

# The Politics of Care: The Possibilities and Limits of Video Games for Political Campaign and Propaganda in *Lugawan ni Leni* (2022) and *Let Leni Lead* (2022)

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## ABSTRACT

This article will analyze two mobile video games, *Lugawan ni Leni* [Leni's Porridge Shop] (Coffee Brain Games, 2022) and *Let Leni Lead* (Cordless Games, 2022). Released during the height of the 2022 Philippine Presidential Campaign, both games are election and propaganda games that endorses and supports the candidacy of former Philippine Vice President Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo for president. By analyzing the two games' design and mechanics, the games attempt to affect the discourse surrounding Leni Robredo will be highlighted. The essay will conclude with the possibilities and limits of the two games in soliciting electoral votes and political action.

## Keywords

Propagandistic advergames, mobile games, Philippine elections, procedural rhetoric

## INTRODUCTION

Then Vice President Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo filed for her candidacy as President of the Republic of the Philippines on October 7, 2021 (Cepeda 2021). As the leading opposition figure to then President Rodrigo "Digong" Roa Duterte, she faced an uphill battle. She was one of the leading candidates for president in many preelection surveys though she lagged behind Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., son of the former dictator of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. (Mateo 2021).

During the height of the campaign for the Philippine Presidential Elections, two video games were made in support of the presidential candidacy of Leni Robredo. This follows the trend that began in 2016 when video games were made and published in support of the eventual winner, Rodrigo Duterte (Cerda 2021, 144-145; Liwanag 2022, 189). Mostly published on mobile platforms like the Android and iOS, these games leverages the widespread use of mobile smartphones in the Philippines.

For this essay, I will analyze *Lugawan ni Leni* [Leni's Porridge Shop] (Coffee Brain Games, 2022) and *Let Leni Lead* (Cordless Games, 2022) and how these games used the video game as a form and medium to spread the message of the Robredo campaign and propagandize for the victory of Leni Robredo as president of the

Philippines. In analyzing these games, the possibilities and limits of video games as a propagandistic medium would be shown, especially in the context of the Philippines.

## **THE DOMINANT CULTURE OF PATRIARCHAL PATRONAGE POLITICS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

Since the arrival and colonization by Spain in 1565, women's political participation had been marginalized in the Philippines (Veneracion-Rallonza 2008, 216-217). Though women's suffrage and electoral participation has been law since 1937, Philippine politics is still dominated by patriarchal patronage politics. As Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza notes,

A patriarchal mindset continues to frame a culture that perpetuates gendered realities detrimental to women; patriarchy has been entrenched in the political realm where men still possess the political authority. Women are an addendum, an afterthought, even perceived as an inconvenient requirement of the signed international women's conventions. (244)

This is the political environment that Leni Robredo operated in. Even her participation in politics had been accident, both literal and metaphorical. She was married to Jesus "Jesse" Robredo, the former mayor Naga City, Camarines Sur who served from 1988-1998 and 2001-2010. Jesse Robredo became the Secretary of Interior and Local Government from 2010 until his death in 2012. He died when the small airplane he was riding crashed at sea near the island of Masbate, Philippines (ABS-CBN News 2012). This thrust Leni Robredo into the political spotlight as Jesse Robredo was one of the leading political figures allied with then President Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III. She won a congressional seat in 2013. In 2016, she became the vice presidential running-mate of Manuel "Mar" Roxas III. Against all odds, she won and became vice president of the Philippines beating many strong candidates including the current president of the Philippines, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr.

Her term as vice president was notable as she became the leading opposition figure against the winner of the presidency in 2016, Rodrigo "Digong" Roa Duterte. President Duterte represents a populist turn in Philippine politics. Duterte's main political campaign promise and eventual government program was a brutal war on drugs which one study has estimated to have killed 7,742 civilians (Kishi and Buenaventura 2021). But some human rights groups have estimated these drug war related deaths to as high as 30,000 by 2019 (Bueza 2016). Robredo was critical of Duterte's drug war even before she was appointed, then fired in less than three weeks, of the Inter-Agency Committee on Anti-Illegal Drugs (ICAD) when it was clear that she would use her position to soften the brutality of the drug war and the opposition might use it for future investigations against Duterte (Bueza 2019).

Along with going against Duterte, Leni Robredo was a target of a coordinated online disinformation campaign against her. On the month of January 2022, a few weeks before the start of official campaigning for the May 2022 elections, Tsek.Ph, a fact-checking group, has noted that most of the 200 post that they fact-checked was targeted against Robredo (Gonzales 2022). By May 2022, Tsek.Ph has noted that 96% of the disinformation about Robredo was negative against her while 92% of the disinformation about Marcos, Jr. was positive in favor of him (Noriega 2022).

In this political environment, the Robredo campaign utilized the video game form as a means to send its message across. New media side-steps traditional structures of political patronage in the Philippines. Traditionally, politicians need to build a network and system of patronage to wage a successful campaign, may it be at the local or national elections (Teehankee 2022, 1-3). But the advent of new media, like social media and video games, has given some people with a means to circumvent or supplement traditional political campaigning. In the recent Presidential Election in 2022, Aries Arugay, in his “Stronger Social Media Influence in the 2022 Philippine Elections”, notes the growing use of social media for political campaigning which began in 2016 (2022, 4-6). Continued study on how new media like video games are used in political campaigning need to be done as video game playing continue to grow especially in countries like the Philippines.

## **PROPAGANDISTIC ADVERGAMES**

In his seminal book *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost outlines the capabilities of video games to express ideas and persuade through its design and processes. He calls this procedural rhetoric. For Bogost, procedural rhetoric is “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions (2007, ix).” He notes how video games were used to convey political messages and ideological critiques as can be seen in Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12*, a critique of the United States war on terror that used bombing of urban areas that resulted in civilian deaths, and those civilian deaths that antagonized the local population that creates more “terrorists”, which the player must eliminate and create a vicious cycle of violence that never ends (85-88). He also describes how video games were also used during election campaigns to persuade voters to vote for a party or candidate. He gives a game that he and Gonzalo Frasca developed and designed, *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* released in 2003. Bogost is very self critical of the failure of the game to persuade voters as Howard Dean lost the Democratic Party nomination for the 2004 Presidential Elections in the United States to John Kerry. He notes that the game’s “...failure to put coherent political rhetoric in the hands of its army of supporters was the Dean campaign’s Achilles’ heel. Dean had political views, but nobody knew anything about them, so they invented their own impressions of them (139).” For video games made for election campaigning, Bogost highlights the need to express the political views of a candidate not just simulate an election campaign (142-143).

Bogost would differentiate these kinds of overtly political games from what he saw as advertising games or advergames. Bogost defines advergames as “...any game created specifically to host a procedural rhetoric about the claims of a product or service. More succinctly put, advergames are simulations of products and services (200).” Teresa de la Hera, in her book *Digital Gaming and the Advertising Landscape*, defines advergames as “a digital game specifically designed for a brand with the aim of conveying an advertising message (2022, 31).” Both Bogost and de la Hera see advergames as video games mainly dealing with products and brands made and sold by companies and the main purpose of these games is to convince the players, ultimately, to buy the product being advertized in a particular advergame.

For this essay, I would like to propose that these two video games in support of the presidency of Leni Robredo are advergames but what I would call *propagandistic advergames*. These are propagandistic because they try to convey a political message for the political campaign of a presidential aspirant and candidate. But these are, ultimately, advergames that aim to “sell” a candidate so that the player would “buy”

or vote for a candidate. As Yuko Kasuya noticed about Philippine elections in her book *Presidential Bandwagon: Parties and Party Systems in the Philippines*, one of the three types of campaign strategies used in the Philippines is based on personality. Personality, according to Kasuya, is when “...a candidate emphasizes issues that pertain to his [or her] personal background and abilities, often through the use of mass media (2009, 44-45).” A campaign that emphasizes personality would attempt to “sell” a candidate as a viable option using mass media. Known strategies include TV interviews and biographical movies or biopics that would highlight the candidate’s achievements and personal qualities. Today, video games has become a legitimate avenue for political campaigns and has become a way to convince voters of the viability of a candidate as a choice in an election.

### **GAME DESIGN AND MECHANICS OF *LUGAWAN NI LENI* AND *LET LENI LEAD***

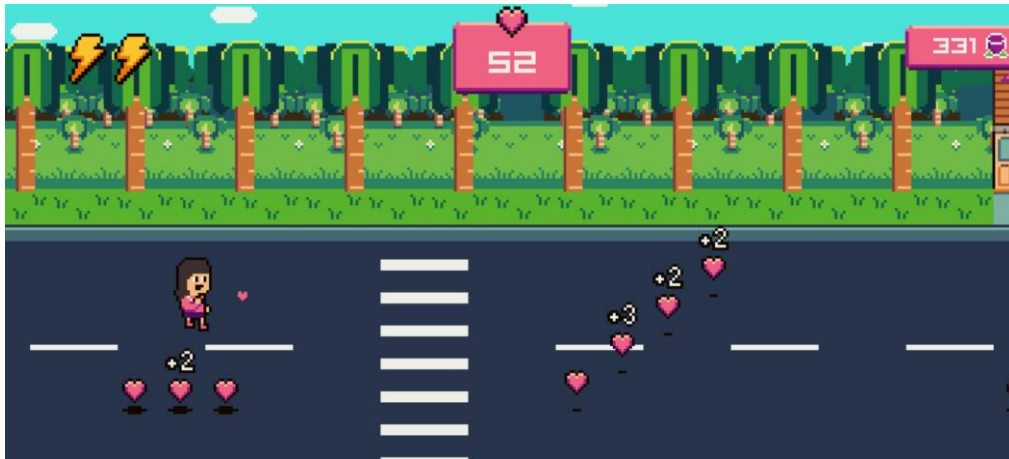
*Lugawan ni Leni* is a casual food game where the player takes on the role of a vendor, who is presumably Leni Robredo herself, that sells lugaw, or rice porridge, to customers. The player must garnish a bowl of lugaw from a preset number of ingredients that includes eggs, spices, and kalamansi, a native lime. The player will then serve a bowl of lugaw based on the request and preference of the customer. A point will be given if the customer is satisfied and none if not. A timer will fill up on top of the screen to indicate the time left for a round. The goal of the game is to serve and satisfy as many customers as possible within the given time limit. It is as simple as that. Some known allies of Robredo would pop up as customers like former Senator Leila de Lima, who was imprisoned for more than 6 years because of trumped up drug charges by the Duterte administration, former Senator Antonio Trillanes III, and Senator Risa Hontiveros (see Figure 1 to see a shot of the gameplay).



**Figure 1:** A screenshot of serving a lugaw to Senator Risa Hontiveros in *Lugawan ni Leni*.

*Let Leni Lead* is a side-scrolling infinite runner game where the player takes control of Leni as she campaigns through out the country. Passing through each city street, the player has to collect hearts that are on the road. There lightning symbols in the in the upper right corner of the screen would slowly deplete and would show how much is time left for the player to collect hearts (see Figure 2 to see a shot of the gameplay). The player can collect energy balls replenish the lightning meter. They can also collect roses, a symbol of the campaign, to buy two kinds of upgrades. The first upgrade are volunteers that cost five roses. This gives the player extra hearts at the beginning of a run. The second upgrade is the “Angat Buhay” which is the name of the non-government foundation that Robredo established as a conduit for her outreach

programs. Roughly translated as “Uplifting Life”, this needs to be bought only once and gives a random power-up to the player during a run. The “Angat Buhay” power-up, once activated, gives the player the capability to collect all the hearts on screen as they run across the screen at high speed. The aim of the game is to reach all the cities in the Philippines or collect as many as possible until the time runs out. After each run, a random campaign agenda of Robredo’s will be flashed to the player and they could try and play again.



**Figure 2:** A screenshot of Leni Robredo collecting hearts as she campaigns all over the Philippines in *Let Leni Lead*.

## **LUGAWAN NI LENI, FOOD GAMES, AND THE POLITICS OF CARE**

The association of Leni Robredo with lugaw began when she and her supporters sold lugaw to earn campaign funds for her successful vice presidential campaign in 2016. As Serqueña noted in his article “Gut Feelings: Socio-Civic Response to Hunger in the Philippines,”

Ever since pictures of Robredo’s supporters peddling porridge circulated on the internet, the term “Leni Lugaw” was used by allies of President Duterte to disparage Robredo, comparing her leadership to bland, soft, and plain porridge. Nevertheless, Robredo and her team remained unperturbed and undeterred; in fact, they embraced the label, using the cheap but comforting Filipino dish as a sign of the grassroots spirit of the vice president’s campaign. (123)

*Lugawan ni Leni*, then, embraces the lugaw as a symbol of Leni Robredo’s campaign. As can be seen in the game’s mechanics, the lugaw is not a food that people avoid or disdain but is something that people want. Even though there is a connotation that lugaw is cheap food, there is a certain comfort attached to it as noted by Serqueña.

Agata Waszkiewicz, in her *Delicious Pixels: Food in Video Games*, notes that food is used, represented, and function in many different ways in video games from restoring health to the player’s character to being an resource that the player can use in the game (2022, 22-33). But Waszkiewicz also states how food can be used “...as a means of strengthening the bond between those who share it is one of its most crucial sociocultural functions (36).” She used the example of *Pokémon Sword* and *Pokémon*

*Shield* that uses food and eating as a means for the player to bond with their Pokémon. *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* feature an extensive mini-game where the player can cook food and feed these food to their Pokémon to gain abilities and status-effects. But feeding the Pokémon can also build up the friendliness of the Pokémon with its trainer (34-36).

This can be extended to *Lugawan ni Leni*. Though there are no in-game bonuses in serving the most number of customers, the game does try to show that serving food to hungry people is, by itself, a rewarding experience. The customer would smile each time that the player gets to serve the right kind of lugaw that the customer wants. This creates a positive feeling for the player as they continually serve lugaw to customers. This is, ultimately, the message that the game wants to impart on the player. That there is nothing wrong in serving lugaw to people, as long as it satisfies their hunger and brings comfort and joy.

This is consistent to what Takeshi Kawanaka calls the Robredo style of politics that Jessie Robredo, Leni's husband, established and pioneered during his stint as mayor of Naga City. For Kawanaka, the Robredo style is composed of two aspects, performance and approachability (30). The first aspect, performance, can be found in providing benefits and public services to the people (19). *Lugawan ni Leni* provides an illustration of how performance in the Robredo style works. Food, here represented by the lowly lugaw, becomes a way to help and serve people. And by using the lugaw to gather campaign funds, it was hoped that the lugaw would become a tool for Leni to attain a government position that would an avenue for her to provide public services to the people. As Serqueña notes,

This is most obvious in the Leni Lugaw campaign whereby supporters of Robredo renewed the symbolic value of the politically charged lugaw, not only to reclaim it from Duterte and his allies, but also to use it as the principal symbol of life-affirming and life-sustaining efforts. Robredo herself took part in this resymbolization, especially in instances where she personally served porridge to her supporters, would-be supporters, and opponents. (128)

By serving the lugaw herself, Leni Robredo continues the Robredo style of her husband. This also represents the second aspect of the Robredo style, approachability. Approachability is measured by how an ordinary person can talk to and deal with a politician. Kawanaka notes how previous mayors tend to be aloof and hard to approach, usually needing intermediaries and appointments, which is in contrast to Jessie Robredo, who can often be seen wearing simple T-shirts and shorts (28). By having Leni Robredo serve lugaw, both in the game *Lugawan ni Leni* and in the real world, her approachability is expressed.

## **LET LENI LEAD AND THE ABSTRACT DESIGN OF GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING**

In contrast to the symbolism that the lugaw represents in *Lugawan ni Leni*, *Let Leni Lead* uses a more abstract approach in representing the ideas and messages of the Robredo campaign. In *Let Leni Lead*, the hearts that the player collects represents the hearts that Leni Robredo needs to convince and win over. Such optimistic message reflects the Robredo campaign's second place standing through out the presidential campaign in 2022 (McCargo 2022, 360). Despite the positive energy and large rallies

that the Robredo campaign was able to muster during the campaign period, Robredo only garnered a peak of 25% voter preference rating during the final weeks before the May 9, 2022 election day compared to the ratings that Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.'s garnered, which always stood above 50% (Abarca 2022).

*Let Leni Lead* is the gamified version of the Robredo campaign's strategy of utilizing the vast network of volunteers to campaign house-to-house and face-to-face. The Robredo campaign aimed to use the house-to-house campaign strategy to combat this online disinformation about Leni Robredo (Abad 2022). That is why the game uses volunteers as a additional hearts in a beginning of a run that would create momentum for Robredo for her to win, in the game and on the actual election day. In this way, the aspect of approachability of the Robredo style is extended to the volunteers and not just in the persona of Leni Robredo.

*Let Leni Lead* also captures the performance aspect of the Robredo style of politics. In terms of performance, the game would highlight in between sessions the projects spearheaded by Leni Robredo as vice president of the Philippines like services her office provided during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also mentions her platform like the industries that she would support if she wins as president.

It was hoped that the message of the Robredo style found in *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* would translate into an electoral victory. Sadly, this did not happen.

## **THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF PROPAGANDISTIC ADVERGAMES FOR POLITICAL ACTION**

Both *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* were published on Android for mobile smartphones. This is to leverage the widespread use of mobile phones in the Philippines. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, 21,559,722 out of 26,374,653, or around 82% of household reports of having access to mobile phones. 5,304,136 of 26,374,653 households, or 20%, also reported to having tablets (Philippine Statistics Authority 2023, Table 1.27). Such numbers correlate to a high amount of screen time for Filipinos (Purnell 2023). Additionally, 91.5% of video games played in the Philippine in 3rd quarter of 2023 were on a smartphone (Balita 2024). There is a potential for mobile games like *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* to reach a wider audience. In fact, between 2016 to 2020, ten mobile games about President Duterte were released. According to Mariyel Liwanag, the most popular of these games, *Duterte Fighting Crime 2*, garnered more than 5,000,000 downloads with all 10 Duterte themed games amassing more than 7.5 million downloads (2022, 193). Both *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* did not reach the same kinds of numbers. Both the Google Play pages of the two games have already been taken down, though according to the archived page of the Wayback Machine at the Internet Archive, *Lugawan ni Leni* had more than 100,000 in 2022. This would not be too far a number of downloads for *Let Leni Lead* to reach as well.

Though the potential to reach a large audience is there, the low numbers that *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* had compared to the Duterte games means success is not assured. This leads to the first problem of creating propagandistic advergames: who were these games made for? *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* can be considered as games catering to casual players. As Jesper Juul defined in his *A Casual Revolution*, casual players have "...a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources



toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games (2010, 29).” Both *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* are easy to play, utilizing the touchscreen mechanics provided by the smartphone. Both do not require extended amounts of time to play. *Lugawan ni Leni* has a one-minute timer to serve the customers. *Let Leni Lead* can theoretically run infinitely but a session usually end in a minute or two if the player was not able to collect the timer power ups at timely intervals. Both are also positive and pleasant fictions depicting an idealized vision of Leni Robredo and her campaign.

But even if the design and gameplay of *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* are perfect examples of casual games catering to casual players, these two games did not reach a wider audience beyond the mass base of supporters of Leni Robredo, if the numbers are an indication of this. This can be explained by the highly polarized nature of the 2022 elections. As a house-to-house volunteer noted, some Marcos supporters they talked to shouted at them or totally ignored them though many of the people that they talked to were soft Marcos supporters whom they could talk to (Mercado 2022). Though easy to play, would playing *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* really convince people to vote for Leni Robredo if talking to people was already hard enough? Some people curious about Leni Robredo would have other forms of media to access information about her, with video games possibly not being one of their top sources of information. Both *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* actually give external links out of the game for the players to have access to information about Robredo’s achievements and campaign agendas.

*Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead*, as propagandistic advergames, have a similar problem that activist games have. If propagandistic advergames aims to sell a political campaign or a candidate and tries to convince the player to vote for this or that candidate, activist games are games that use the video game medium to critique society and convince them to take action. As Anne-Marie Schleiner proposed in her essay “The Broken Toy Tactic: Clockwork Worlds and Activist Games,” many activist games have a “toyiness” problem. As Schleiner explains, “The ‘toyiness’ of the world of the game, the miniature abstraction of the model that announces itself as game, not life, contributes to this nullification of the game’s critical impact... (2019, 124).” She adds “Beautiful toys that run too well are always enchanting, no matter how ugly the outcome of their workings. The player is lost in the game (134).”

In the same way that some activist games lulls some players into complacency, *Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* does these as well as these games create a world that are comfortable and ideal, a reflection of Leni Robredo’s vision of the Philippines. According to these games, all that one needs to do is to serve food to the needy or go house-to-house to campaign and people can be convinced of Robredo as the perfect candidate that will take care of the Philippines. But things are more complicated in real life. As the victory of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 can attest, people are willing to embrace a darker vision of the world that borders in participating in killing their fellow Filipinos even if its just in a video game (Cerdeña 2021, 161).

*Lugawan ni Leni* and *Let Leni Lead* were, in the end, preaching to the converted. More was needed to combat the political machinery and social media disinformation campaign that whitewashed dictatorial rule that lasted more than two decades under

Marcos, Sr. This technologically savvy campaign ushered a new Marcos presidency in 2022.

The next step that propagandistic advergames need to learn is how to convert procedural rhetoric into political action, and not just votes. This can be seen in how, after losing the presidential election, Leni Robredo established “Angat Buhay” as a non-government organization that would harness the energy of her supporters during the election (Cepeda 2022). How to create games that could foster political action outside the video game world is yet to be seen. But this would be an interesting challenge for the next generation of video game designers.

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