

# How Vito's Thinking Games Will Transform Your Dog Training

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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In 2010, I was teaching a agility seminar in Italy, and I was introduced to a man who was in the audience by the name of Vito Cieca. Now I might be butchering his name. However, Vito would be the originator of a game that I believe is changing the dog world for the better all over the world.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. The game I labeled as Vito's Thinking Games and my friend, Martina Magnoli Klimešová came to Canada in 2011, just six months later, and actually taught a bunch of Canadians this game and it caught on like wildfire.

Today, the game goes by many names, Martina now calls it Special Games. I've heard it called Movement Games or Movement Puzzles. It is such a revolutionary way to give our dogs autonomy. And let me tell you all the benefits to playing this game with your dog are.

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First of all, [any game you play with a dog is going to be a relationship building game](#). But this one is special because you don't necessarily do the training. You just do the reinforcing, and the [environment does the training](#). It's a game that can be the foundation of so much progression.

For example, there are three difficult skills in the sport of agility that I actually teach using Vito's Thinking Game. And these skills are pretty complex skills. Why would anybody who has zero interest in dog agility or dog sports want to play these games?

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Number one, we're giving our dogs autonomy. We're giving them the power to control the game. Their motion controls the game. We will set them in motion, and they will keep being in motion because they want to play the game. They learn to problem solve in motion.

What about when a dog's out away from us? They're in motion. We need them to be of a mindset that they can think. And so, this is just the kickstart to getting that kind of them making choices away from you, making choices without prompts from you, making choices all on their own. We are giving our dogs agency in the purest sense of the word.

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And what you're going to find happens is the dog's focus for work strengthens when you play this game. It's such a simple game. But I'm going to show you today, not only how to play it, but how to progress it into something that's fun for both you and your dog.

And when you do play the game, you'll see that your skills as a trainer sharpen, even though There's little training for you to do. Really, the biggest job for you is to set the environment properly.

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And so, what does that look like? First of all, we're going to need a bowl of really yummy cookies. And I would say a mixture of really yummy cookies. You're going to need a small like bathroom garbage can, and the game involves you sitting on the floor.



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So, it might mean that you can sit right on the floor, or you might want a cushion, or you might want to want a small stool, or it might be that you have to play this game from a chair. It's okay. But if you can get to the floor, then that's where we want you to start.

In addition to that bowl filled with yummy treats, you're going to have two smaller bowls that you're going to use as targets for your dog. And a prerequisite before you begin is you should have taught your dog the word "[search](#)".

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Now, I said you don't do the training. I just use the "search" cue to build the dog up before we actually start the Vito Game. So, let's start the Vito Game. If you're listening to this podcast, I strongly encourage you to jump over to our [YouTube channel](#) so that you can watch it in progress.

Because it really is a thing of beauty to see a dog be allowed to make these choices and to carry on and get engaged and say, "I really like this, and this is fun, and I want more." It's really cool, to see where this leads you as a team. And it's like you have this proud moment when your dog grows in their understanding of the Vito Game.

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Number one rule, and there's not many rules, but the most important thing is once we get started into the actual Vito Game, you have to be disciplined in that you have to be quiet. If you're a person who wants to prompt your dog, "You can do it! You can do it! Attaboy, attaboy!", you've got to maybe put duct tape over your mouth.

You've got to be quiet. It's called the 'Thinking Game' because we allow the dog to figure things out. Therefore, we want to start in a room with very little distractions. If it's possible that you're in the smallest room that you have, that would be brilliant.

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If you don't have a small room, you can maybe fence off with a baby gate or an ex-pen one part of your room to play this in. The second thing is you need a wall. I love to do it against the couch because quite honestly, it was more comfortable for me to lean against than a wall. So, you need an area to lean against.

Because that breaks off the environmental opportunities for the dog. For example, if there's a wall behind me where I'm sitting, the dog's focus is going to be in one of two places. It's going to be on me, which I'll show you how we're going to defer that. Or it's going to be on the two targets, AKA the two empty bowls.

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If it's open behind you, it gives the dog a lot of options. "Oh, what's Freddy over there doing? Oh, I see there's an open window." "Hey, what's the bird got?" So, we want to decrease the stimulation for the dog that's in behind. So, we help create focus just for the game. Now I could take any one of my dogs and play this, you know, in a crowded bar if I wanted to, because they really know the game.

But we're going to start in a way that creates success for you and your dog. So, back in behind a wall or a couch. And remember everyone, let's pinky swear, no talking, resist the urge to help your dog. Alright, you might need to write that one down because it's a super important one. Alright, to begin with, this is like our pre-Vito warmup.



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You're going to be sitting on the ground or wherever you're going to be playing the Vito Game, you're going to have your bowl of yummy treats on your lap. I like to sit cross legged and honestly, I like to sit on a little piece of foam that just gets my butt a little bit off the floor, a little bit elevated. I find that a little more comfortable for me.

You can take your bowls and put them just in front of your hips. So, they're kind of at your side, but not really. A little bit forward of your side and maybe, maybe a foot away from your hip. No more than that. Maybe even six inches away. So, they're pretty darn close to your body.

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But here's how we're going to start. And you've got to have everything organized before you begin. So, you might put those bowls down and then sit down immediately. Your dog's going to come in and say, "What are we doing?" And you're going to say "search", and you're going to toss one cookie with your left hand, underhand in a way that the dog sees it.

And it's going to go maybe six or eight feet, two meters out in front of you and a little bit on an angle to the left. So, it's out in front and on an angle. You're going to toss that. And when the dog grabs it, you're immediately going to say "search" again, toss with your other hand. And so, the cookie ends up on the other side on the same angle.

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What I want to establish is the pattern for the dog, the pattern of reinforcement. We're going to say "search" and toss a cookie six to eight times, and each time the toss is progressively getting closer to us. So, what it looks like for your dog is they're out a little bit out in front of you, a little less on the right side, a little less on the left side, a little less on the right side, a little less on the left side.

And before you know it, the dog is right at those two bowls at your side. And then you're going to say nothing. This is where the Vito Game begins. We've established a pattern for the dog. Go left, go right, go left, go right.

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And as they get closer to the bowls, just put a cookie in the bowl and say nothing. Now I like to sit perfectly still. Think calm thoughts. You want to avert your eyes from your dog. You can turn your eyes towards the next bowl if you want, but that's all the help we're going to give the dog. They ate a yummy treat out of this bowl, and we want them to just go a short distance.

Those bowls are going to be kind of close together, a short distance over to the next bowl. Alright so, once they eat the yummy cookie from this bowl, as soon as they look towards that other bowl, you're going to drop a cookie in there. Say nothing. They run over, they pick up that yummy cookie from the new bowl, and you say nothing.

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Wait till they look over, maybe take a step towards the other bowl. And you're just going to go back and forth. It's like a game of ping pong, but what we're doing is we're rewarding a choice the dog makes. I'm going to say that one more time.

You don't watch your dog eat the cookie and the dog stops and looks at you and you put another cookie in the other bowl. That's not it at all. That would be rewarding the dog for staring at you. We want the dog to make a choice.



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So, if your dog just sits there and stares at you, maybe go back to more of that search game out in front and do more of that before you get closer to the bowls. We just want the dog to go from one hip, get a cookie, go in front of you to the other hip.

And once they get that pattern, they're going to start going faster and faster. They're going to say, "This is fun." Now you might be thinking, "Susan, this is just my dog eating cookies from a bowl. I don't see that this is any thinking involved at all." Stick with me. It gets better.

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Okay, so now we have a dog who is driving between those bowls. I want you just to move the bowls a little bit back to beside your hips, and they can go out to maybe the end of your arms. And so, the dog is happy to go from one bowl to the other. This is a great game. They love it.

And then you're going to take that bathroom garbage can that you maybe had beside you, and you're going to put it in front of you. Put it in front of you, touching your legs. So now the dog's going from one bowl, they can't cut in front of your face. They have to go around that garbage can to get to the cookies in the other bowl.

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We've just added an obstacle. So, their brain has to process something different. "I can't just go and see my food. I can't see the food over there now because there's a garbage can in front of me." They'll keep that pattern going. And you might say, "Well, this is kind of a longish session. Normally I only train my dogs for like a minute and a half."

The first couple of times you play Vito it will go on longer than a normal session. But the rate of reinforcement is so high, the dog's getting really yummy treats. It's okay. So, the dog now will go back and forth. What we're going to do, we're adding an element of choice. If the dog is happy driving around that garbage can, you're going to move it out maybe three inches.

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That shouldn't bother them. Back and forth, back and forth. Eventually, you just keep nudging it out a little further. There'll come a time where the dog says, "Hey, I don't need to go around that garbage can anymore. I see a new road that's developed between one bowl and the lap where the garbage can used to be to the other bowl."

"So, I'm not going around the garbage can, I'm just going to cut in." All you do is keep your eyes averted, say nothing, and withhold the treat. And the dog's going to go, probably cut back between your lap and the garbage can and go to the other bowl. And they're going to go, "Wait a minute. How come the cookie stopped? What happened to my Pez dispenser?"

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This is where the thinking really starts to kick in. Sure, the thinking at first was kind of easy. Now they have to make a critical decision. "If I go around the garbage can, then I get a cookie again." And then the pattern starts. Doesn't mean they'll never cut in, but if they cut in, you just withhold reinforcement.

If they cut in and then go around the garbage can, you're going to feed that. If they then cut in the same direction again, I wouldn't feed the next go around the garbage can because it's all about the patterns. So, the dog might learn the pattern of 'cut in, get nothing, go around, get a cookie', 'cut in, get nothing, go around, get a cookie.'



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I'll let them do that, two or three times, but eventually I'll say, "Yeah, that's not working for me anymore." So, when they cut in, go around and get a cookie, so then they'll go cut in again, they get nothing, cut in again. And eventually they'll go around the way they've been avoiding.

And if they don't, you can squeak that garbage can back. But what don't you do? You don't talk to them. You don't say, "Come on, you can do this. Attaboy, you got this." It is about thinking. It is about allowing that dog to process their environment, to process what's happened, to process where the value has been given.

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So many people write in and say, "I don't get this [transfer of value](#). How does my dog get it?" Allowing them to think, allowing them to make decisions. In this case, we're allowing them to fail in the smallest way possible. And I want you to make a note, better yet, you should be videoing this entire session.

I want you to video the session. And when you look back, what does your dog do when they're frustrated? Do they start sniffing? Do they scratch their imaginary itch behind their ear? Do they yawn? Do they just turn around and give up? How does your dog deal with failure and frustration? And if they do, let's make sure you make note of that and let's help the dog to alter that.

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And so, if my dog was to lay down, I will wait and what I'll do is I'll probably like take the cookies from my bowl and I'll just play with them in my hands a little bit. And sometimes a dog will get up. "Oh yeah, I was doing something." Or I'll move the cookies back and forth from one hand to the other.

If the dog still doesn't get up, I'll move the garbage can, closer to me and I'll just help the dog up gently. You can put them on a harness when you're playing this as well. So, either put your hand under the ribs and guide them by their collar just to get them up. And when they make the next circle, they can't cut in remember, because you've moved your garbage can in.

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Then go back to the last step of the Vito Game where they're just going around that garbage can and that's close to you. Move it back and forth until they get, "Oh yeah." So, you can go out a few inches and so that, oh, they could sneak through, bring it back. Then go all the way out, maybe six inches and then bring it back a little bit.

So, for the dog that gets frustrated easy, know that and say, "I want you to learn that you can work through this." Okay. Once you've ended one session, here's what you're going to do. You're going to end up by saying your dog's name, putting the cookies down. And the next stage is what Vito referred to as the relaxation phase.

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Now, what Vito would do is he would take his dog on his lap, and he would just hug them and hold them. Now, not everybody's dog likes to do that. So, I want to give you options. You can hug them and hold them until you know, "My dog is not happy."

Now if they struggle, don't let them go when they're struggling because we don't want them to learn another lesson. Let them go after they struggle and release. You can help them relax by your breathing. Deep breaths again, calming. You're not talking to them here.





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If you know, "My dog's not going to like that, Susan.", then your relaxation will be in our [relaxation protocol](#). Maybe pull out a raised bed and get your dog to hop it up. And you're saying nothing, you're not reinforcing, you're just stroking them while they're there.

Eventually, what that dog is learning is, 'I work, I relax.' 'I can be chill after I work. I don't have to be demanding and say, "Where's more cookies? We're playing this game again. I really liked it.'" You relax after work, and you chill.

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Maybe after two or three, depending on your dog, build that up to five minutes of relaxing so that we have a dog who knows how to relax. So, it's Vito Game, the thinking game, part two is the relaxation game. Now once you get onto this, there's so many things you can do.

You can move that garbage can halfway across the room, so the dog has to go all the way around here. You can put out two garbage cans side by side so the dog has to go a wider path. There's so many things you can do. If you have a dog who maybe doesn't like slippery floors. You can play this on a carpet and put a few tiles that they have to walk over instead of going around something, they have to walk over something.

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Use your imagination. Most importantly, it's a game that builds that bond, that deepens the trust, that teaches the dog to work through struggle and frustration, that sharpens your skills of recognizing your dog's innate responses in training situations. And gives that dog agency to make choices on their own.

I would love for you to give the Vito Game a try. Jump over to YouTube, re watch this entire session, and then set up your environment because it's the environment doing the teaching. Set up the environment, video your sessions, [come back to my YouTube channel](#), leave me a comment. Let me know what you've learned about you and what you learned about your dog.

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If you've played Vito Game before or played it by a different name, I'd love for you to come over here and write your experiences. And if this podcast episode didn't give you new insights into the game or into what you could learn about your dog while you're playing the game, love to hear from you.

It's a great game. Again, I learned about it in 2010, but it just keeps growing and growing in popularity. And I think every dog on the planet should get a chance to play Vito Game on a regular basis. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 151: How Location Specific Reinforcement Markers Will Improve Your Dog Training!](#)

[Podcast Episode 174: Dopamine In Dog Training: Anticipation, Rewards, And The Transfer Of Value](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Dog Training Games with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 276: What No One Tells You About The Best Place To Train Your Puppy Or Rescue Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)



## How Vito's Thinking Games Will Transform Your Dog Training

### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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