Dan Gardner wanted to know when to go to the loo during films – so he built an app

Created out of personal necessity by North Carolina-based developer Dan Gardner during a near three-and-a-half-hour King Kong screening, RunPee is an app that tells film audiences the best times to nip to the loo. Where did the idea come from? By the end of Peter Jackson's 201-minute King Kong in 2005, I was in agony because I needed the loo. As we were leaving, I wanted to tell the people in the line to see the next show about the scene with giant bugs in the middle of the movie – perfect for a bathroom break. Of course, I didn't say that to strangers at the movie theatre, but I'm a developer, so I thought I could make a website. This was before mobile apps were a thing. I bought the domain runpee.com, but then I got a job at Microsoft on its Xbox team so I didn't do anything about this for the next few years. In 2008, I became a freelance developer and built RunPee as a demonstration app I could show to clients. What was the initial response to the app? Everybody loved it, but nobody used it. Back then, it had a button to create a printout. So, users would go to the website and print out a sheet of "Peetimes" when they could nip to the loo and a synopsis of what happens during those three to four minutes. I've got [longstanding] users who email or message me about using RunPee since the days when they had to print it out. How does it work now? The app shows a list of movies currently in theatres in chronological order. Once you select the movie and go to the Peetime screen, it will tell you how many there are. Longer movies have more; for example, we have six Peetimes for Oppenheimer. Most movies have two or three. When a Peetime approaches, users get a cue like a line of dialogue or a visual hint, but it can't be a spoiler. You can't use something like "When Bob dies". The app also has alerts for sensitive material like animal cruelty, violence, sex and torture that viewers can avoid. What happens when you leave during a Peetime? If you go to the loo during one of the Peetimes, you can read a quick summary of what you missed. The app's built-in timer will give you a countdown on how much time you have until the next Peetime and how long until the end of the movie. Thanks to the Marvel cinematic universe, if there's a bonus scene after the end credits, it'll count down to that. Who decides these Peetimes? It's primarily my sister and I who do the movies these days – about 95% of the movies each year. Before the pandemic, my mother was super-active and did almost all of the kids' movies but it's harder for her to go to theatres now. I always say the RunPee app is family-run. I certainly couldn't have got it to this point alone. Early on, I did all the Peetimes myself and it was overwhelming. I would be at the theatre all day Friday and Saturday every week until my mother and sister started helping me. Often, people get in touch wanting to contribute, but it's not easy, as you can't just watch it; you've got to sit there and take notes and find the Peetimes. What makes a good Peetime? It's not so much the boring parts of the movie as the parts that we can summarise concisely without losing the meaning. So if you're watching a comedy, you

can't have a funny scene in the Peetime synopsis say: "It was really funny but you had to be there." What's been the most challenging movie to find Peetimes for? Without question, [Christopher Nolan's] Inception. I saw the movie three times before I finally understood enough to say that this character isn't actually important to the plot. It's the guy [Robert Fischer, played by Cillian Murphy] whose dream they go into – a lot of his scenes were the Peetimes because nothing else worked. Have you received any fun stories from users? During the pandemic, this woman emailed me saying she and her husband watched a movie on Netflix, and to recreate the nostalgia of going to the theatre, they started the RunPee timer. I get so much feedback from users who have bladder issues saying: "I couldn't go to movies because I would go like three times during a movie which just ruined it." People who had stopped going to the theatres could go back using the app for their peace of mind. I didn't solve cancer and I will not win any Nobel prize for this. It's a first-world problem, but I've helped make a lot of people's enjoyment of an enjoyable thing better and that is incredibly rewarding. Have you tried expanding RunPee to different languages? Funny story. Back when Avatar came out, somebody in China wrote about the app, and this young woman read that article, loved the app and reached out, asking if she could work with me to make a version for China, and we did. We worked on translations for the next few years and had a partnership. Then she came to visit – and we've been married for five years. With the advent of streaming, where does RunPee figure? It was surprising when people would tell me that they used it when watching Netflix with a group of people and didn't want to interrupt. I've also had people tell me that if they're watching a movie with friends, they'll use the Peetimes to pause the movie, take a break, refill their sodas, or go to the bathroom. Meet the RunPee volunteer Since 2018, RunPee volunteer Rob Williams has been a regular at his local cinema in Merseyside, armed with a stopwatch and notepad, trying to find the best Peetimes How did you get involved with RunPee? I retired from my local government job in 2017 and I've always been a film fan, but now I've got time to go whenever I want. I've got one of those infinity cards, so I go twice or thrice a week. I've been a Guardian reader since the 70s and the two came together when I saw RunPee in the paper. I thought, "Oh, that looks interesting," and asked if they could use some help. What makes a good Peetime scene? Montages, especially when they're recapping things, and sometimes you get big chunks that have already been in all the trailers. In the last James Bond movie, No Time to Die, that was quite handy because it was a very long run-in to the opening credits that came in at about 15 to 20 minutes. You can't miss out on any of the big blockbuster scenes in action films or the jump scares in horror films. It's one of those things we just start getting used to looking for and knowing what to use. What's your favourite part about going to the movies? There is something about going to a cinema to watch a film on the big screen. Even the smell of popcorn as you walk in: that is cinema for me. I've been going since I was little, and now I get my granddaughter to come along with me whenever possible.