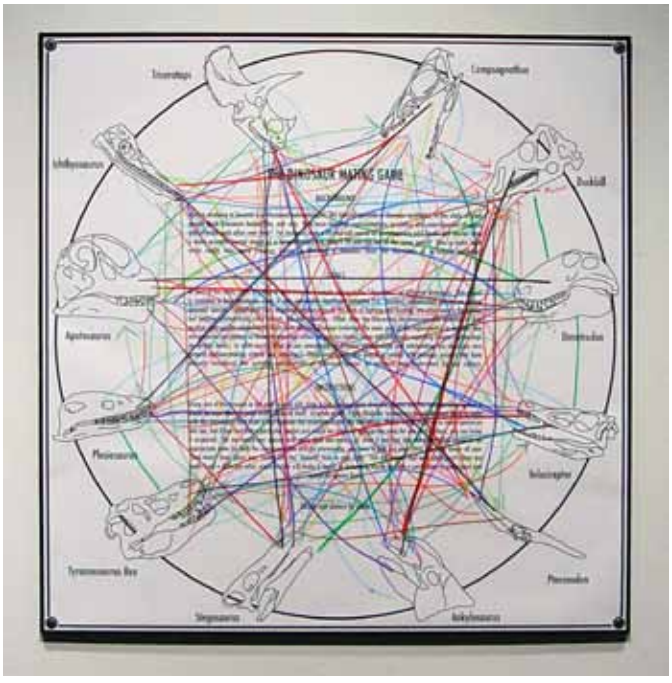
The Original Survey Formats

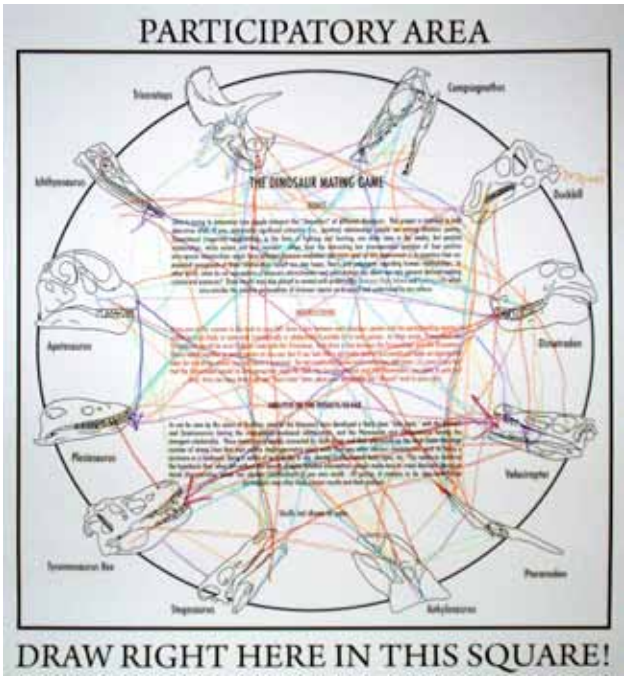


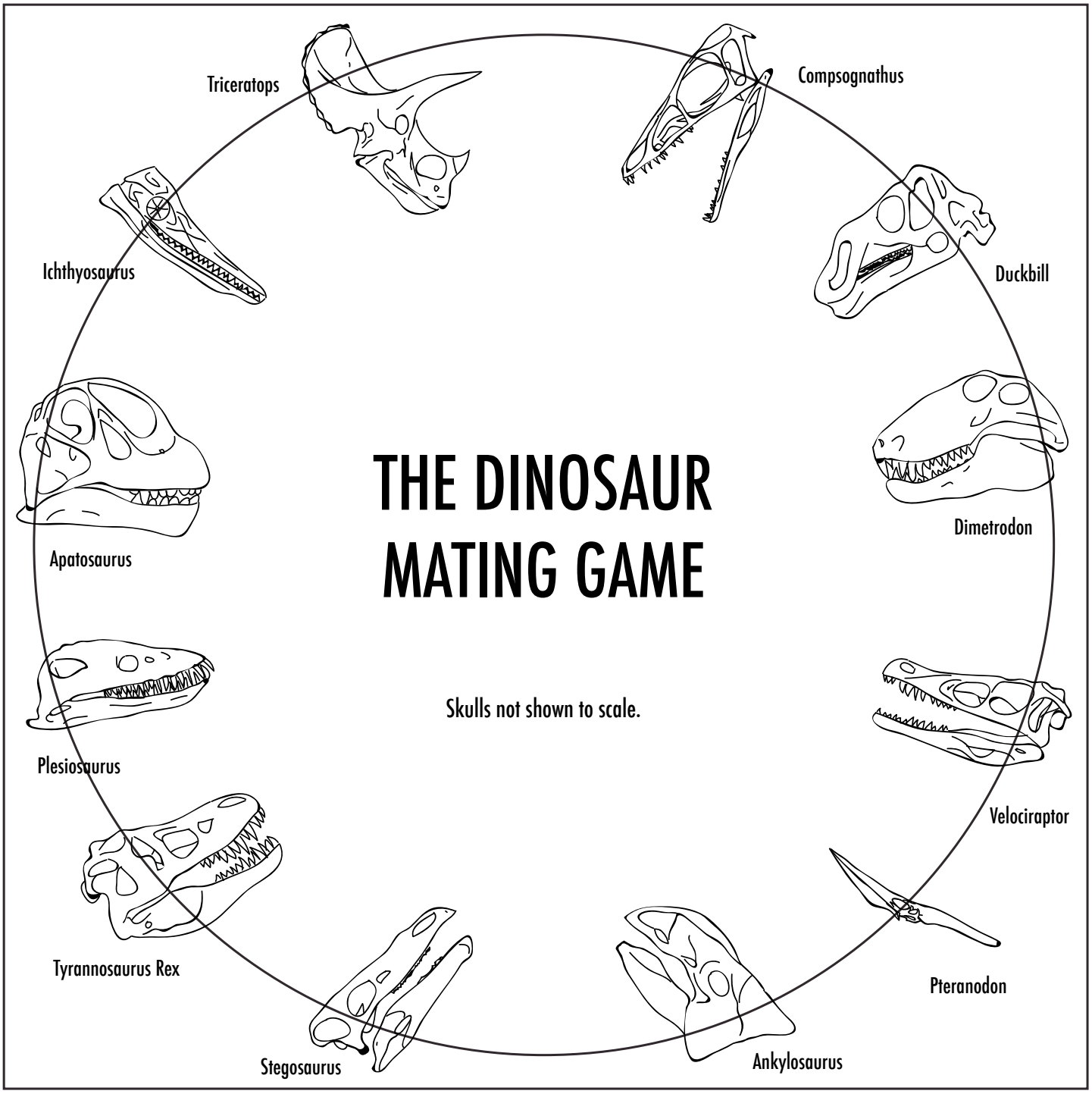
The socially-oriented mass-drawing installation of the project can be seen on this page, with results from two different shows. The two fishbowls on either side of the print are there to hold the crayons before and after the participants use them.

The handout version of the project is on the opposite page.

These 12 particular dinosaurs were chosen because they are the standard group Chris uses when he needs a pre-selected group of dinosaurs (see also *Dinosaur High School* and *A Picture Is Worth 1000 Words*). They are well-known to the public and fill out the main subsets of dinosaur types. Of course, not all of them are actually dinosaurs; see the other projects for an explanation as to why they are included anyway.







THE DINOSAUR MATING GAME

Skulls not shown to scale.

Each of the above dinosaurs is looking for a mate. Draw a line between each dinosaur species and the corresponding species you think would be its most likely romantic partner. In other words, if you think the tyrannosaur would like to have the triceratops for its mate, then draw a line between the tyrannosaur and the triceratops. Match each species with one and only one mate!

The Results

The chart on the opposite page shows the main results from the project, using a similar format to the original handout.

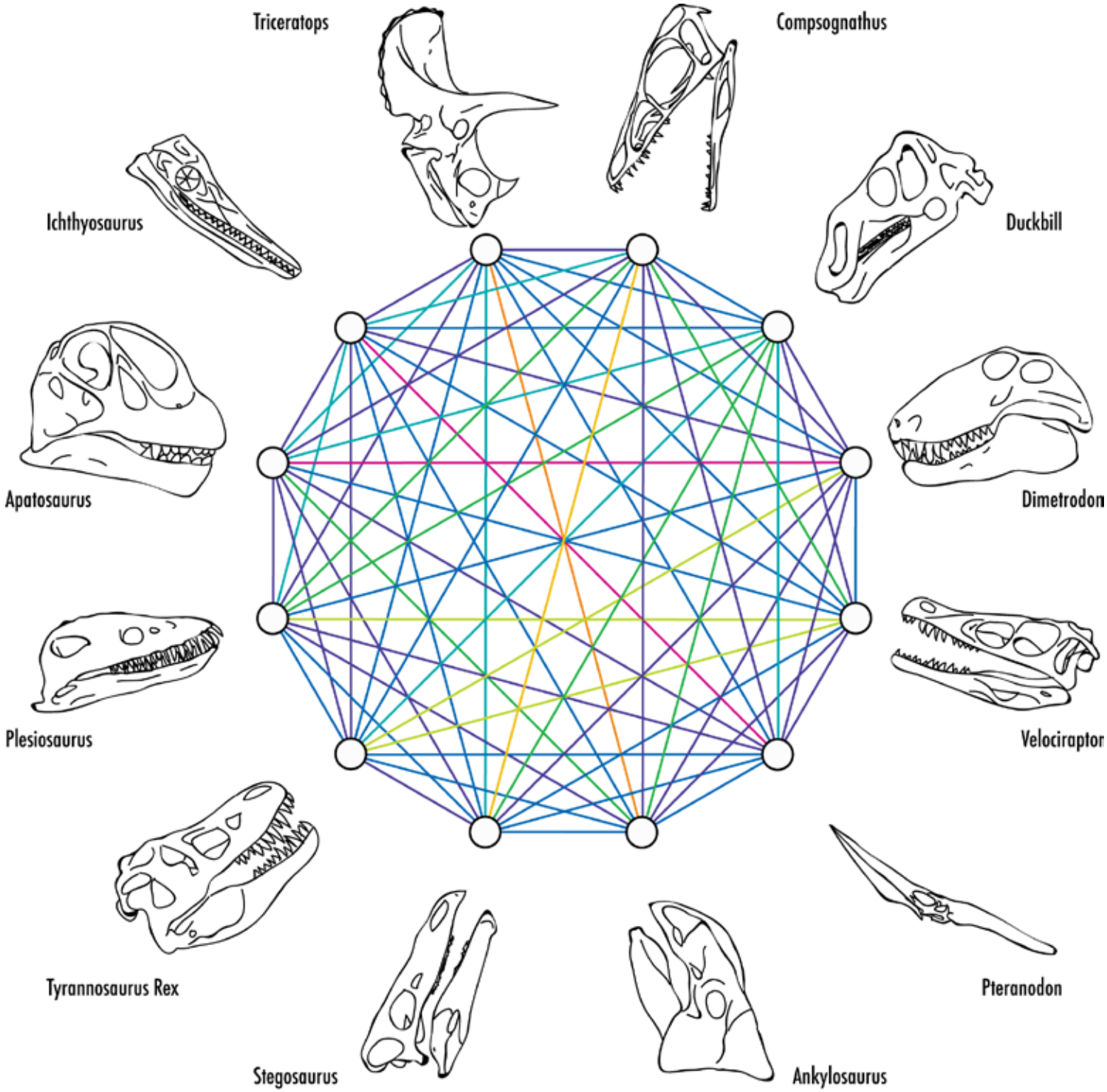
The twelve dinosaurs are shown around the circle. Lines have been drawn between every possible pairing amongst them. These lines have been given a color depending on how "cool" or "warm" their relationship is. If they have a very strong relationship, it is a warm color, and if they have a weak relationship it is a cool color.

The strength of these relationships are based on how many votes they received.

As can be easily seen, most dinosaurs do in fact have a "best mate," signalled by the warmest line emanating from any particular dinosaur.

The next page then takes these results and shows one arrow for each dinosaur, pointing to its best mate. (Two dinosaurs have two out-going lines, due to a tie in the voting.)

As can be seen, four pairs of dinosaurs are best mates with each other and no one else, while the others enjoy varying degrees of affectionate reciprocity. The skulls and lines have been color-coded to make it easier to tell the lines and pairings apart from one another. In this case, the colors do **not** signify anything about the strengths of the relationships; all of the relationships shown on the next page are the strongest relationships those particualr dinosaurs have.



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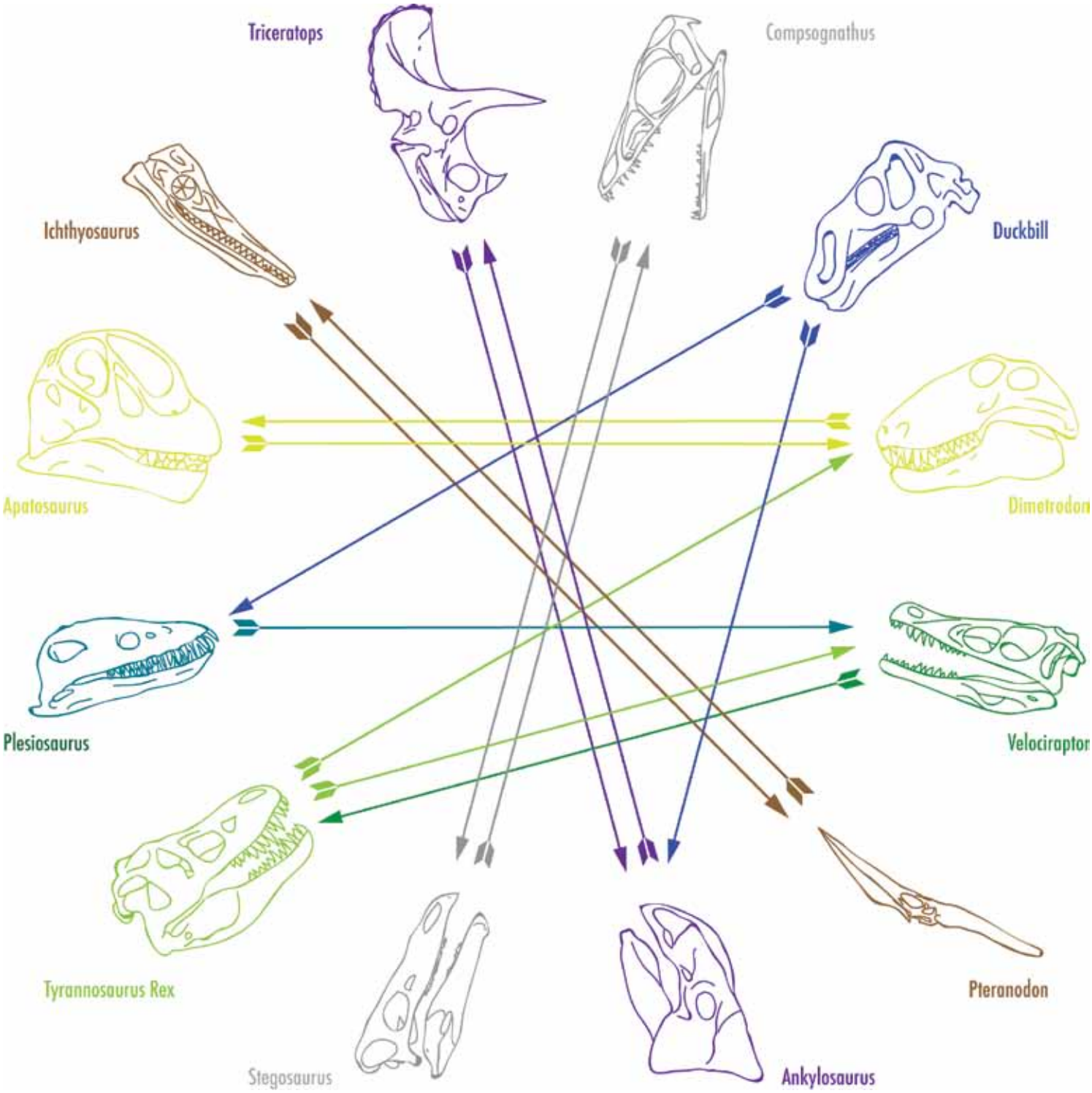
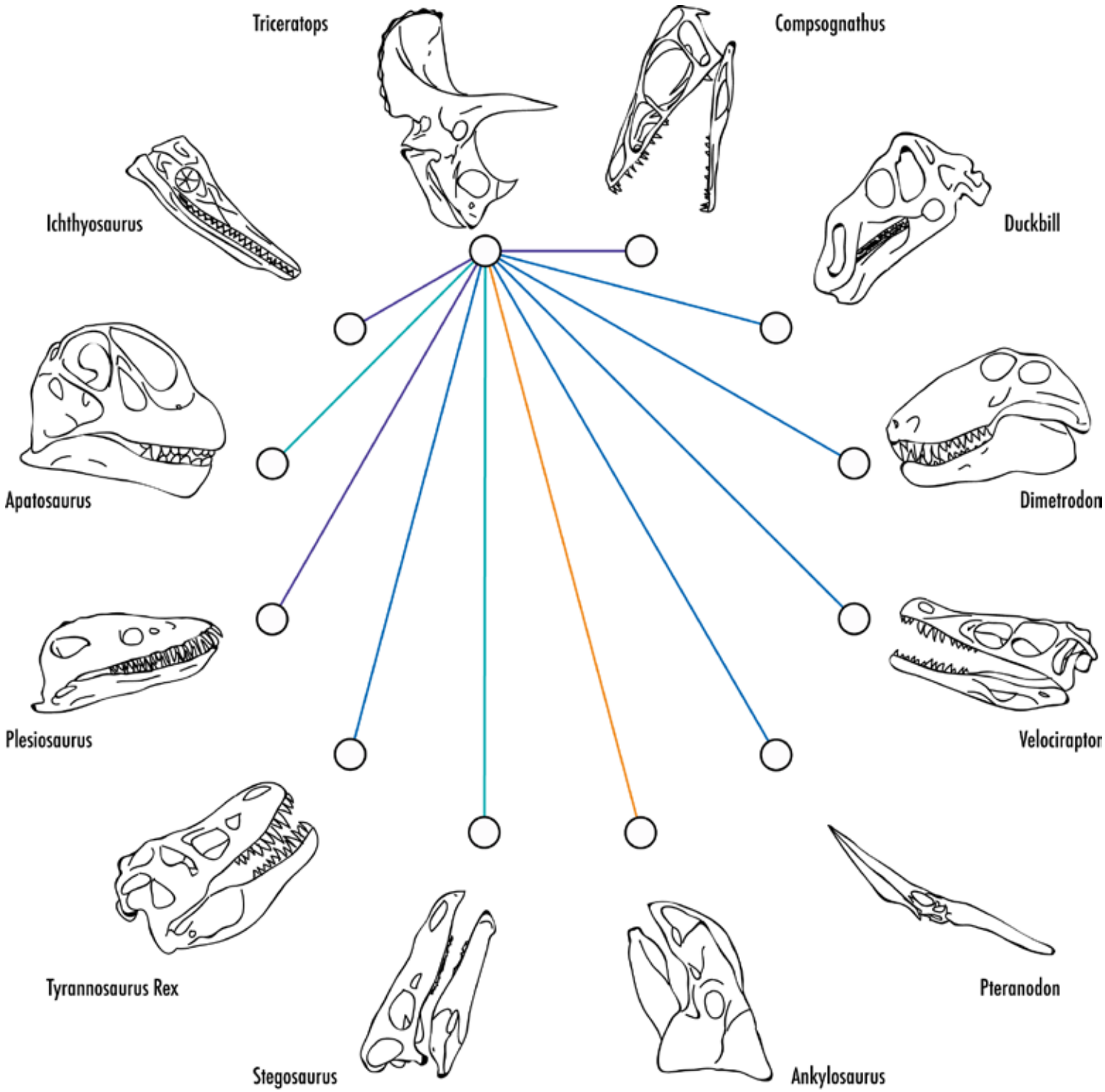

Triceratops
Compsognathus
Ichthyosaurus
Duckbill
Apatosaurus
Dimetrodon
Plesiosaurus
Velociraptor
Tyrannosaurus Rex
Pteranodon
Stegosaurus
Ankylosaurus

Breakdown of the Results

The following pages take the first main chart and simply break it down to show the results for one dinosaur at at time, thus making it easier to see the relationships between them.

For instance, the opposite page shows the relative strengths for all of Triceratops' possible relationships. Its relationship with Ankylosaurus is clearly the strongest, as seen by the orange line.

These charts can also help clear up the few situations on the main "arrow" chart where the Duckbill, Tyrannosaurus, Plesiosaurus, and Velociraptor have somewhat more ambiguous relationships than the others.



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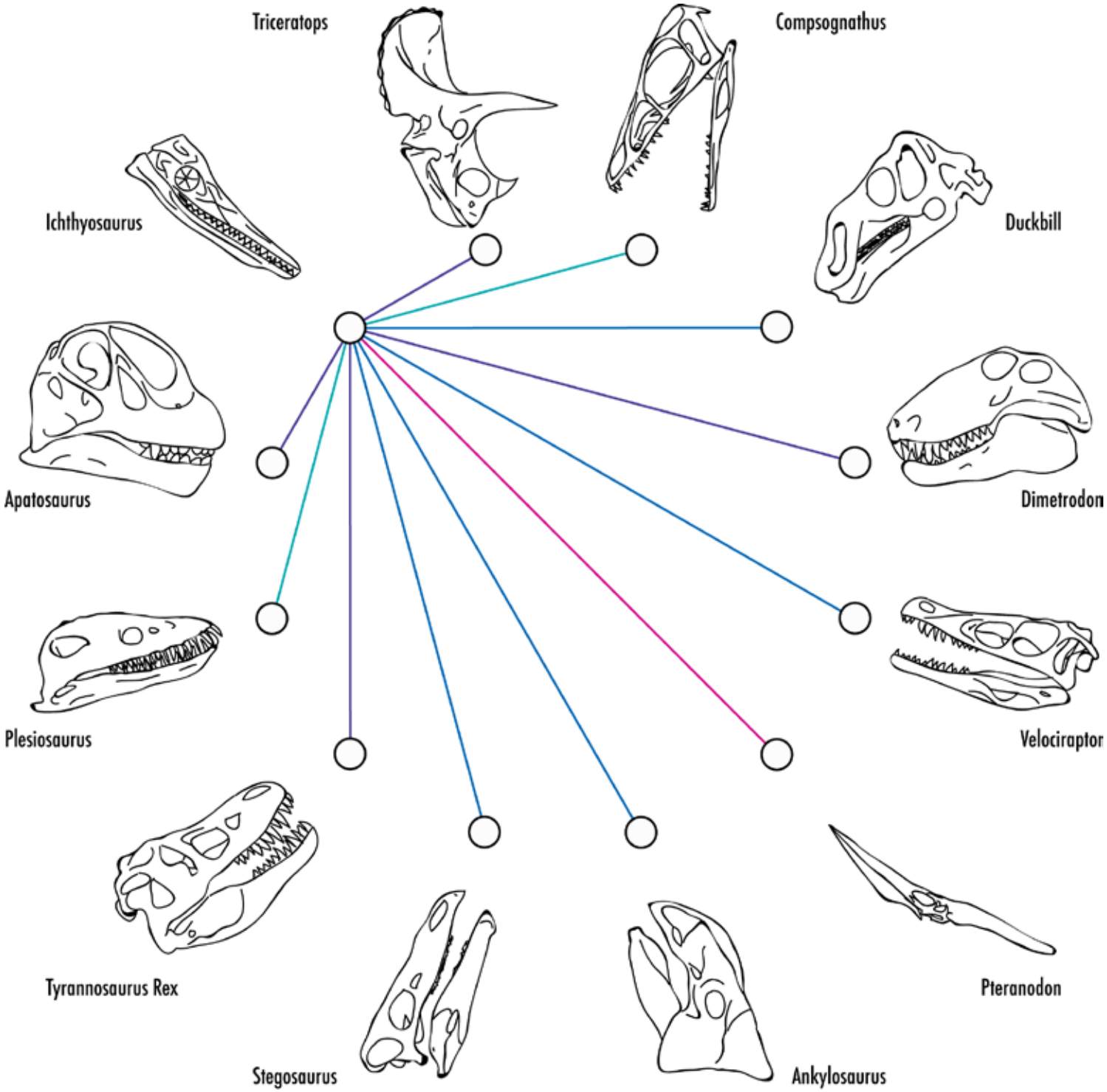

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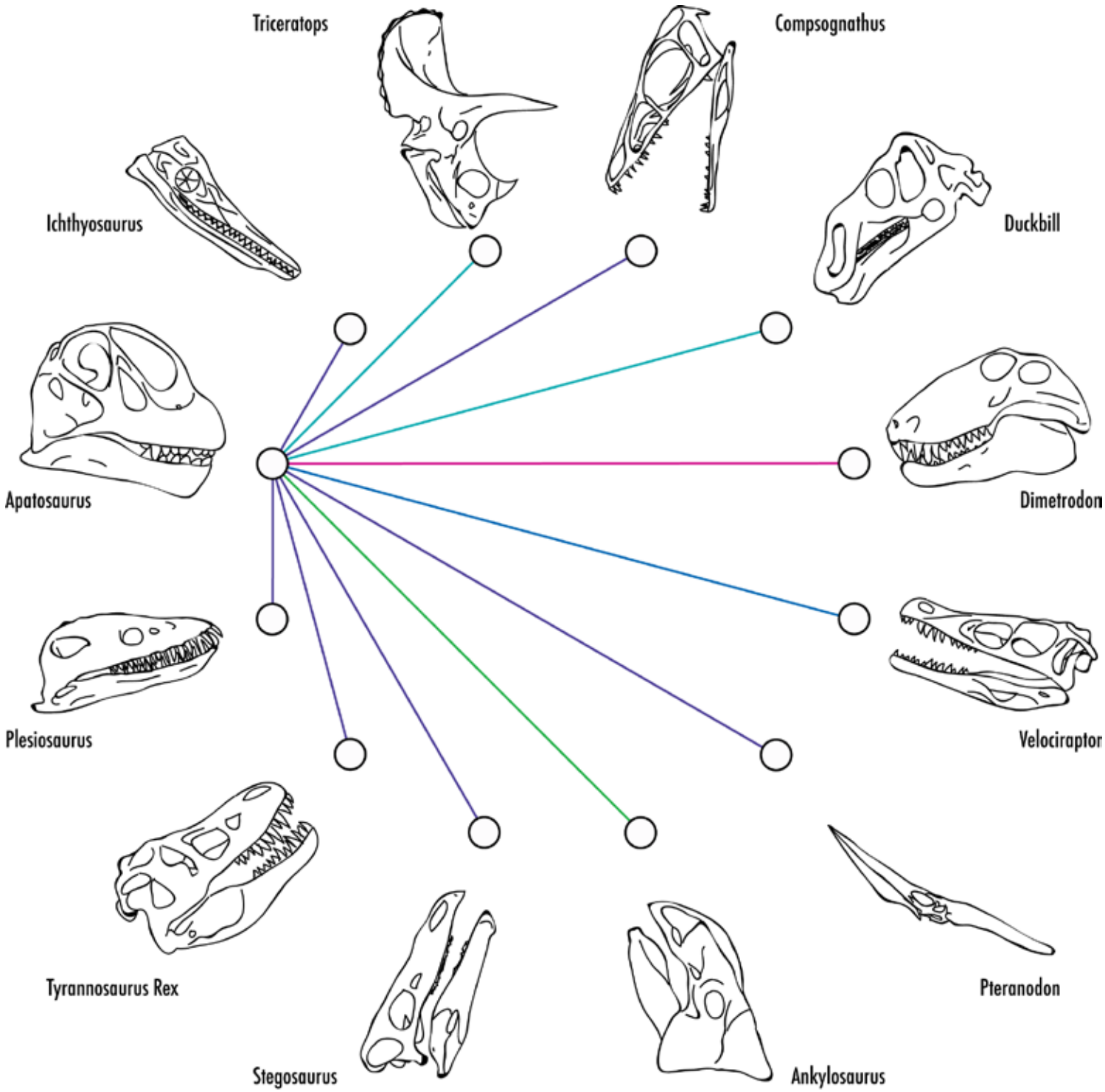

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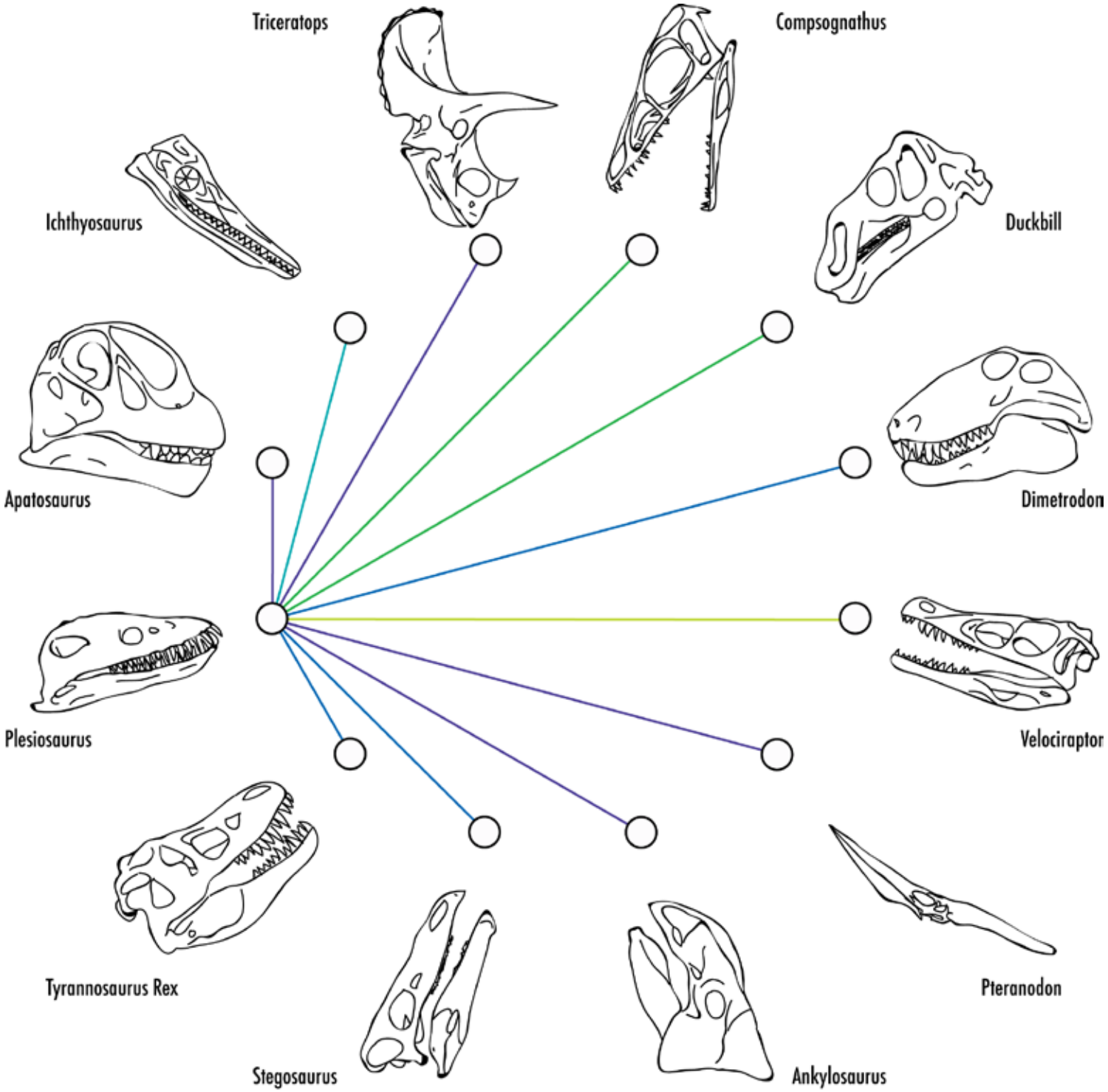

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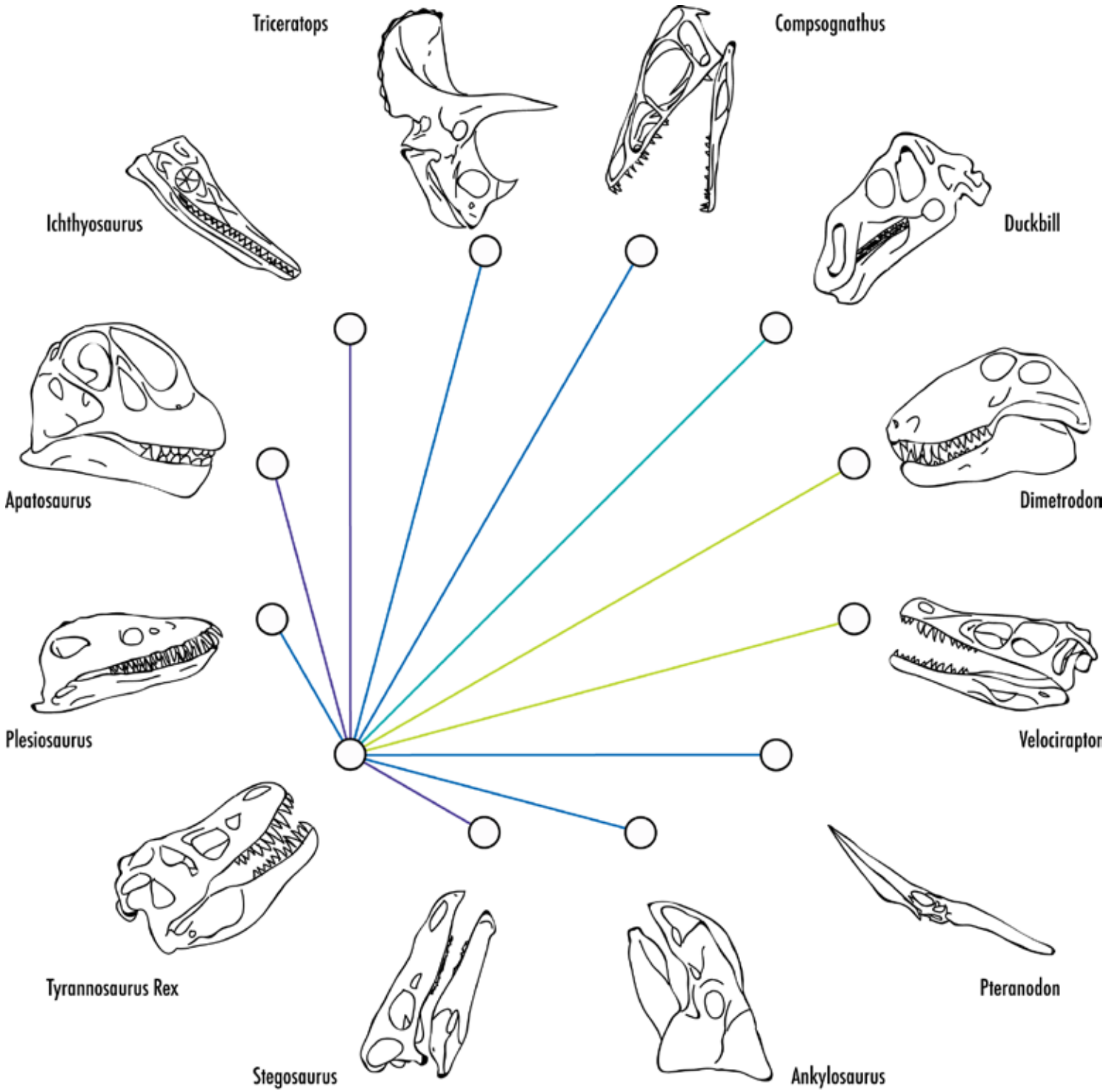

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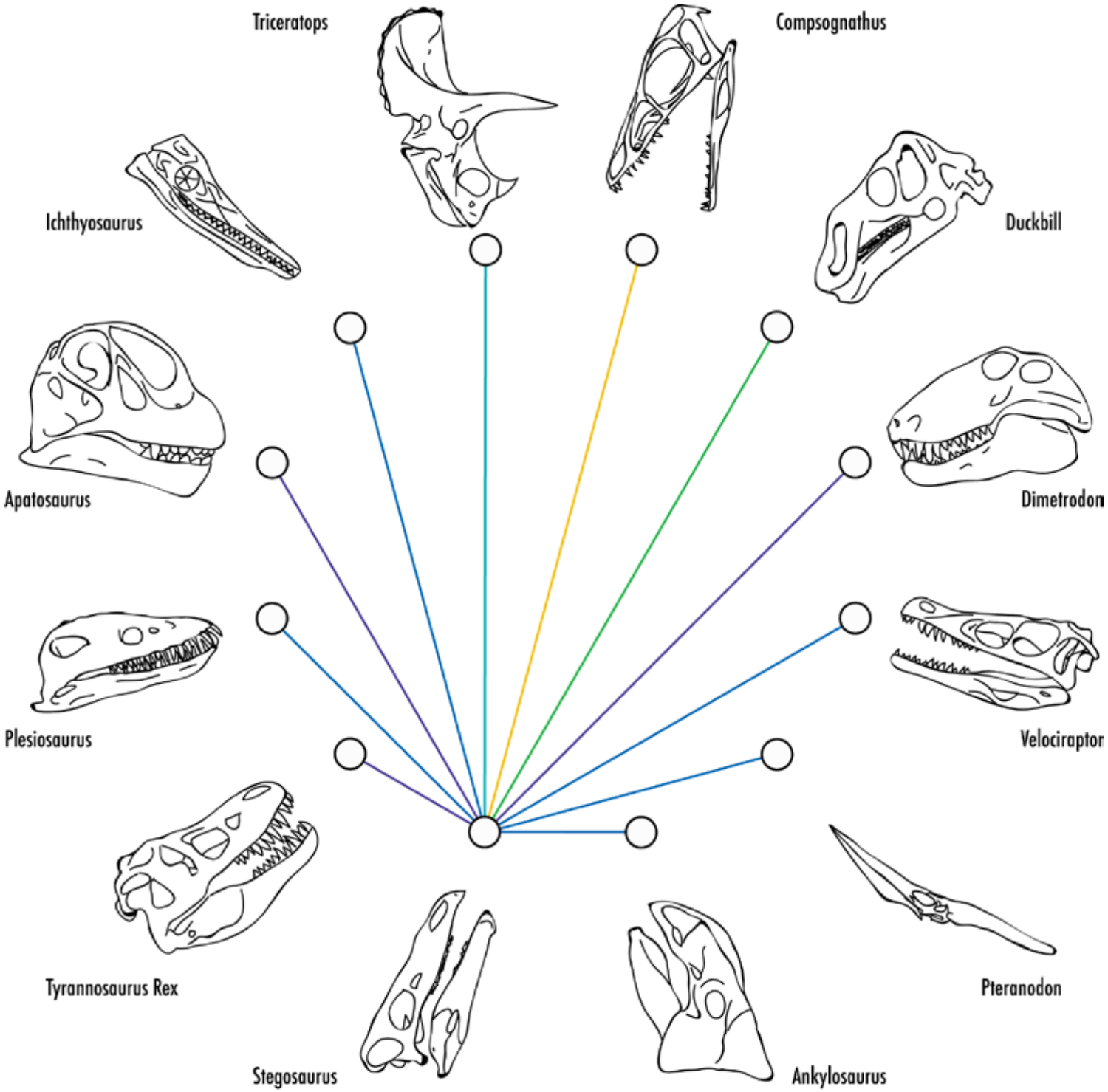

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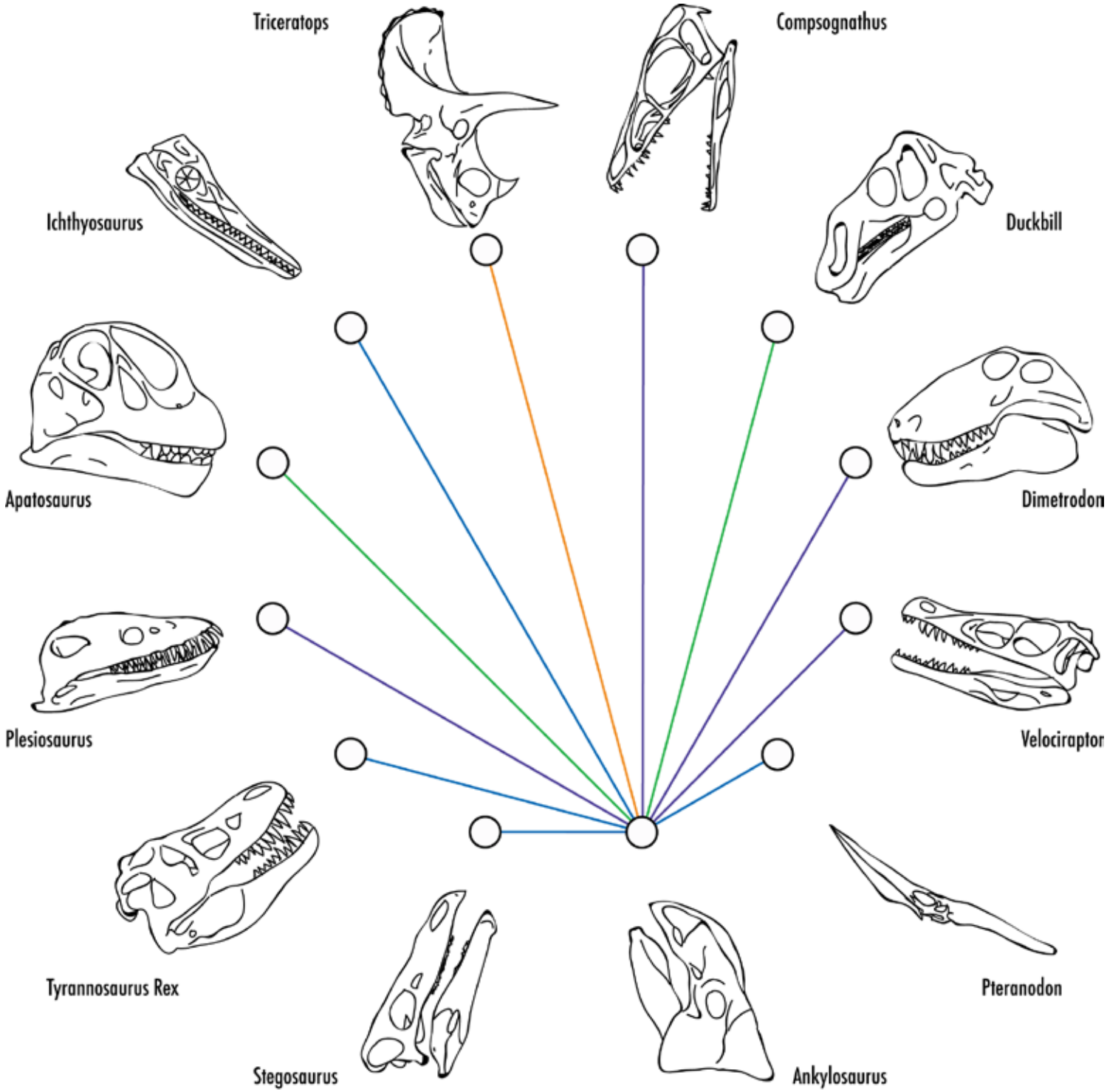

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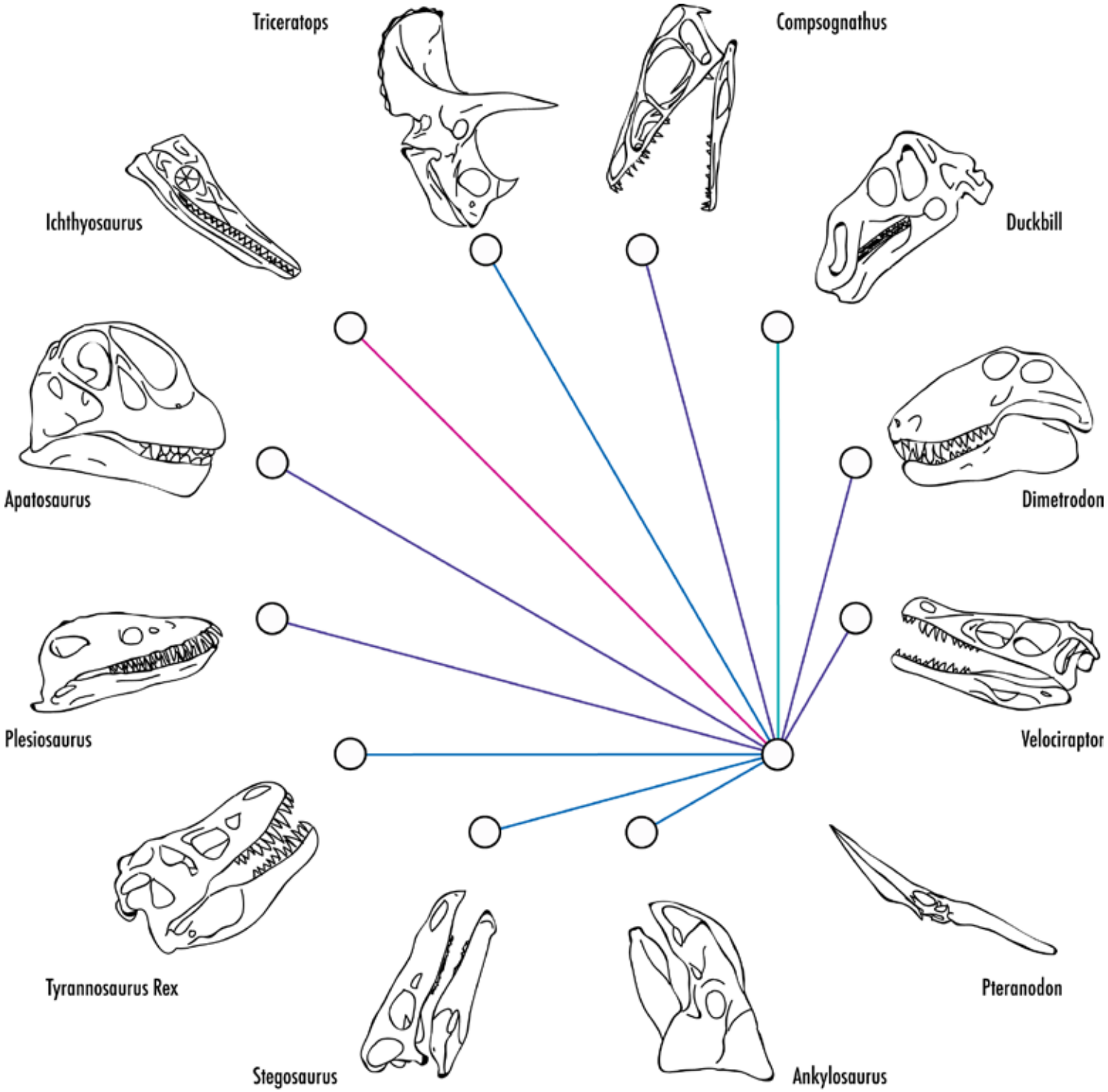

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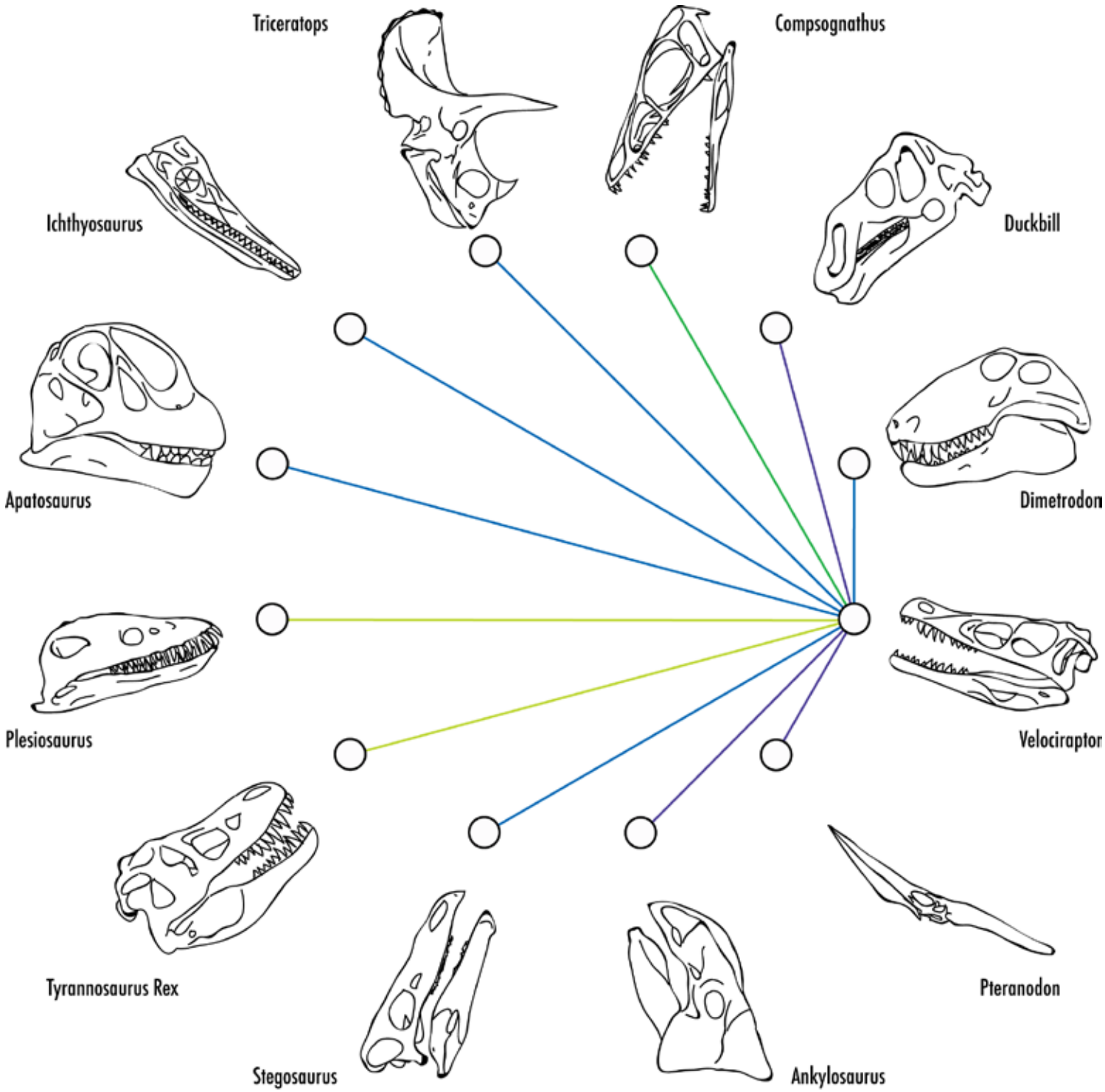

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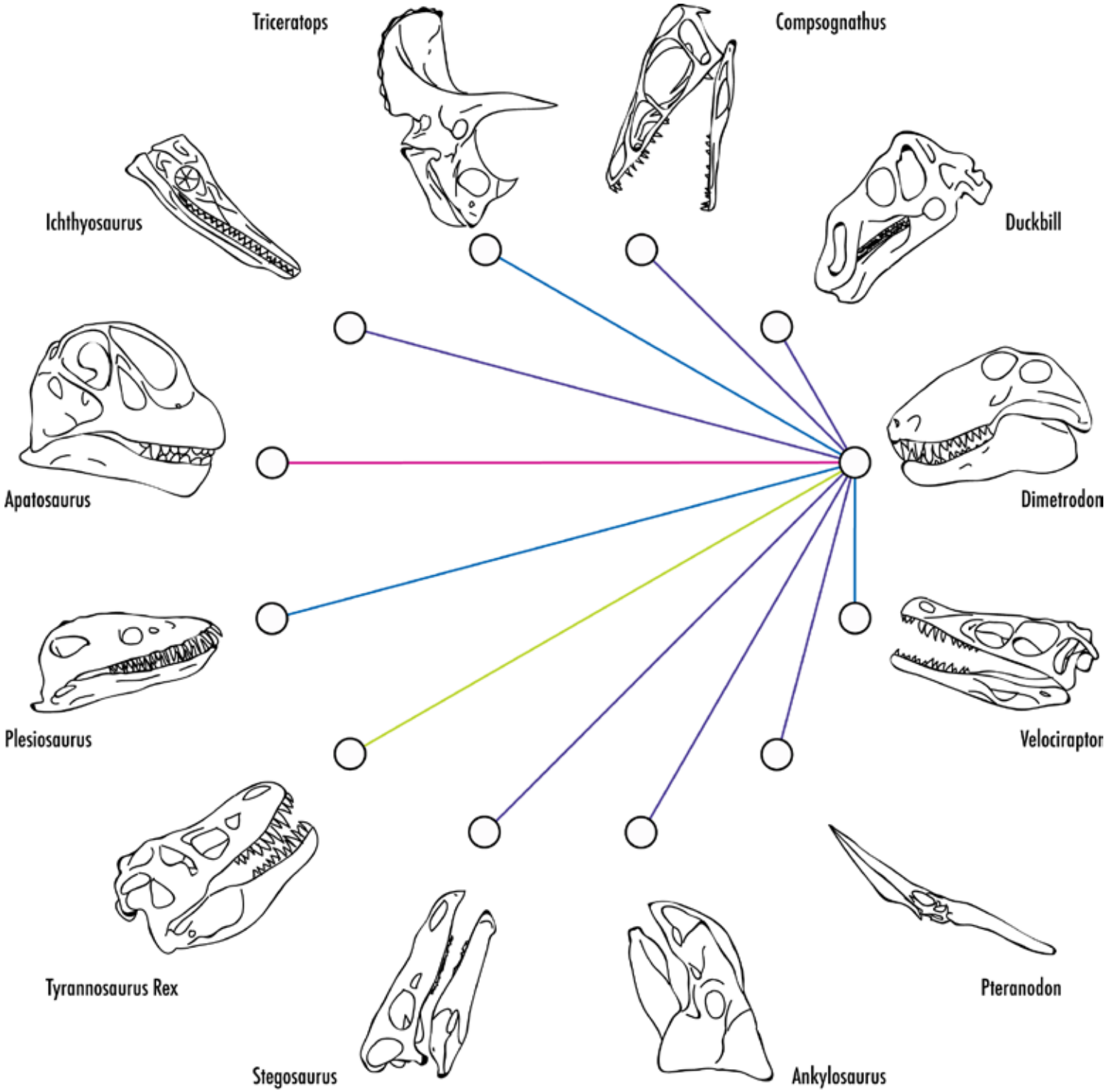

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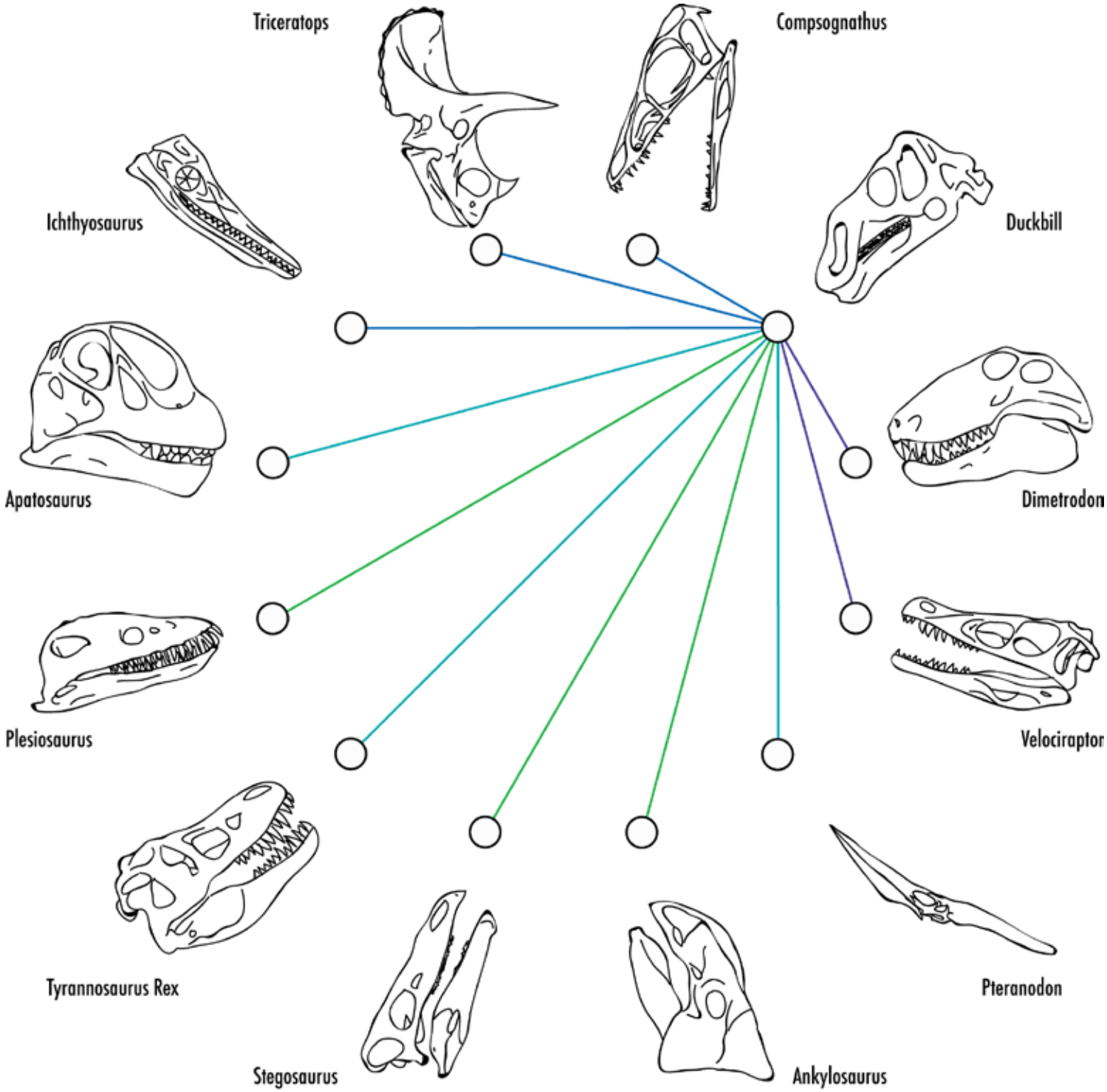

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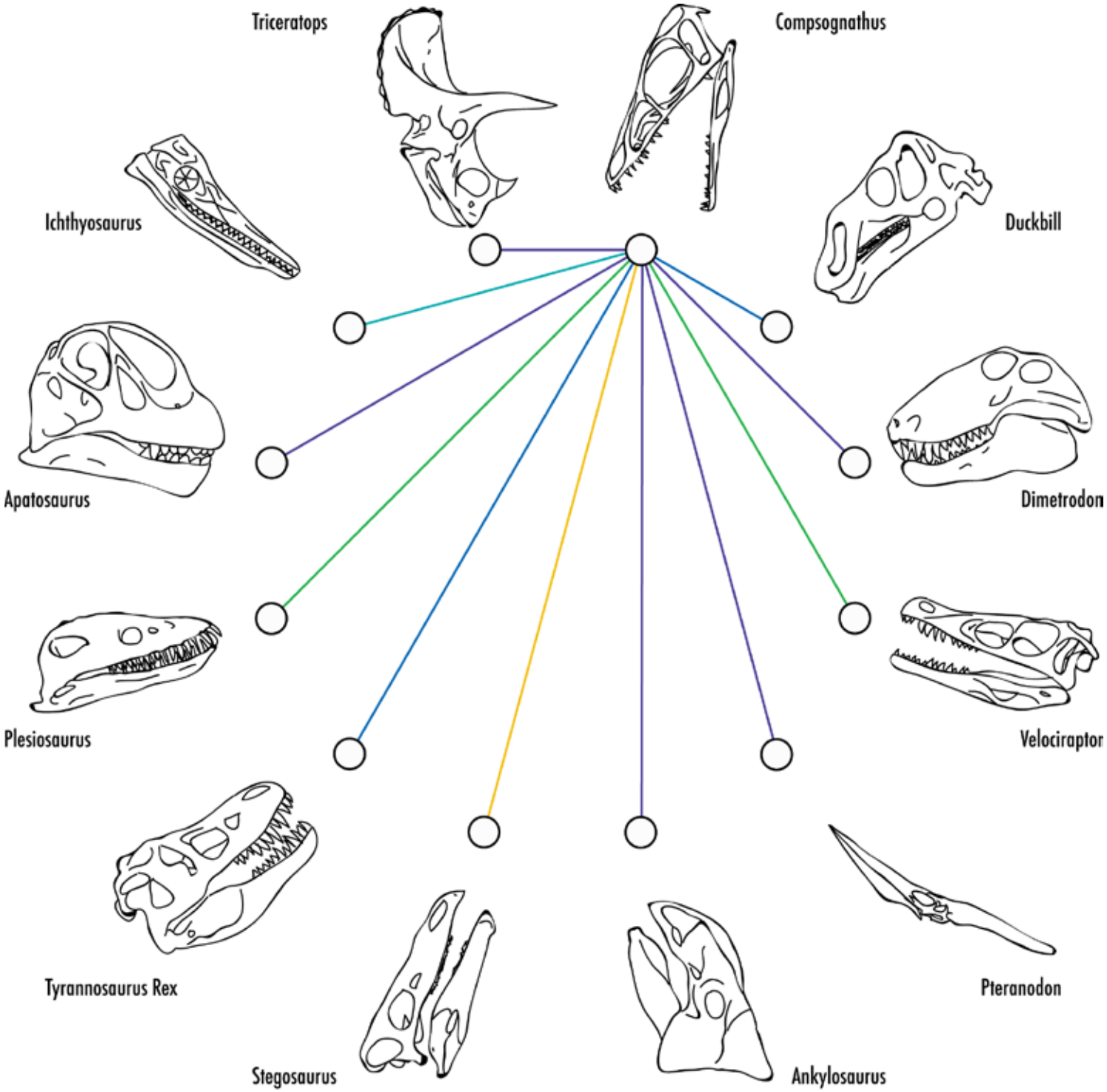

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Analysis of the Results

Overview
As can be seen by the colors of the lines, most of the dinosaurs have developed a fairly clear "best mate," with the Duckbill, Tyrannosaurus, and Plesiosaurus having the most-weakly-developed relationships, and the Pteranodon and Ichthyosaurus having the strongest relationship. These mates are probably connected by skull shape, tooth shape, and their placement on the circle (note the large number of strong lines that exist on the major geometric axes) more than any other obvious characteristic, such as being a carnivore or a herbivore, being a native of land or sea or sky, sharing (unillustrated) body types, etc. This seems to reinforce the hypothesis that, when left without the benefit of more detailed information, people make tend to make decisions based on visual characteristics, which has obvious ramifications in our own world. This is an observation that has arisen in multiple other projects in this series, such as *Emotidon* and *A Picture Is Worth 1000 Words*.

Specific Relationships
The four strongest relationships are also the four purely reciprocal relationships--those between the Ichthyosaurus and the Pteranodon, between the Apatosaurus and the Dimetrodon, between the Triceratops and the Ankylosaurus, and between the Compsognathus and the Stegosaurus.

Among the others, there are some reciprocal relationships, but not purely so. The Tyrannosaurus is split between the Dimetrodon and the Velociraptor, but only the Velociraptor has him back.

The Plesiosaurus also has the Velociraptor, but it is not reciprocated. The Plesiosaurus is instead the target of affection of the Duckbill, who is also connected with the Ankylosaurus. However, none of the other dinosaurs have him back--it is the only lonely dinosaur.

Focusing in on each individual dinosaur, the Triceratops' only real strong relationship is with his mate, the Ankylosaurus.

The Apatosaurus' main relation is with the Dimetrodon, but somewhat with Ankylosaurus.

The Plesiosaurus has relationships with Velociraptor, Compsognathus, and Duckbill.

The Stegosaurus has ties to Compsognathus, Triceratops, and Duckbill.

The Ankylosaurus is tied to Triceratops, Duckbill, and Apatosaurus.

The Tyrannosaurus is connected with Dimetrodon and Velociraptor.

The Dimetrodon is relatd to the Apatosaurus and the Tyrannosaurus.

The Velociraptor links to the Plesiosaurus, Tyrannosaurus, and Compsognathus.

The Pteranodon has relationships with Ichthyosaurus and Duckbill.

The Compsognathus is connected with the largest number of other dinosaurs--Stegosaurus, Apatosaurus, Plesiosaurus, and Velociraptor.

The Duckbill is tied to Plesiosaurus, Stegosaurus, and Ptera-

nodon, but none of them are very strong, continuing its weak streak.

When looked at close up like this, some of the non-reciprocated relationships of the official set of best mates are now reciprocated.

This level of detail also now connects some of the dinosaurs that would be seemingly obvious mates if skull shape is the main factor, such as Compsognathus and Velociraptor, and Duckbill and Stegosaurus.

The tooth/jaw shape seems to be an important subset of skull shape, as can be seen in the relationships between Tyrannosaurus and Dimetrodon and Velociraptor, as well as between Ankylosaurus and Triceratops. One interesting exception to this rule is the Apatosaurus-Dimetrodon link, which seems to come from the skull contour.

The skull and circle-location factors are obviously strong drivers of the mating ties. Chris can't remember if he set them up spatially balanced on uprpose, or if it was an accident. Certainly the dinosaurs themselves were not chosen to have a skull-doppelganger; the choice to use skulls to visually represent the dinosaurs was based on an interest in remaining as objective as possible. Chris' feeling was that using any other kind of illustration would add too much bias into the situation. Little did he realize that any visual image is a kind of bias--people will grab on to anything to help make a judgment.

All that said, most participants said they understood and appreciate the basic idea, and that they were looking for ties between them. One problem was simply that most people were just not familiar with all the dinosaurs, even though they were specifically chosen for their popularity.

Format

It was interesting for Chris to get a chance to use two totally different formats for this project. Both seemed to work fine, but clearly the public option brought a lot of energy and social comraderie to the table. However, it also brought a degree of vandalism and silliness that was absent in the other. One basic rule of public projects is that you can assume someone is going to do something stupid eventually, and that was true in this case. After scores of people faithfully drew mating lines on the chart, a few people decided to write a number of overly-salacious remarks on it, taking it permanantly out of the family-friendly world. It is interesting, vis a vis *Emotidon's* revelations about how looking at any ambiguous image can bring out our inner violence and sexuality, that whereas it is easy to see violence in our relationships with dinosaurs, any sense of sexuality is usually absent. In this case, it seemingly came up from some very suppressed depths right into the forefront, showing that it's always there, even if it seems silly.

OOPS!

The Dinosaur Mating Game contains one glaring, hilarious mistake. It is a relatively early project within this series, and Chris was still learning about dinosaurs when he made it. When it came time to draw the skulls, he found pictures of them on the web and traced them. However, he used the wrong skull for Apatosaurus--he used a Camarasaurus skull instead, because it was wrongly labeled on a website and he didn't know the difference. This would just be a silly mistake, however, if it didn't fit directly in with a big moment in the history of paleontology. Othniel Charles Marsh, one of the most celebrated early paleontologists, actually put a Camarasaurus skull on an Apatosaurus body by mistake, and it lasted

that way for decades, until someone realized the mistake and used the correct, much more slender Apatosaurus skull.

Beyond this humorous paralell, however, is the interesting implication that if Chris used the right skull, the relationships in this project would have all turned out differently, since skull shape is such an important factor! If the real skull was used, it might have been a more likely candidate for Plesiosaurus than Dimetrodon. It would be interesting to try this project again in the future, using the corrrect skull, and see what happens. Looks really do matter!