

Understanding Runaway Stars Using Newton's Laws

Introduction

Newton's three laws (summarized in the flowchart below) can help us explain a lot of the phenomena we observe in the universe. This includes the observations scientists have made about stars and their location in the universe.

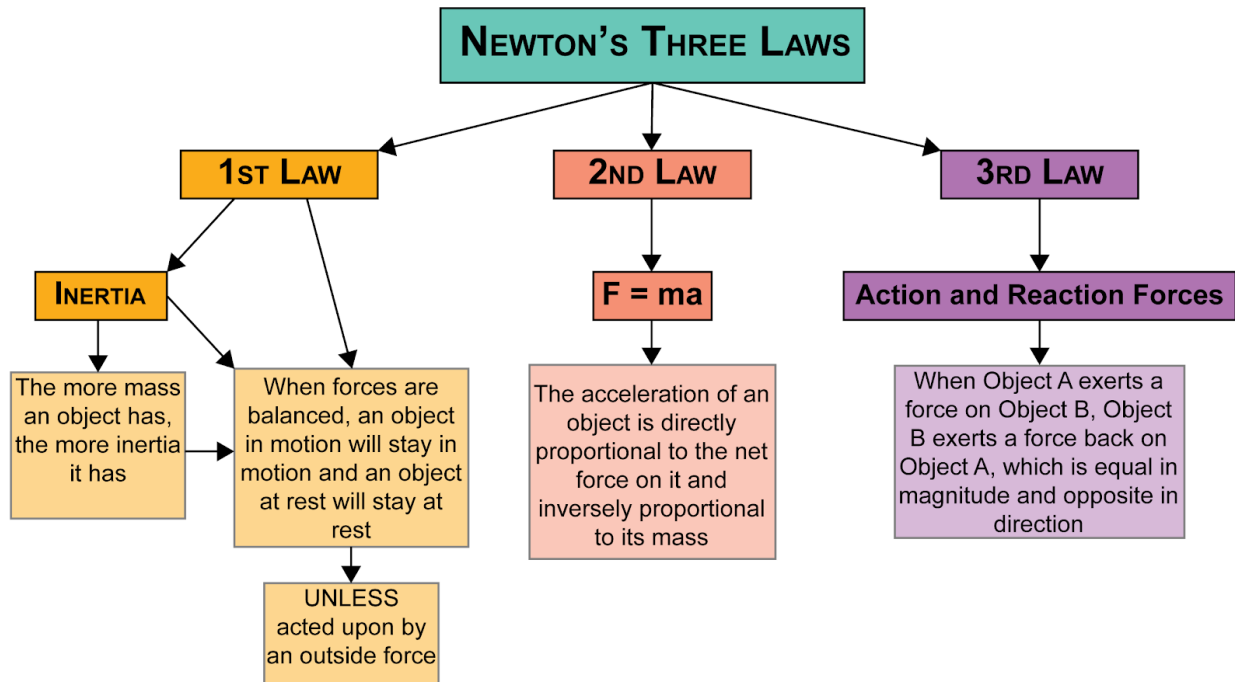


Figure 1. A Flowchart of Newton's Three Laws of Motion.

The Law of Universal Gravitation, which is an extension of Newton's Third Law of Motion, states that there is a gravitational force that attracts any two objects to each other. Both m_1 and m_2 in the diagram below experience an equal magnitude of this force, which depends on both of their masses and the distance between them. In this activity, you will use Newton's Laws of Motion and Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation to explore a fascinating phenomenon: runaway stars.

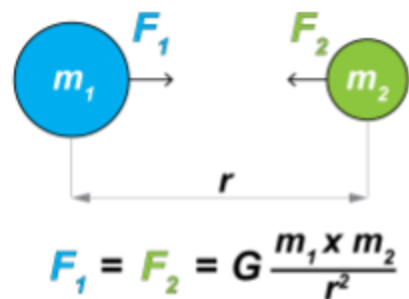


Figure 2. Gravitational Force. Gravitational force is calculated according to the equation shown here. Each variable is represented in the diagram above the equation.

What To Do

Watch the demo of two students rotating around each other and answer the analysis questions, reading the Bite when instructed.

Analysis Questions

1. Answer the following questions about the demonstration.
 - a. What keeps the two students orbiting around each other?
 - b. According to Newton's Third Law of Motion, what can you say about the magnitudes of the forces that each of the two students experiences? Are they equal or not? Explain.
 - c. What happens to the second student when one of the students lets go of the rope all of a sudden?

 & read : Where Do Runaway Stars Come From?
(Read first three paragraphs only.)

2. Answer the following questions about binary star systems.
 - a. What is a binary star system?
 - b. Thinking about the student model and what you read about binary stars, draw a model of what a binary star system might look like. In your model include labeled arrows that represent the force on each star from the other star and the instantaneous velocity vectors of each star.
 - c. Use the orbiting student demo as an analogy of binary stars. What does the rope represent for binary star systems? Cite specific information from the Bite to support your connection.
 - d. What do you think might happen if one of these massive, fast moving stars in a binary system were to suddenly disappear? Explain using the Law of Universal Gravitation and your observations from the demonstration.

STOP & read Science Bite: Where Do Runaway Stars Come From?
 (Read rest of the Bite)

3. Answer the following questions about supernovae in binary star systems.
 - a. What happens to the mass of a star during a supernova explosion?

 - b. Look at the Law of Universal Gravitation in the Introduction section above. What is the relationship between the gravitational force between two objects and the masses of those objects?

 - c. What would happen to the amount of gravitational force between the two stars in a binary system after a supernova explosion of one of them? Use the Law of Universal Gravitation to explain your answer.

 - d. Multiple Choice: Because the two stars in the binary system were so close in proximity, they were orbiting each other at a very high speed. What do you expect would happen to the motion of the second star after one of the stars explodes? Choose one of the options below and explain your answer.
 - i. It would keep moving around in its orbit at the same speed as before
 - ii. It would keep moving around in its orbit at a slower speed than before
 - iii. It would come to a crashing halt
 - iv. It would be propelled out of its orbit at a very high velocity

Explain your choice.

4. Once the runaway star makes it out into empty space, it will continue in a straight line indefinitely, since there are no other external forces to change its velocity. Explain why this is true using Newton's First Law of Motion.

