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WRITTEN BY		August 8, 2022	

REVISION HISTORY

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Chapter 1

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1.1 Cloanto - The Kara Collection - Plaquegrounds

Plaquegrounds

This is a high-quality set of plaques which can be used for backgrounds and textures. The following is a list of all "digital materials":

- Adobe
- Brass (Brushed)
- Copper Patina
- Granite
- Marble (Gray)
- Marble (Pink)
- Sand-Stone
- Wood

The plaques come in different proportions (for NTSC and PAL displays) and sizes (here indicated in pixels):

	NTSC Format	PAL Format
Screen	752 \times 480	752 \times 580
Size A	638 \times 93	638 \times 113
Size B	638 \times 125	638 \times 152
Size C	638 \times 173	638 \times 210
Size D	638 \times 397	638 \times 481

Rather than coming "raw", all plaques are provided with various styles of smooth 3-D borders: round, square and with two types of frames (simple and plaque). All plaques can of course be used to "cut out" a part without the border. The thicker "plaque" frame is available only for plaques in size D (the largest format). Sizes A, B and C are small enough to fit on the same page, so they are always grouped in the same file.

The original, best-quality plaquegrounds are those designed for the NTSC format and stored as 24-bit IFF files. "24-bit" means that 8 bits of information are used to respectively store the information on the red,

green and blue components of each pixel, thus allowing for more than 16 million different colors. The PAL versions of the plaquegrounds were generated automatically by slightly "stretching" the NTSC images. This was done using very professional and time consuming methods, so that it is unlikely that even the expert eye will notice a difference between the quality of the NTSC and PAL versions. The "natural" patterns of the plaquegrounds are not only rescaled very well, but they can also easily be compressed without a perceivable loss of quality. JPEG is a file format which can encode 24-bit information at a fraction of the size of the corresponding IFF files. The JPEG conversion for The Kara Collection CD-ROM was done in a way that 24-bit plaqueground files in the JPEG format are 7 to 10 times smaller than IFF files, but it remains very hard to notice any difference in quality between the two formats. One side-effect of JPEG is that, after conversion, the "solid" black area around the plaques may include some pixels which are not 100% black.

The CD-ROM has enough space to store the 24-bit IFF files which the original packages by Kara Computer Graphics did not include. We recommend using the JPEG versions only for installation on hard disk (if there is not enough space for the 24-bit IFF versions). Once loaded by 24-bit graphics software, JPEG files generate bitmaps which are exactly as large and memory consuming as the corresponding images stored as IFF files, so there is no advantage in using JPEG rather than IFF, except for the reduced disk storage space.

Professional color-reduction techniques were employed to make all plaquegrounds also available in 256 and in 16 colors. This allows for the plaques to be used in palette-based environments (even with Amigas which cannot display 256 colors). In these versions of the Plaquegrounds the first color in the palette (color 0) is used only for the black background, and it does not appear inside the image. This makes it easier to selectively apply transparency effects or change the background color.

Since the plaques come in styles varying in shape and size, digital "masks", or "stencils", are included for the various formats. These are stored as standard IFF stencil files. Stencils are especially useful to isolate the plaquegrounds from the background. This could be necessary to "clean" the area around the plaques after JPEG compression and decompression.

Storing 8 materials in 13 style-combinations of size and shape, in formats allowing for NTSC and PAL representations and 4 different image qualities results in more than 800 different plaque variations. For faster access to the individual plaque files, the images are accessible either by material or by style (size and shape). For example, it is possible to quickly list all "Wood" files in all sizes and shapes, or instead select a specific style (e.g. "Size D, Round") and view the list of materials in that style.

Using Plaquegrounds with Amiga Software: General Instructions

In their different sizes and numbers of colors, the plaquegrounds included in The Kara Collection can be used without special instructions in any piece of software which works with images. While it remains advised to refer to the documentation included with the various packages for more specific instructions on topics such as transparency, stencils and

brushes, this section proposes a few suggestions.

Once a plaque file has been loaded, the corresponding stencil file can be used to change the color of the background color without affecting the plaque. Programs like Personal Paint have an "Invert Stencil" feature to alternately "protect" the plaque itself or the area surrounding it. Stencils are also useful to "clean" the area around the plaques after working with JPEG files (which are not very accurate in storing solid blacks), and for "picking up" plaques as brushes, leaving the surrounding area transparent.

The exact plaque sizes in pixels (indicated in these instructions) can be used to create a grid (if the software has such a feature) to ease both the definition and the positioning of plaques when used as brushes.

Although the plaques already come in four different sizes, there may be a need for smaller or larger sizes. Best results are achieved when a 24-bit NTSC size D plaque is used as a basis to generate a new size. To compensate for the different proportions, NTSC plaques are usually resized with a correction factor of 1.21 on the Y axis to create images in the PAL video format.

Plaques used as they are can greatly increase visual impact on titling and graphic screens. Layering can give you added dimension by combining plaques over plaques. For example, a size D plaque could be used as a background, with a smaller plaque "floating" (with a shadow) over it.

A "stair step" effect can be achieved by picking up a larger plaque as a brush (with transparent background), and by gradually resizing it smaller each time, "building" it higher and higher.

Plaques don't always have to be within the confines of a screen. It is possible to "bleed" them off the screen from different sides. Or it is possible to make parts of a plaque transparent, letting other background images appear through.

An interesting "newsroom" effect can be achieved by using the Size D Plate style for "over-the-shoulder" graphics. The textured inner part of the plaque can for example be replaced with a graphic panel.

ColorFonts, AnimFonts and Plaquegrounds can of course be used together. Since a few Kara fonts (e.g. KaraGothicSerif) have a light source which originates in the lower right, whereas plaquegrounds may have a frame which was rendered with light coming from the upper left, some adjustment may be necessary. The light source of the fonts can be changed by reversing the order of the colors used to draw the font. Alternatively, it is possible to change the light source of a plaque by flipping the plaque both horizontally and vertically. Other types of rotation on the plaques may also yield to interesting graphic elements.

When used in combination with Plaquegrounds in a 24-bit environment, ColorFonts can be slightly smoothed or blurred to achieve softer color transitions.

Using Plaquegrounds with Amiga Software: Personal Paint

Although the plaques already come in color-reduced formats of 256 and 16 colors, Personal Paint makes it possible to create new plaques with different numbers of colors (e.g. 8, 32 or 64). The highest degree of quality is achieved when 24-bit plaques are used as a source, and if the Floyd-Steinberg and Best Quality Dithering options are selected. If the image is not only color-reduced, but also resized, it is important to also activate the Color Average Resize option. The desired target format, including the number of colors, can be set in the Image Format requester before loading the 24-bit image. Once the Load Image function presents the Format Selection requester, it is sufficient to confirm the current format.

When ColorFonts, AnimFonts and Plaquegrounds are used together, it may be necessary to make some colors in the palette available for the font palette (usually 5 to 8 colors for Kara fonts). This can be done by removing the necessary number of colors with the Less Colors function, and then moving the free color entries from the end of the palette to the beginning by using the Edit Palette requester, followed by a Remap command.

Using Plaquegrounds with Amiga Software: Deluxe Paint

Whenever a new brush or ColorFont is loaded in an environment already containing a plaque, the Remap command can be used to restore the image colors. Additional color arrangements can be organized in the Palette requester. If the color entries in bank 7 are free, they can be changed to host the brush or font colors. To check whether a color is in use or not, it is possible to move the RGB sliders and see whether this changes any colors in the image.

Using Plaquegrounds with Amiga Software: Video Toaster

The sizes of the various plaques were designed from the beginning considering the default resolutions used by video packages such as Video Toaster.

To create a brush using a plaque, the No Background option in the Brush menu should be selected before using the Scissors/Rectangle tool to mark the plaque.
