Ultimate Meaning and the Game of Games: Toward a Model of Individualized Paideia

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Abstract

Plato's philosophy of paideia concerns the life-long growth toward areté, excellence, in body, mind, and spirit. Implementation of this philosophy in modern times is thwarted by many obstacles, especially relativism, plurality, and secularity. A new approach focuses on individualized paideia. To this end, what are termed *R-class games* are proposed and defined. They consist of games based on the model of *Rebirth*, the Tibetan game of liberation. R-class games promote what is termed *embodied areté* across a variety of paths. They overcome the obstacles of relativism, plurality, and secularism, to provide scalable and transferable games of individualized paideia.

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> *We ought to learn the virtues by practicing them, not merely by talking about them.*
> - St. Peter of Damaskos

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore an idea, a possibility, maybe even an inevitability. But that remains to be seen. I don't think it will say anything startlingly new with respect to the concept of paideia, although I think it illuminates a point often missed. Nor will it make any great breakthroughs in the theory or practice of education. Though, hopefully it will provide some food for thought in that regard.

Its main purpose, really, is to inter-relate an idea and, of all things, a board game. Both are very old, but they come from totally different cultures. The idea, paideia, is of course from ancient Greece. The board game, called *Rebirth*, comes from 13th century Tibet. And yet, as different as the origins of these two things might be, the goal of this paper is to show that they connect together remarkably well. And even more than that, the one, *Rebirth*, may have the potential, with suitable development, of being a model for tools and methods that would allow the re-visioning and modern re-instantiation of the other, Plato's ancient ideal of paideia.

Paideia

In the closing of *Gorgias* (Cooper, 1997), Socrates says to Callicles and the assembled others,

> For my part í I think about how I'll reveal to the [final] judge a soul that's as
> healthy as it can be. So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of
> people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to

live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other

people as well í to this way of life, *this contest, that I hold to be worth all other*

contests in this life (*Gorg*. 526 d-e, emphasis added).

But what is this contest of which Socrates speaks? What is its true nature? Earlier in the

dialogue, Callicles states,

í this is whatøs admirable and just by nature í --that the man whoøll live

correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not

restrain them. And when they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to

devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them

with whatever he may have an appetite for at the time (*Gorg*. 492a).

Callicles, too, clearly sees life as a contest. It is one where all the players are motivated solely by

self-interest. One which nowadays we would say is driven by Darwinian principles. The

strongest and most powerful shall prevail and thereby shall have the right to do whatever they

want to the utmost. For Callicles, the game of life produces winners and losers, haves and have-

nots. But for the have-nots, life is not a game; it is struggle; it is suffering.

This echoes another theme of *Gorgias*. Who is the more despicable person, the one who

causes injustice or the one who suffers it? Callicles clearly feels that those who suffer injustice

are the lesser beings. Those who cause it are wielding the power Nature has given them and are

to be admired.

What we see in *Gorgias*, then, is a comparison of three views of the contest or game of

life. Calliclesø perspective highlights two of theseô winners and losers. Winners see a single

game that must be won at all costs. All processes and events are translated into the singular

demands of their own desires and appetites. The game is won by superior power of both mind

and body, and those possessing such power have the right, indeed, the obligation, to *do* all and *take* all they can. For the losers, however, there is no game. They are beaten, and life has become a depressing series of events perpetually confirming their suffering and the futility of their hopes and dreams. As sad as their existence may be, however, their lot is still the result of their attempt to play life as a game of self-interest. They have lost because they have tried to win but failed.

Socratesø arguments provide an alternative view. Life is indeed a game, but not a singular contest of victory and loss. Rather, it is a *game of games*, where each moment provides a new opportunity, not to defeat a competitor, but to defeat all those elements within oneøs self that are restricting and distorting oneøs *true nature*. This game of games is paideia.

According to Werner Jaeger (1943/1971), õPaideia for Plato is the souløs lifelong struggle to free itself from ignorance of the greatest goods, which bars its way to its true welfare (p. 153).ö Furthermore, Jaeger points out,

> What Plato means by paideia í is not merely a stage in a manøs development,
> where he trains a certain number of faculties; its meaning is extended to connote
> the perfection of his character, in accordance with his nature. í [Plato] did not
> think of nature í as raw material out of which education was to form a work of
> art; he thought it was the highest areté, which is only incompletely manifested in
> individual man. í Areté is the souløs health; so it is manøs *normal state*, his true
> nature (pp. 133-134, authorøs emphasis).

It is the task of education to complete the manifestation of manøs true nature and thus fulfill the promise of areté. Yet, õall education is spiritually a function of the community. í It is actually the influence of the state and society that educates men and makes them into whatever

society wants.ö Jaeger thus identifies two distinct, yet necessarily interrelated, perspectives. In the classical view, paideia is the manifestation of oneøs own individual nature, *and* it is a function of the community, molding the person according to the ideals of the state. For Plato, there is no conflict between these two because the true nature of the individual and the ideal of the community are held to be one and the same. This identity is, in fact, the foundation of paideia, both in its classical and more recent manifestations.

Obstacles to Paideia

Though obstacles to the fulfillment of this ideal have always existed, our modern post-modern world seems to render it virtually meaningless. Several factors come into play. The first and most pervasive is *relativism*. The notion of Truth, the cornerstone of Socratesø approach to life, has been de-capitalized to a mere contextualized figure, subject to consensual validation. No longer, it seems, can humans possess a *true nature*, only one that works for a given situation and can be characterized within accepted, ethnic, cultural, and gender-based standards.

Here we find the related problem of *pluralism*. There is no longer any simple relation between the individual and the group. There can be no guarantees that the nature of the individual is an expression of the nature of society. The fundamental symmetry between the ideals of the society and the true nature of the individual is the cornerstone of Platoøs conception of paideia. That can no longer be assumed. Virtually all societies are subject to a multitude of cultural, ethnic, ideological, and religious influences. They play on the individual with ever-changing consequences, creating plurality within the person as well as within their social context.

Finally, we live in an age of extraordinary *secularity* (Taylor, 2007). The old spiritual values and ideas donøt seem to carry much force anymore. Which holds the greatest truth, the

Trinity or the Dharma, Yahweh or Allah, the spirit or the bottom line? There are, of course, still societies where religious belief is dictated by law and maintained by force. Though this creates a guise of solidarity, the power of universal communication and internet-based access to every possible idea and expression known to humankind, means the days of this enforced religiosity are numbered. Eventually, even such closed societies must give way to the global force of secularity.

In this relativistic, pluralistic, and secular world, what hope can there be for the ideals of areté, eudaimonia, and especially paideia?

Ultimate Meaning

Despite such obstacles, given the pendular swing of human history, the study of virtue has seen renewal in both philosophy (e.g., MacIntyre, 1981, 1999; Comte-Sponville, 1996) and psychology (e.g., Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Fowers, 2005). In addition, there has been a dramatic increase in the field of psychology's interest in both religion and spirituality (see, for example, Paloutzian and Park, 2005; or Miller, 2012). These developments indicate a climate of rediscovered interest in the higher forms of human thought and endeavor. Or perhaps, as this symposium would attest, ultimately human beings cannot help but be concerned with excellence and the growth of the good.

I have argued this very perspective (Doner, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), which I call *the theory of the archetype of ultimate meaning*. According to this theory, we are hard-wired to be able to pursue what can be called ultimate meaning, where this usage derives from Tillich's (1957) notion of ultimate concern. The overall perspective can be summarized by the following conceptual sequence: 1) The actualization of the full potential of each human mind requires its embedding within an integrated symbolic and material culture. 2) The evolution of such cultures

is impossible so long as human minds function solely according to self-interest, despite the unquestioned centrality of self-interest in the overall process of evolution. 3) Current conceptions of pro-sociality, social facilitation and similar approaches are inadequate to explain the evolution of culture insofar as they cannot account for the subjugation of self-interest. 4) Subjugating the power of self-interest requires the emergence of a new capability within the human brain. 5) This capability, here termed the archetype of ultimate meaning, constitutes a differentiation within the high-level, embodied, symbolic processes of the hominid brain. 6) The functioning of this archetype provides the protean basis of religion as a fully-encompassing, though symbolic, form of engagement between the person and their physical and social world. 7) This provides the leverage needed to subjugate self-interest and instantiate a symbolic and material network of ultra-cooperativity (Tomesello, 2012), empowering the emergence of human culture.

Of greatest relevance to the present paper, the theory argues that when a person functions within an overarching *semantic context*, this context acts as an *attractor* (Cook, 1986), drawing thought, experience, and behavior along a particular path. If the semantic context is some form of self-interest, the mind moves toward self-interest. On the other hand, if the semantic context is a concern for ultimate meaning, *regardless of the form by which this is conceived*, thought, experience, and behavior will be moved to a degree and in a manner that is consistent with the person's conception of ultimate meaning.

The semantic context is the foundation of the overall intent and significance of experience and behavior. For there to be paideia, the semantic context must be some expression of ultimate meaning. The growth to excellence, or what I will call *embodied areté*, will only take place if there is some overarching ultimate, i.e., transcendent, intent. Excellence points *beyond* the norm. The *greatest* excellence points toward ultimate meaning.

Overcoming Obstacles to Paideia

These ideas can be used to construct an approach which resolves the three main obstacles to paideia. We are interested in building a system composed of a collection of behavioral and experiential domains. How should this system be structured, and what are its guiding principles?

Consider first the issues of plurality and secularity. The problem of plurality means the relation between the paideia of the individual and the paideia of the people is ambiguous and uncertain. The problem of secularity means that individuals will be resistant to traditional religious conceptions of paideia. These two issues are resolved by,

1. Letting individual choice be the foundation by which the system's domains of thought, experience, and action are selected. Each person is free to choose their own paths. The system is given form by their choices.

2. The system must support this individual customization by providing a catalogue of potential selections, where each has been worked out according to its possibilities for excellence, its areté.

By making the choice of domains within which paideia is to be pursued totally up to the individual, interference between the individual and society and the resistance of the individual to society are eliminated. Persons make their own choices. Yet this is only effective if the system is such that it can support a range of possible choices (a catalogue) such that every option truly constitutes a game of paideia.

The system must both utilize and overcome the issue of contextualization. Contextualization is used because every path, every domain, is developed as an embodied symbolic game functioning in the real world, even if that world is virtual. The content and structure of each game is thus specified contextually.

Contextualization is overcome because the pursuit of an embodied areté leads to a true individualized expression of one's best or most fundamental nature. What this means is that all paths must converge in their expression of embodied areté. In the highest excellence, expressive of the embodiment of ultimate meaning within each path/practice/discipline/tradition/game, all paths become symmetric. For example, we fully expect that Christ and Mohammed, or Gandhi and St. Francis, or Ishmael and Isaac, or any other combination of religious exemplars, should interact in a completely simpatico or even synergistic manner. On the other hand, we intuitively understand that a critical factor interfering in interactions among less exemplary individuals is self-interest. Self-interest is always a critical source of conflict between persons.

Peak religious experiences are known to possess a general form that is invariant across religious traditions (Schuon, 1984; Hollenback, 1996). In addition, the spiritual understanding of exemplary persons, even across traditions, is generally symmetric (Suzuki, 1957, Jaoudi, 1998). The present perspective takes this a step further. It says that the issue is not religious or spiritual per se. It argues that all pursuits within a context of ultimate meaning will result in symmetric forms of embodied areté.

It is this convergence in the basic nature of embodied areté that supports individualized choice. Society, or the State, need not dictate the paths to be followed. By providing a system which supports the paideia of the individual in all paths, it naturally promotes the paideia of the whole.

The Game of Games

What kind of system might allow this freedom of choice and also fully support embodied areté regardless of the particulars of the path? One answer, in truth, is *life*. Life, taken as a whole,

is a game of games. It provides paths of potentially unlimited variability. It also fundamentally supports the growth of excellence in all aspects of living a life.

Hence life, the Game of games, is paideia. It is paideia at the largest of scales, relative to a single person. An educational tool such as a board game will be of a much smaller scale. But if life is paideia, then a board game can only embody paideia if it scales to life as a whole. In other words, it must be composed of the same basic forms as life, and these forms must interact according to dynamic rules identical to those rules governing life.

If a game is thus *scalable*, its areté should then be *transferable* to life as a whole. Here we see why most board games are very poor models of a game of paideia. More will be said on this later, but for now, this is why, for example, *The Game of Life* can never be a game of paideia. This is why *Guitar Hero* does not make great guitarists. These games are not truly scalable to real life and therefore their various skills and knowledge are not transferable.

A game of paideia must be scalable and transferable. In addition, it must be capable of faithfully expressing ultimate meaning within its paths. The remainder of this paper demonstrates how the game of *Rebirth* fits these criteria. Or more precisely, *Rebirth* is an example of a form of a game of paideia which meets all criteria. It is scalable, transferable, expressive of ultimate meaning, and supportive of embodied areté.

Rebirth

No other board game can compare to *Rebirth* as a game of paideia. Board games have long been recognized as means for training, not only specific knowledge and skills, but also general cognitive abilities (Hinebaugh, 2009). Through the ages, board games have also been used to teach religious concepts and moral and ethical ideals. One of the oldest of this genre is

the Hindu game of *Leela* (Johari, 2007), which means õdivine gameö. It was developed over 2000 years ago and is believed to be a precursor to the modern game of *Chutes and Ladders*.

In 19th century America, several games appeared that sought to teach Christian values. Milton Bradleyøs *Game of Life* began in 1860 as *The Checkered Game of Life*. The title referred to the structure of the board, which resembled a checkerboard, but more importantly, to the vagaries of life itself. Squares on the board represented such positive states as Honesty, Bravery, Wealth, and Success, but also such serious problems as Gambling, Disgrace, Prison, Ruin, and even Suicide (Wikipedia, 2013). The modern game has been whitewashed of virtually all of these dire outcomes, though one still faces bankruptcy. We see here an example of the difficulties facing the transferability of training in a game of paideia. The modern version, *Game of Life*, fails to transfer because it is not a good model of real life.

The game of *Rebirth*, however, has many unique and powerful aspects in its play that make it an excellent small-scale model of paideia. *Rebirth* was invented in the early 13th century by Sakya pandita Kunga Gyalsten (Tatz and Kent, 1977). His name means õWhose Banner is Total Joy,ö but he was generally known as Sa-pan, a shortening of his title as a pandit of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. He developed the game as a pastime for his ailing mother. It caught on, however, with old and young, monks and laypersons. It was regarded as an amusement, an educational tool, and as a method of self-understanding. As Tatz and Kent report, the current Dalai Lamaøs elder brother, Thubten Norbu, has written that, in his youth, games would last for hours and could get very noisy as all participants reacted to each otherøs fate.

In general, *Rebirth* consists of three domains. The lower domain is known as Samsara in accordance with the Buddhist worldview. Samsara, simply, is life as we know it. It is life lived under a context of self-interest, with its ups and downs, its hells and its heavens. Eventually, the

player leaves Samsara and progresses to the next domain, the Path. In *Rebirth* the Path is two-fold. The player can progress along the path of either Tantric or Mahayana Buddhism. This is one of the factors that make *Rebirth* unique. The game includes not one but multiple perspectives on ultimate meaning. The predominant paths are both Buddhist, but there are non-Buddhist paths as well. Tatz and Kent (1977) identify six major variants of the Path in their game. A player can learn to live a life of ultimate meaning along any of these paths, but the Buddhist paths rise the highest. Only they present the possibility of ascendance to the highest realm of the game.

After becoming thoroughly experienced by training, one ascends to the final area of the game, becoming an Exemplar. This is a brief segment during which the player learns about and even experiences the major life events and circumstances of an exemplary person. In *Rebirth*, this is the Buddha. The game ends with the player completing the Exemplar path and transcending even Nirvana itself.

Such is the basic structure of the game. It is played on a õboardö that is actually a type of tapestry called a *thangka*. A contemporary version is shown in figure 1. This is the board available in Tatz and Kent (1977). The playing board is divided into 104 squares, arranged in a matrix eight squares wide and thirteen squares high. Squares are numbered sequentially, right to left, bottom to top, beginning in the lower right. Each square is also titled or named. Its name corresponds to its content and its nature. For example, #11 is the square labeled Animals. This square represents living oneøs life as an insentient being. A very important square is #17, called the Eastern Continent or Jambu Island. In the Buddhist view, Jambu Island represents existence as a human beingô not an animal, not a god, just a normal human being. This is very important, because it is only as a human being that one has the opportunity to progress beyond Samsara and begin the Path. Lower beings cannot do so, and neither can gods, only human beings.

Game Dynamics

In *Rebirth* play is governed by the role of a single die. Players begin at #24, The Heavenly Highway. This square is the doorway. Depending on the throw of the die, the player moves from #24 to one of six other squares. In general, when a player throws the die value n, they do not move n adjacent squares as one would in most board games. Rather, the player moves to a single square indexed by n. From #24, the pattern of movements is as follows: 1. To #27, Heaven of the Four Great Kings, 2. To #17, Jambu Island, 3. To #15, the Asuras, 4. To #11, Animals, 5. To #10, Hungry Ghosts, 6. To #6, Reviving Hell. Even without the details of each state, it is apparent that the highway of existence spans the greatest and the worst of life. Every square has its own pattern of movements indexed by the value n. Some movements are non-movements, in which case the player remains on the square until their next turn.

This basic method of play allows the game to utilize several different *transitional schemes* for controlling advancement. The concept of multiple transitional schemes is another, extremely important, characteristic that sets *Rebirth* apart. The schemes are specified by two things, the index pattern and the way squares are interlinked. In *Rebirth*, no two squares are interlinked by accident. Every connection is purposeful. Thus there is an ongoing interplay between the methods of interpreting the die, in other words, the index patterns, and the logic of relationships among the different squares.

The way most common board games are played utilizes some variation on the transitional scheme shown in figure 2A. This can be termed *sequential progressive*. Play progresses sequentially from beginning to end. Some games have means for leaping forward or falling back, but play remains dominantly sequential and progressive.

The Samsara region of *Rebirth* is composed of about half of the total number of squares. These squares are all interconnected in a network or web as shown in figure 2B. Any given throw moves the player somewhere else, to a better or worse condition, but almost always still within the Samsara region. This means that movement within Samsara is *neither* sequential *nor* progressive. Players can cycle around among the various Samsara squares for an indeterminate amount of time. Such is life! Because the probability of getting out is non-zero, eventually the person will rise up out of Samsara and follow a Path. In practice, however, there can seem to be no end to the cycle of gain and loss.

The Paths represent a second transitional scheme. Though not exactly sequential, Paths are generally progressive. At a certain point, the major Paths separate permanently from Samsara and the player on these paths can no longer fall back to lower levels. One of the main characteristics of this transition mode is that for most squares along the Paths, between a third and 5/6ths of the die throws result in no movement. Consequently, the player usually remains at each square for several cycles of play, giving time to contemplate the meaning of the square and all it entails.

A third transitional scheme corresponds to the Exemplar domain, which consists of the top row of eight squares. This set is entirely sequential and progressive. Die values of õ1ö or õ2ö move the player to the next square. All other values have no movement. Players inevitably move sequentially along the top row, from #97, Adopting a Physical Form, to #104, Nirvana.

There is a final transitional mode that is highly specialized and applies to only two squares on the entire board. These squares are #1, Vajra Hell, which is where a monk goes that has violated the fundamental precepts of the Path, or has performed acts against Buddhism itself.

15

The other square, #48, Cessation, is a state of unconscious suspension that is a consequence of incorrect meditation. In both cases, the player at that square cannot leave until they throw all of the following, though not in any particular order: one 1, two 2s, three 3s, four 4s, five 5s, and six 6s. We can name this the Vajra scheme for its primary instantiation.

Rebirth thus possesses four transitional schemes, Samsara, Path, Exemplar, and Vajra. Each creates a distinct class of experiences since it is composed of different contents which are engaged according to different dynamics. Samsara is at first fascinating, but then can seem to go on forever. This increases the desire and motivation to move beyond. Path mode creates a slow and deliberate movement, giving time for serious thought and meditation. The Exemplar sequence is measured and dignified but nonetheless straightforward. And finally, Vajra mode provides an experience no player wants to repeat.

A Vision of Individualized Paideia

The original game, of course, is wholly derived from the symbols, knowledge, and practices of Tibetan Buddhism. The structure of *Rebirth*, however, can be utilized to generate an unlimited-sized class of different games. I call these, therefore, R-Class games. Several years ago, the author programmed a computer version of *Rebirth* based on the Tatz and Kent game. Its board is shown in Figure 3. All squares in Samsara were given less Buddhist and more modern, psychological interpretations. Path squares still followed either the Mahayana or the Tantra, but here too, more psychological, less strictly Buddhist interpretations were given to all squares.

The purpose of this version was to create a computer-based alternative, and to examine the generalization capabilities of the game. This new R-Class game is interesting and enjoyable to play. It feels very similar to the original. The possibilities for generalization thus seem

unlimited. As a first-step prototype, the computer game was very successful. It provided a recreational, educational, and research tool. But most importantly, it also provided insight into the production of other R-class games.

R-class games should be capable of development along two critical dimensions. One is the establishment of a repertoire or catalogue of potential paths, each worked out through the growth of areté. The second possibility is to enhance each square such that it is actually another playable game within the defining theme of the square. For example, #11 might entail some other activity consistent with the theme of existence as an animal. Performance in these sub-games may then have some influence on the odds of where the player goes next. Such an R-class game would thus be a true game of games.

Examples of small-scale versions of an R-class game are, for *Rebirth*, the physical game (Figure 1) and the computer version (Figure 3). But since this game is scalable, we should be able to use it to design larger-scale models. For example, a computer game might scale up to a curriculum. And the curriculum might scale to a degree program. And a degree program might scale to a system of high-level continuing life-long educationô the ultimate game of paideia.

Conclusions

1. There are three critical obstacles to the expression of Platoøs philosophy of paideia in current approaches to education and personal development.

2. These are the relativism, plurality, and secularity of current societies.

3. However, insofar as all three represent progressive ideas in the evolution of culture, they are not going to go away, nor should they be eliminated.

4. Therefore, a modern expression of paideia must use a new perspective to overcome these obstacles.

5. This paper has presented the conception of an *individualized* paideia, where the larger system expressive of society completely supports the individual's choice of domains, within which they seek what is termed *embodied areté*.

6. It was shown that games of paideia, constructed from this perspective, can overcome the obstacles of relativism, plurality, and secularization, without trying to eliminate them.

7. Games of paideia form a specifiable class of games, termed R-class games. They are based on the structure and dynamics of *Rebirth*, the Tibetan game of liberation.

8. R-class games are fully supportive of ultimate meaning, and therefore are capable of embodied areté.

9. They are scalable, which means their basic structure and operational principles can create systems of different scales, i.e., sizes and complexities. R-class games scale from the size of a board game to a curriculum, and to life as a whole.

10. Because of their scalability, the excellences achieved through participation in the game at one scale, say the board game, will be *transferable* to the game at a different scale, like life.

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Figure 1. The game board for the Tatz and Kent (1977) version of *Rebirth*.

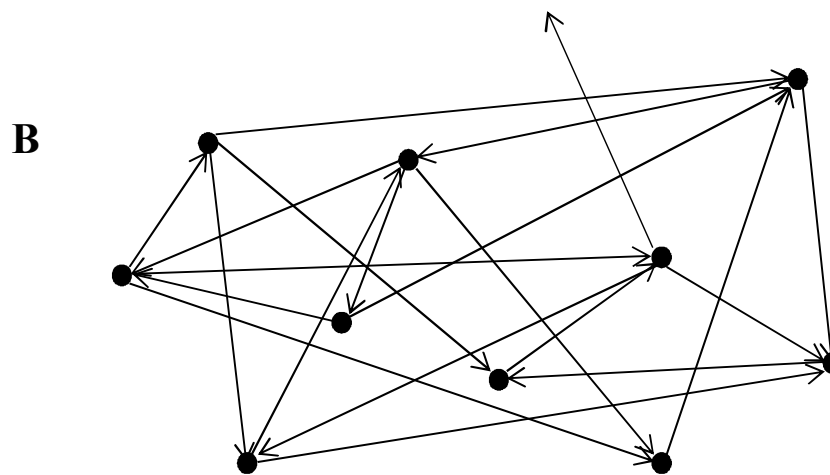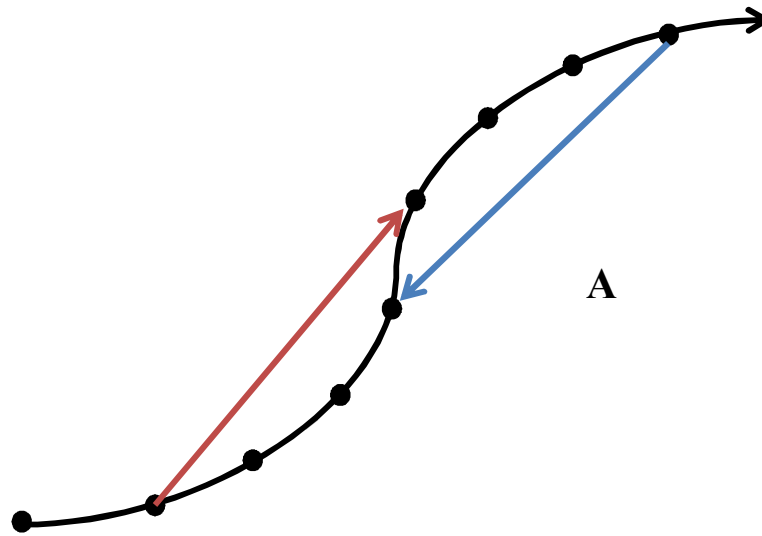Figure 2. **A.** A representation of the sequential progressive transition mode of normal board games. Moves are mainly between adjacent points except for forward (red) and backward (blue) jumps. **B.** A representation of the non-sequential, non-progressive network interconnection of points in the Samsara domain of *Rebirth*. One path exits the domain.
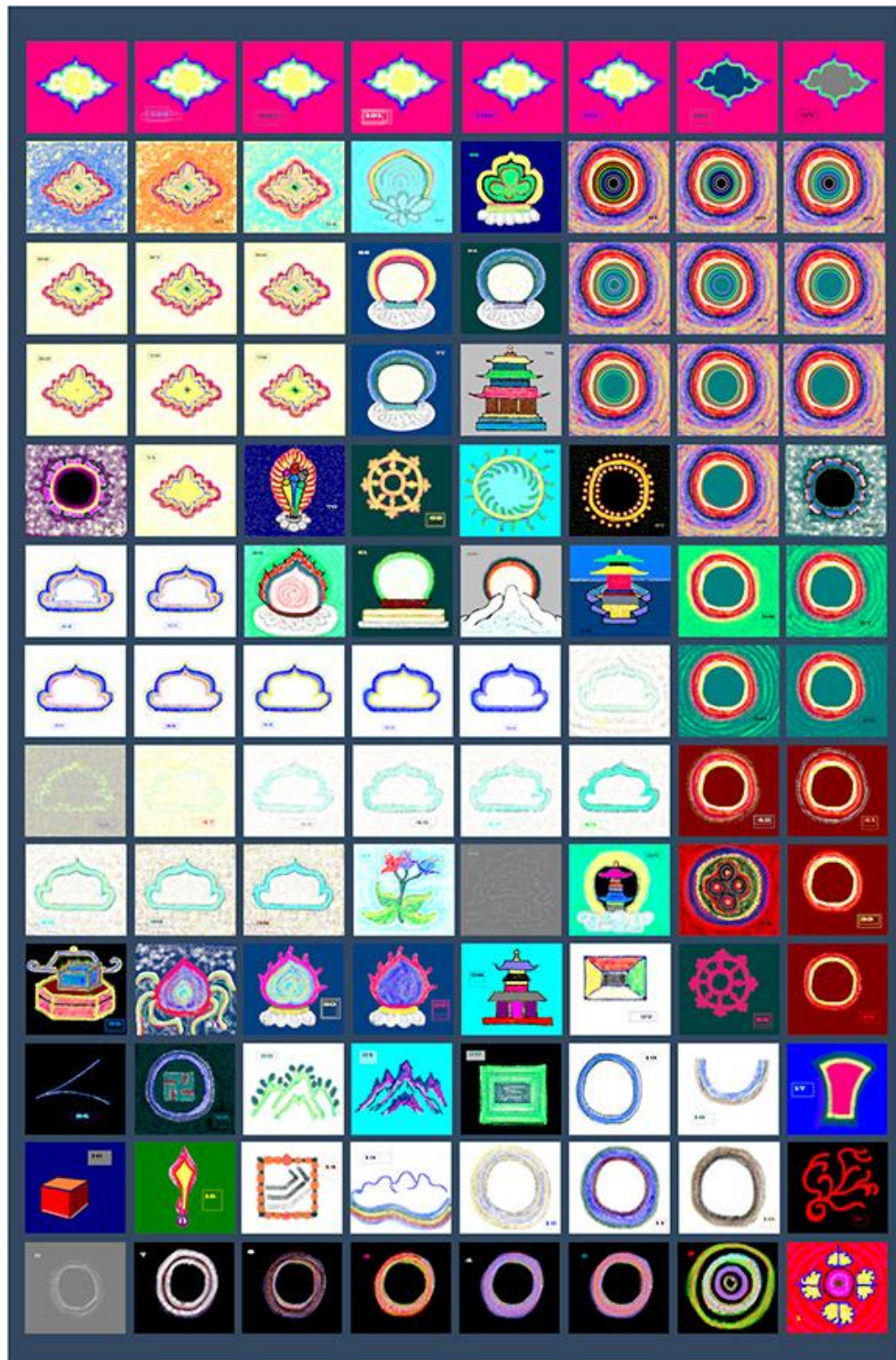
Figure 3. The game board for the computer version of *Rebirth* developed by the author.