Formation of millisecond pulsars with heavy white dwarf companions; extreme mass transfer on subthermal timescales
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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently a large number of binary millisecond pulsars (BMSPs) with relatively heavy white dwarf (WD) companions have been reported. These pulsars form a distinct class of BMSPs (see Table 1) that is characterized by relatively slow spin periods ($P_{\text{spin}} = 10-200$ ms) and high period derivatives: $10^{-20} < P_{\text{spin}} < 10^{-18}$. It has been suggested that such BMSPs evolved through a common envelope and spiral-in phase (e.g., van den Heuvel 1994). This gives a natural explanation for their close orbits and the presence of a relatively heavy CO/O-Ne-Mg WD, if the mass transfer was initiated while the donor star (the progenitor of the WD) ascended the asymptotic giant branch. However, it has been argued that a neutron star engulfed in a common envelope might experience hypercritical accretion and thereby collapse into a black hole (e.g., Chevalier 1993; Brown 1995). If this picture is correct, then these BMSPs cannot have formed in a common envelope and spiral-in phase.

Here we investigate an alternative scenario for producing the mildly recycled BMSPs with He or CO WDs in close orbits, in which a 2-6 $M_\odot$ donor star with a nonconvective (or partly convective) envelope transfers mass on a subthermal timescale and yet in a dynamically stable mode.

2. STABILITY CRITERIA AND MODE OF MASS TRANSFER

The stability and nature of the mass transfer is very important in binary stellar evolution. It depends on the response of the mass-losing donor star and of the Roche lobe (e.g., Paczynski 1976; Soberman, Phinney, & van den Heuvel 1997). The mass transfer is stable as long as the donor star's Roche lobe is not too deep. These systems thus can provide a new formation channel for binary millisecond pulsars with heavy CO white dwarfs and relatively short orbital periods (3-50 days). However, we conclude that to produce a binary pulsar with a O-Ne-Mg white dwarf or $P_{\text{orb}} \sim 1$ day (e.g., PSR B0655+64) the above scenario does not work, and a spiral-in phase is still considered the most plausible scenario for the formation of such a system.

Subject headings: binaries: close --- stars: evolution --- stars: mass loss --- stars: neutron --- white dwarfs

2.2. Highly Super-Eddington Mass Transfer

The maximum accretion rate onto a neutron star is given approximately by the Eddington limit for spherical accretion of hydrogen gas, $M_{\text{Edd}} = 1.5 \times 10^{-6} M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. If the mass transfer rate from the donor star $M_2$ is larger than this limit, radiation pressure from the accreted material will cause the infalling matter to be ejected from the system at a rate $|M| = |M_2| - M_{\text{Edd}} \approx |M_2|$ if $M_2 \gg M_{\text{Edd}}$. In systems with very large mass transfer rates, matter piles up around the neutron star and presumably forms a growing, bloated cloud engulfing a large fraction of the accretion disk. A system will only avoid a spiral-in if it manages to evaporate the bulk of the transferred matter via the liberated accretion energy. This would require the radius of the accretion cloud $r_{\text{ac}} > R_{\text{NS}} |M_2|/M_{\text{Edd}}$ in order for the liberated accretion energy to eject the transferred material.
(≈0.1M_{\text{Edd}}C^2 \approx 1/2M_jL_{\text{Edd}}^2$, where $t_{\text{Edd}}^2 = 2GM_{\text{NS}}/r_{\text{Edd}}$, $R_{\text{NS}}$ is the radius of the neutron star). If the material which is to be ejected comes closer to the neutron star, it will have too much negative binding energy in order for the liberated accretion energy to expel it. At the same time, $r_{\text{E}}$ must be smaller than the Roche lobe radius of the neutron star during the entire evolution if formation of a common envelope (CE) is to be avoided.\(^1\) A simple isotropic reemission model will approximately remain valid for our scenario. In this model it is assumed that matter flows over conservatively from the donor star to the vicinity of the neutron star before it is ejected with the specific orbital angular momentum of the neutron star. Assuming this to be the case, we find that, even for extremely high mass transfer rates ($|M_j| > 10^5M_{\text{Edd}}$), the system can avoid a CE and spiral-in evolution.

3. RESULTS

3.1. A Case Study: $M_2 = 4.0 M_{\odot}$ and $P_{\text{orb}} = 4.0$ days

In Figure 1 we show the evolution of a binary initially consisting of a neutron star and a zero-age main-sequence (ZAMS) companion star with masses $M_{\text{NS}} = 1.3 M_{\odot}$ and $M_2 = 4.0 M_{\odot}$, respectively, and initial orbital period $P_{\text{orb}} = 4.0$ days.

At the age of $t = 176.6$ Myr, the companion has evolved to fill its Roche lobe ($R_2 = 8.95 R_{\odot}$; $T_{\text{eff}} = 9550$ K) and rapid mass transfer is initiated (A). The donor star has just evolved past the main-sequence hook in the H-R diagram and is burning hydrogen in a shell around a 0.56 $M_{\odot}$ helium core. Prior to the mass transfer phase, a radiation-driven wind ($|M_j| \approx 4 \times 10^{-5} M_{\odot}$ yr$^{-1}$) has caused the donor to decrease its mass slightly ($M_j = 3.99 M_{\odot}$) and consequently resulted in a slight widening of the orbit ($P_{\text{orb}} = 4.02$ days). Once the donor fills its Roche lobe, it is seen to lose mass at a very high rate of $|M_j| = 4 \times 10^{-5} M_{\odot}$ yr$^{-1}$, $2.7 \times 10^{-5}$M_{\text{Edd}}$. At this stage the donor has only developed a very thin convective envelope of size $Z_{\text{conv}} = 0.015 R_{\odot}$, so its envelope is still radiative and will therefore shrink in response to mass loss. At $t = 176.7$ Myr its radius has decreased to a minimum value of 3.38 $R_{\odot}$, but now $Z_{\text{conv}} = 0.97 R_{\odot}$. At this point ($s$) the donor has a mass of 1.76 $M_{\odot}$, $P_{\text{orb}} = 5640$ K, and $T_{\text{eff}} = 1.59$ days. The donor expands again, but shortly thereafter its rate of expansion slows down, causing $|M_j|$ to decrease to $\approx 10M_{\text{Edd}}$.

The mass transfer ceases (B) when the donor has an age of 178.3 Myr. At this stage $P_{\text{orb}} = 8.11$ days, $R_2 = 6.68 R_{\odot}$, $Z_{\text{conv}} = 0.07 R_{\odot}$, and $T_{\text{eff}} = 12,700$ K. The mass of the donor is 0.618 $M_{\odot}$. It still has a 0.56 $M_{\odot}$ helium core, but now only a 0.06 $M_{\odot}$ envelope consisting of 16% H and 82% He. The mass transfer phase (A-B) is relatively short ($t_s = 1.7$ Myr), and hence the neutron star will only accrete $\Delta M_{\text{NS}} = t_s M_{\text{Edd}} = 0.03 M_{\odot}$. This leads to relatively large values of $P_{\text{spin}}$ and $P_{\text{spin}}$ for the (mildly) recycled pulsar. Since the mass transfer rate is always highly super-Eddington during the RLO and the accreting neutron star will be enshrouded by a thick (bloating) disk, it is doubtful whether it will be observable as an X-ray binary during this phase—except very briefly just at the onset and near the end of the RLO.

We followed the evolution of the donor star further on. The donor continues to burn hydrogen in its light envelope. At $t = 186.4$ Myr ($f$, the helium burning is finally ignited ($L_{\text{He}}/L_{\odot} > 10$) in the core, which now has a mass of 0.596 $M_{\odot}$. After 70 Myr ($t = 253.8$ Myr since the ZAMS), the core-helium burning is exhausted ($g$). The 0.602 $M_{\odot}$ core then has a chemically different composition.

<table>
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<th>PSR</th>
<th>$P_{\text{orb}}$ (days)</th>
<th>$f$ ($M_{\odot}$)</th>
<th>$M_{\text{NS}}$ ($M_{\odot}$)</th>
<th>$P_{\text{spin}}$ (ms)</th>
<th>$P_{\text{spin}}$ (ms)</th>
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Note. –$M_{\text{NS}}$ is calculated assuming $M_{\text{NS}} = 1.4 M_{\odot}$ and $i = 60^\circ$.

\(^{a}\) New pulsar, Parkes Multibeam Survey (Manchester et al. 2000).

Fig. 2.—Final $P_{\text{orb}}$ as a function of WD mass for different BMSPs. Next to each curve is given the initial mass of the donor star (the progenitor of the WD) used in our evolutionary calculations. The free parameter in each curve is the initial $P_{\text{orb}}$ (at the onset of the RLO). The curves in grey color represent the formation of BMSPs with helium WDs, while the black curves are BMSPs with CO WDs. The open circles on some of the curves indicate the transition from case A to early case B RLO mass transfer (i.e., whether or not the donor burned hydrogen in the core at the onset of the RLO; Kippenhahn & Weigert 1990). The thin lines show the calculated parameters for systems which evolved through a CE and spiral-in phase scenario assuming an efficiency parameter of $\eta = 1.0$ (e.g., van den Heuvel 1994). The 12 observed BMSPs with a “heavy” WD companion are marked with a star; see Table 1.

3.2. The $P_{\text{orb}}$-$M_{\text{WD}}$ Diagram

In Figure 2 we have plotted the calculated final orbital periods as a function of the mass of the WD companion (the remnant of the donor) for a given initial mass of the donor star. The values for the BMSPs which originated from a binary with a low-mass companion (the former LMXBs with $M_1 \lesssim 1.8 \, M_\odot$, located on the upper branch) are taken from Tauris & Savonije (1999). These WDs are expected to be helium WDs—unless the initial orbital period was very large ($P_{\text{orb}} > 150$ days) so a relatively heavy helium core developed prior to the RLO, in which case the helium core later ignites, forming a CO WD. The final product of X-ray binaries with $M_1 > 2 \, M_\odot$ is seen to deviate significantly from the low-mass branch. The reason is that the former systems had a large mass ratio, $q = M_1/M_{\text{NS}}$, which caused the binary separation to shrink initially upon mass transfer (see Fig. 1). Such systems only “survive” the mass transfer phase if the envelope of the donor is radiative or slightly convective. This sets an upper limit on the initial orbital period for a given system. If the donor is in a wide binary, it develops a deep convective envelope prior to filling its Roche lobe, and it will therefore expand rapidly in response to mass loss which, in combination with the orbital shrinking, will result in the formation of a CE and a (tidally unstable) spiral-in evolution.

In Figure 3 we show how the final orbital period and the mass of the WD depends on the initial orbital period for a binary with $M_1 = 4.0 \, M_\odot$. We notice that the question of initiating RLO before or after the termination of hydrogen core burning (case A or early case B, respectively) is important for these relations. For initial $P_{\text{orb}} < 2.4$ days (case A RLO), $P_{\text{orb}}$ decreases with increasing $P_{\text{orb}}$. The reason is simply that in these systems the donor star is still on the main-sequence and the mass of its helium core, at the onset of RLO, increases strongly with $P_{\text{orb}}$ and therefore the amount of material to be transferred (the donor’s envelope) decreases with $P_{\text{orb}}$. Since the orbit widens efficiently near the end of the mass transfer, when the mass ratio between donor and accretor has been inverted (see Fig. 1), $P_{\text{orb}}$ will also decrease as a function of initial $P_{\text{orb}}$. However, for $P_{\text{orb}} > 2.4$ days (early case B RLO), the final orbital period increases with initial orbital period as expected and the core mass of the donor only increases slightly (due to hydrogen shell burning) as a function of initial $P_{\text{orb}}$.

3.3. The Initial ($M_2$, $P_{\text{orb}}$) Parameter Space

In Figure 4 we outline the results of our work in a diagram showing the fate of a binary as a function of its initial $P_{\text{orb}}$ and the value of $M_2$. We conclude that X-ray binaries with $2 \lesssim M_2/M_\odot < 6$ can avoid a spiral-in and CE evolution if $P_{\text{orb}}$ is between 1 and 20 days, depending on $M_2$. If the initial $P_{\text{orb}}$ is too short, the systems will obviously enter a CE phase, since these systems always decrease their orbital separation when the mass transfer is initiated. On the other hand, if the initial $P_{\text{orb}}$

2 In narrow binaries the amount of available orbital energy (a possible energy source for providing the outward ejection of the envelope) is small and hence the neutron star is most likely to spiral in toward the (unevolved) core of the donor, forming a Thorne-Zykov–like object. In that case the neutron star will probably undergo hypercritical accretion and collapse into a black hole.
is too large the donor develops a deep convective envelope prior to RLO and a runaway mass transfer event is unavoidable, also leading to a CE formation. For systems with $M_T \gtrsim 1.8$ $M_\odot$ and initial $P_{\text{orb}} < 1$ day, the outcome is a BMSP with an ultra-low-mass degenerate hydrogen star (e.g., PSR J2051−0827; see Ergma, Sarna, & Antipova 1998).

4. DISCUSSION

We have now demonstrated how to form a BMSP with a relatively heavy (He or CO) WD companion without evolving through a CE phase. If a substantial fraction of BMSPs have evolved through a phase with super-Eddington mass transfer on a subthermal timescale (a few Myr), this will eliminate the need for a long X-ray phase. This would therefore help solving the birthrate problem between BMSPs and LMXBs (Kulkarni & Narayan 1988) for systems with days. It has recently been suggested (Podsiadlowski & Rappaport 2000; King & Ritter 1999) that Cygnus X-2 descended from an intermediate-mass X-ray binary via a scenario that resembles the one described here. We confirm that Cyg X-2 is a progenitor candidate for a BMSP with a heavy WD.

It is seen from Figure 2 that we cannot reproduce the systems with very massive O-Ne-Mg WDs or the short orbital periods ($\lesssim 3$ days) observed in some systems with a CO WD. We therefore conclude that these binaries most likely evolved through a CE phase in which frictional torques were responsible for their present short $P_{\text{orb}}$ (see thin lines in Fig. 2 and light gray area in Fig. 4). These systems therefore seem to originate from binaries that initially had a relatively large $P_{\text{orb}}$ and case C RLO—otherwise, if $P_{\text{orb}}$ was smaller components would have coalesced either in the spiral-in process or as a result of gravitational wave radiation shortly thereafter (typically within 1 Gyr for systems surviving case B RLO and spiral-in).

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