

The Last One Is Always the Hardest: The Coupon Collector's Problem

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If you have ever collected the stickers tucked into snack packets, you probably remember feeling at first that you would finish the set in no time, since almost every packet you opened held a new sticker. But once the album is nearly full, you keep getting stickers you already have, and the last one or two just won't turn up. This isn't bad luck; it is simply how probability behaves. The mathematical explanation of this phenomenon is known as the "Coupon Collector's Problem." Simply put, the coupon collector's problem is a probability question that asks, "When one of several types comes out at