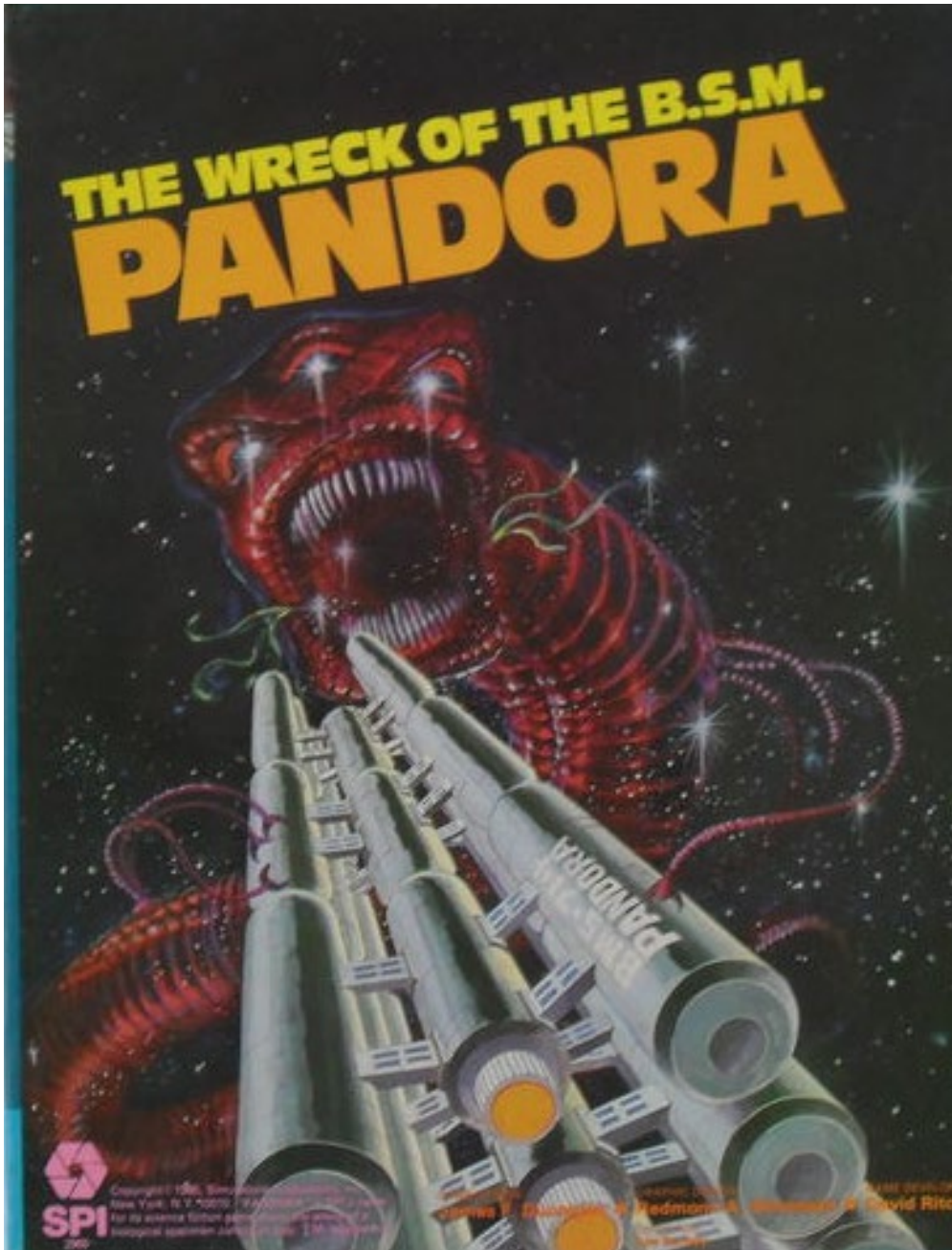# Review of **Wreck of the B.S.M.** *Pandora*

by Jeffery Bass (Skygazer)

"BSM *Pandora* calling. Rescue alert. Position approximate. Autostasis red. Out of FTL. Out of stasis. Power down. Nav down. Envio down. Con down. Comp down. Ship approaching cold shutdown….BSM *Pandora* calling. Rescue…"

And so begins the adventure aboard the Biological Survey Mission (BSM) *Pandora*. **The Wreck of the B.S.M.** *Pandora* (WotP) first appeared in the magazine Ares #2 published by SPI in 1980. The game was designed by James Dunnigan, developed by David James Ritchie with Physical Systems and Graphics by Redmond A. Simonsen. A prequel to the game was published about a year later called **Voyage of the** *Pandora* while **Wreck of the** *Pandora* saw a re-release in box form at about the same time.

The Back Story
The premise of the game is basically the same as the movie *Alien*, or maybe *Aliens* since there is more than one monster or "specimen" to deal with in the game. From the game's introduction: "**The Wreck of the** *Pandora* is a game of discovery and survival for one to five Players. Each Player takes the role of one surviving crew member aboard the *Pandora*. Players must attempt to regain control of the ship, destroy or re-confine the wandering specimens in their restraint pods, restart the ship's systems to avoid cold shutdown and get the damaged craft home. Each Player in turn moves, acquires tools, and attempts to use and repair ship's equipment. Specimens are moved automatically as they react to the presence of crew members."
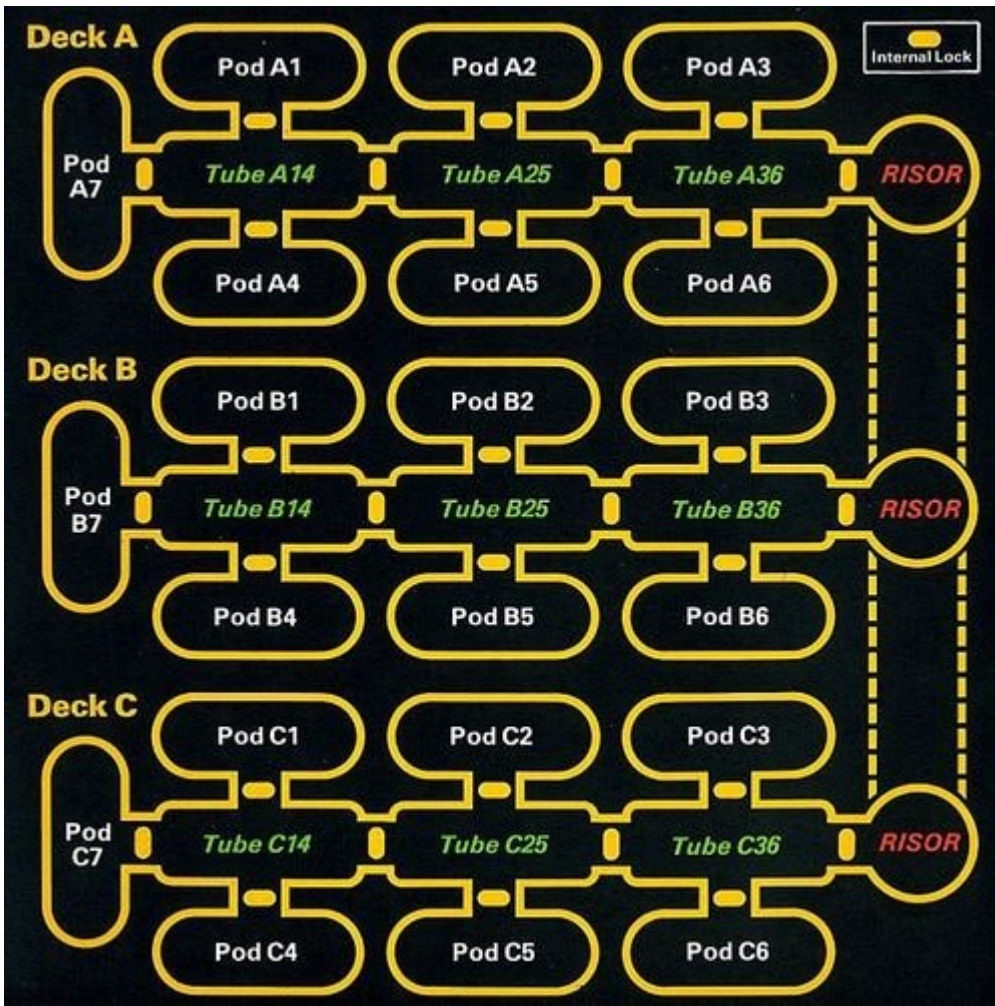
Components and Bits

The game is played on a simple 11" x 17" map which consists of a stark, schematic layout of the three decks and 21 pods of the BSM *Pandora* along with various tables and counter displays used to determine and track outcomes during play. Objects in the game, including Crew members, are represented by 100 die-cut ½-inch cardboard counters. The originally published rules are a reasonable 8 pages.

There are random elements in the game designed primarily to ensure replayability. For instance, the attributes of the Crew members are determined by dice roll at the beginning of each game. Interestingly, the attributes of equipment, pods and specimens are determined only when a specific attribute is needed. Players do not have knowledge of the state of the ship or the ferocity of specimens in advance. These attributes are determined only at the moment of encounter and can result in some distressing surprises. One of my favorite examples of how entertaining this rather quantum mechanical process can be is when after spending the time and trouble to stun a specimen for recapture a Crew member tries to pick it up only to discover that the stunned specimen is too heavy to carry.
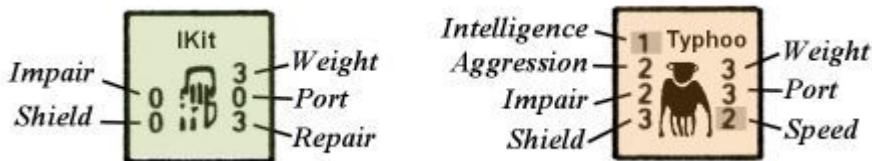
Modifiers to each unit's attributes are displayed on its counter.

All units have innate abilities including Impair (ability to inflict damage), Shield (ability to defend), Weight (how heavy the unit is), Port (ability to carry objects with Weight) and Speed (how fast the unit is). Specimens have Intelligence and Aggression attributes which determine how likely they are to fight, and how nastily. Crew members also have a Stamina value, which if reduced to zero signifies death. And finally, Repair is the ability of units to fix things.

It is possible for a Crew member in the game to receive medical attention and improve his Stamina value, but all of the other values are fixed. Crew members cannot "level up". But this works thematically. The passage of time in the game is essentially real time. In the 90-minutes it will take to play the game, about 90 minutes of harrowing terror is experienced by the hapless denizens of the *Pandora*. So, it is unlikely that a Crew member will be able to improve any of his skills in 90 minutes, other than his ability to stay alive. However, there are lots and lots of really cool tools and robots stashed aboard the spaceship which are extremely useful, and deadly, all waiting for the Crew members to get their hands on.

There are many decisions that need to be made and cooperation is a good thing when more than one Crew member is about. Multiple players should dole out responsibility for conducting certain tasks. Crew members who have discovered powerful weapons or robots can become effective specimen finders (and killers), while Crew who have gotten a hold of good repair tools can fix the *Pandora's* systems. And when specimens are found lurking in a dark corner of a ship's pod, players need to decide whether it is important and productive to barge in and fight it or just go the other way for the time being and come back later, packing heat.

Setting the Stage
When the game begins, the Crew rudely awakens from their hibernation in mid flight aboard a research ship that has suffered a series of catastrophic system failures. The Crew members have suffered short term memory loss and so are a little confused as to the layout of the ship. They have to explore each compartment to refamiliarize themselves with the location of the ship's pods, tools and systems. For my part, I find the temporary amnesia excuse a bit much. I prefer to imagine that the Crew members in the game are not the original assigned crew but are passenger crew members hitching a ride on the *Pandora* after returning from another mission in a similar ship. When our heroes awake, they find that the originally assigned Pandora Crew is dead or incapacitated. Our heroes inherit the task of trying to bring under control the chaos of a ship, the *Pandora*, in which its systems and components are well known but its layout is not.

To make matters worse, all ten of the ship's collected specimens (which is to say "alien monsters") have gotten out of their cages and some of them are running around. Despite the unnerving chaos posed by having loose monsters underfoot, your primary job is to fix the five Major Systems of the ship, Power, Environmental, Computer, Navigation and Control, to prevent the ship from entering Cold Shutdown.

In a refreshing reversal of the situation depicted in the movie *Alien*, in which the heroine is frantically trying to beat the countdown to a massive explosion, the countdown on *Pandora* ends not with a bang but with critical systems dropping to zero plunging the ship into the irreversible condition of a frozen tomb, killing everything aboard. Cold Shutdown. If this happens, then game over. Escaping in a shuttle craft (yes, there is one in the game) is not considered a victory.
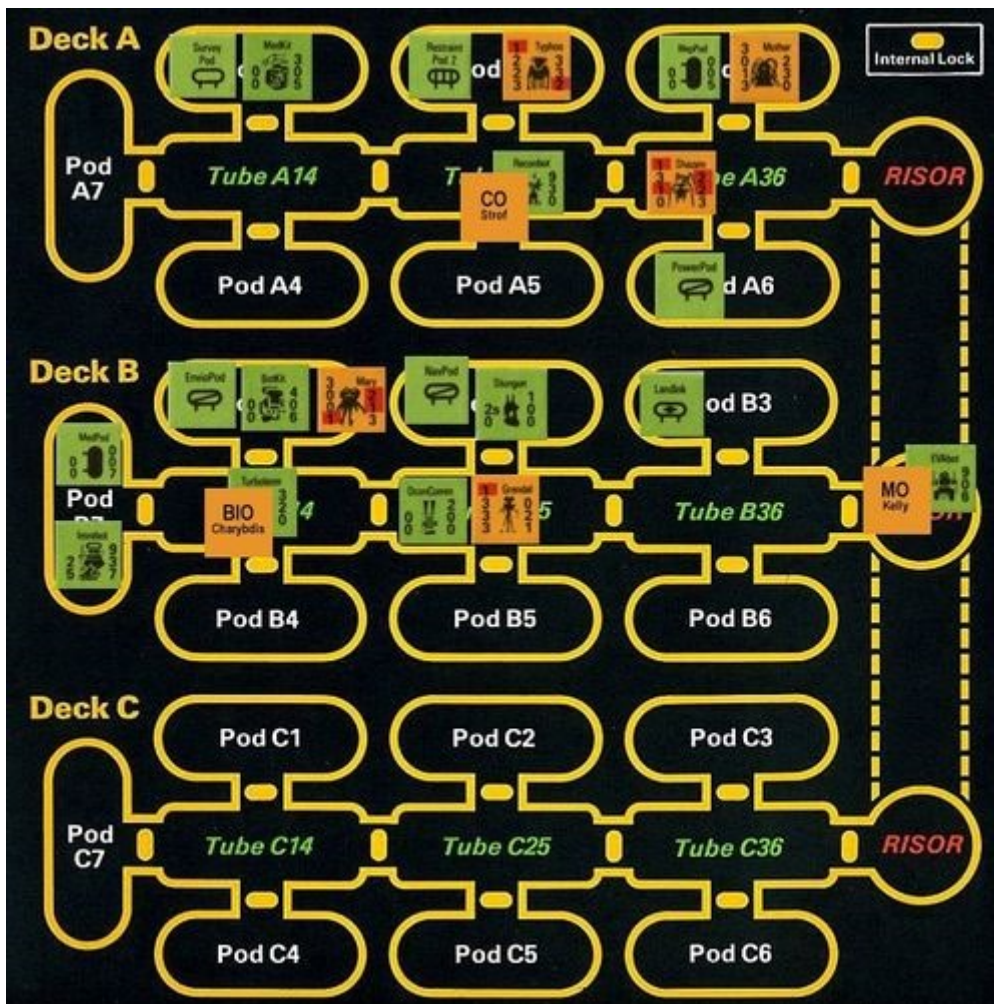
While the Crew members struggle to repair the ship's systems, the wandering specimens make their presence known. They get in the way and prevent Crew from conducting repairs. And they can kill you. The specimens can be killed, too, of course, some more easily than others, but such drastic measures are considered a last resort as your secondary objective in the game is to try to subdue and recapture them.

Conflict

When a Specimen is encountered, it will react to your presence using an automatic procedure based on the specimen's innate Intelligence and Aggression attributes, which are randomly determined each game. Sometimes the specimen will flee (mischievously stealing tools on the way out), sometimes it will just watch you. Other times it will come at you in sickening fury with only one thought consuming its alien brain, to take your life. Combat is conducted by subtracting the defender's Shield rating from the attacker's Impair rating. The resulting differential is referenced on a table and a simple roll of the die determines the outcome in terms of damage to the defender. Each attack is matched with a form of counter-attack called a Damage Check. Attacker and defender swap blows this way over several rounds of combat. Some players have complained that the rules, as written, require units who are engaged in combat to fight to the death. This can be a protracted affair, especially if the units have poor Impair ability but reasonable Shield ratings, which means they can't inflict much damage on each other nor can they break away. Not quite a stalemate, but close.

Despite this aspect, the rules still work as written, albeit clunkily. Even with matched opponents with no combat differential at all, the combat procedure ensures there is at least a 1 in 3 chance that damage will be inflicted each round. The upshot is that some combat match-ups become death hugs lasting many turns until one unit or the other, by chance, gains a slight advantage over the other. Thereafter the conclusion of the struggle unfolds more rapidly. If a Crew

member finds himself on the receiving end of this punishment curve the inevitable result is usually death, especially during the beginning turns of the game when helpful tools and weapons haven't been located yet.

This deadly all-or-nothing aspect of combat can be quite a challenge to manage in a solitaire game with only one Crew member. Avoiding almost every monster becomes a priority until weapons are found. If you think about it, though, this supposed "limitation" for a lone Crew member is probably pretty realistic. Can you imagine running around an unfamiliar spaceship all by yourself with ten monsters on the loose? You can stack the deck in your favor if you play with multiple Crew members since one of them can rescue the other and both can combine attack efforts. And for the purpose of having fun in the game, you can ease things a bit with a simple house rule that allows Crew with fast Speed attributes to escape or evade combat if desired. I use this house rule because it opens up plenty of tactical possibilities for survival.

When Crew members encounter a lurking specimen, the visceral reaction is to just kill it but a better strategy is usually to try to soften up the specimen a bit, first, by battering it to within an inch of its life and then stunning it with an appropriate weapon if one can be found in advance. The dazed beast is then carried to an appropriate Restraint Pod. The fun happens when the monster occasionally wakes up while enroute to his cage.

Generally, I have found that there are no "easy" kills in this game. Even the weakest monster usually manages to inflict a nasty wound or two before going down. It is common to start the game with a Crew member who possesses a fairly robust Stamina but after a couple of skirmishes with monsters he is reduced to stumbling down the corridors of the ship looking desperately for the MedPod. All part of the fun. There are a lot of different ways to repair damaged Crew members in the game, thankfully, because they get beaten up quite a bit. Typically, a Crew member that survives to the game's conclusion has come within a hair's breadth of death at some point during the mayhem.

But Crew members can give as well as they get. The trick is in knowing when to hold back that final blow so the specimen is still in good enough shape for getting prodded with the stun rod. Restrained animals are worth more victory points than dead animals at the end of the game. After playing the game the first few times and having the fun of turning the *Pandora* into a slaughter house, one usually settles down to attempt the more skillful and difficult task of subduing the animals. After all, what is the point of saving a Biological Survey Mission ship if you kill everything in the zoo?

Monsters

If the game was produced today it might have cool miniatures for the monsters but this is an SPI magazine game from 1980 and so the specimens are only cardboard counters with a bit of artwork. The monster names are clever, though, as one might expect from futuristic cynical scientists providing a nomenclature of cuteness to what are, in most cases, hideous beasts. The monster roll call includes: Mother, Mouse, Grendel, The Scrod, Typhoo, Shazam, Mary, The Blind Pig, Fletcher and The Golem.

Fun Stuff

One of the special highlights of the game is the abundance of unique tools and robots scattered about that are essential to making ship repairs and subduing the more docile specimens and killing the nasty ones. The most useful objects are the seven robots that can be found, repaired and used as if one of the Crew. Each robot, or "Bot", can conduct combat to one degree or another but most have a special function. Some have built in stun devices, like the Specibot, while others are good at repairing ship systems and broken tools, even fixing other Bots. The EVAbot can repair hull breaches.
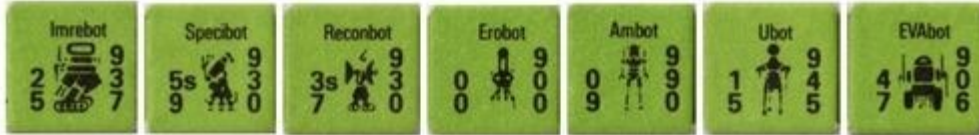
Unfortunately, if Bots get damaged they can go berserk and can be as deadly to Crew members as specimens. If this happens, you have to intentionally damage the Bot to the point of deactivating it (Condition Red). Imagine clubbing R2D2 until his lights go out. Once the Bot is shut down, you carefully repair it to return it to useful service, again. Or just leave it. Sometimes the choice is difficult. In one multi-Crew game, I exposed a Crew member to significant danger in the presence of a cohort of stunned aliens in order to accomplish an important task (repairing a Major System) knowing that the Crew member had a powerful Bot to back him up, only to lose the Bot. The choice was then made to leave the Bot unrepaired while the System repair was completed, instead, because the Cold Shutdown countdown was in progress. Unfortunately, the aliens recovered from their stunned state. What ensued was a desperate scramble for the Crew member's very existence. He did not survive. He managed to repair a Major System but he paid for it with his life. Making tough choices and dealing with their consequences is a regular and enjoyable part of the game experience.

Numerous tools are stored around the ship, as well. Among the most useful are Comm devices that allow for the remote control of certain Bots. A Crew member operating a remote-controlled Bot via a portable Comm can essentially function in two places at once. Other tools include repair kits of various kinds for fixing systems, Bots and Crew injuries.
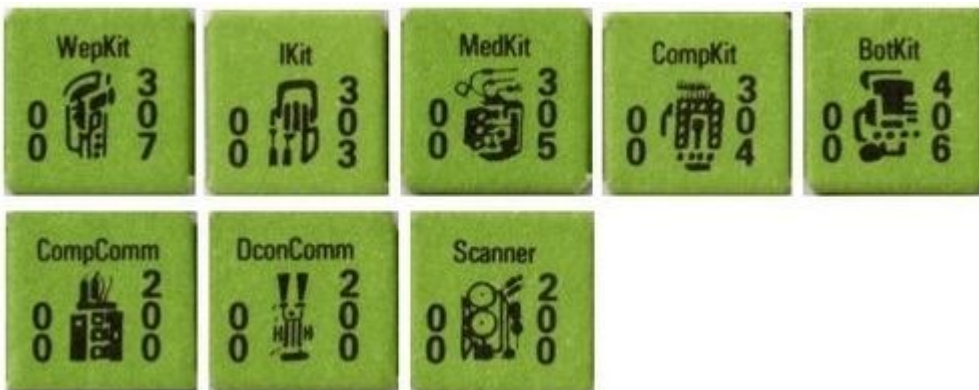
And there are weapons. One of the more useful and sought after is the Turbolaser, a good "softening up" weapon. It blows holes in things. The other more subtle weapons are Stunguns and Stunrods which help subdue specimens.

There are special rigs that Crew members can wear that enable them to conduct EVA and move from pod to pod outside the ship.

Armorig 9 8 2 2 7

Envlorig 4 6 0 0 3

There are three airlocks aboard the ship for egress and entrance during EVA but a Turbolaser can blast a hole in the hull anywhere, causing a hull breach that a properly equipped Crew member wearing an EVA "rig" can utilize. Ripping a hole into the hull is also one way to kill specimens (and anything else) in a pod. Again, killing a specimen by sucking it into the vacuum of space is fine but will not score the highest victory points at the end of the game. Even so, creating an "instant airlock" can be a useful tactic in resolving a situation in which a particularly ferocious group of specimens is blocking progress, especially if they happen to occupy a Major System Pod that needs repair and the Cold Shutdown countdown is in progress.

The tools, kits, weapons and Bots can be combined in many ways. And therein lay one of the big challenges in the game. There is bound to be a combination of tools that no one has really tried, yet, and such situations can provide obstacles in rules interpretation. Certainly, not every kind of equipment combination was playtested back in 1980 before the game was published. Fortunately, there are nowhere near as many variables in these combinations as in those of, say, A Game of Thrones LCG, and usually you can figure out the best way to make the situation work.

Conclusion

The game is great fun and is one of the more enjoyable solitaire games I've played. It takes about 90 minutes to finish a solo game. A two-player game takes under an hour. If you play solitaire and control more than one Crew member, you can explore the ship in about half the time of one Crew member and very quickly get down to the business of repairing the ship's systems and dealing with the specimens. Set up time is about two minutes. I've timed it at 45 seconds on one occasion, so getting the game ready to go is no problem and it uses hardly any space on the table.

Even though the game has a few glitches, there is still a lot of goodness in **Wreck of the BSM *Pandora*** worth mining. It would have been nice if the original designers finished the game with some tight rules testing. But since no one from the original design team is ever likely to close loopholes or make official "rulings", we'll just have to do it ourselves, I suppose. I've provided a good start with some aids in the "files" section. I hope you enjoy the game as much as I do!

- Jeffery Bass (Skygazer)