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To be or not to be? As Copland slips further and further into the next millennium and Apple's stock sinks, this is indeed the question.

When people ask me why I use a Mac, I have quite a few stock answers. They're faster. They're cheaper (a bald lie, but I say it nonetheless). As the argument nears its crescendo I point one sweeping hand to my PowerMac 7500 and rise to my feet: "Apple is and always will be at the forefront of innovation! Would you rather be using machines made by Taiwanese slave labor, installing card after card after card to keep up, or would you rather own a Mac?!" Instantly, my friends are converted. Their jaws drop in admiration.

Nevertheless, I've begun to suspect that I could be wrong. Is Apple at the forefront of innovation? How can a company that stubbornly hangs on to technologies like ADB and takes years to give its notebooks PC Card capability, be at the forefront of innovation? There's no question — the Mac is a great machine, better than the PC not just in a technical way but in a philosophical one as well. While Microsoft adds feature after feature after feature — and then installs "Wizards" to manage them — Apple has always focused on elegance, on the uncluttered desktop without beveled windows and extra screen elements.

But the feeling which pervades the computing industry isn't entirely misguided. Apple is losing its edge. Long gone are the days of the Macintosh IIfx, a machine that cost $18,000 but was the fastest desktop computer on the planet. I remember when I was the only person I knew with 16.7 million colors. Apple doesn't produce cool stuff anymore. They produce marketable stuff, products that are so focused on the corporate customer that they seem stale to someone who remembers Apple as the company that put laser printing on the desktop.

Now Jean-Louis Gasée, former head of Apple R&D and manufacturing, is poised to change all that. His company, Be, Inc., and its fiercely independent vision may forever draw the line between the computer you use at work and the computer

you use at home. The BeBox isn't targeted at people interested in groupware. It's targeted at people interested in — well, way cool stuff.

In October of 1995, Jean-Louis Gasée and a Be engineer finally showed the industry what Gasée had been doing since his departure from Apple in 1990. At Stewart Alsop's invitation-only Agenda '96, the BeBox brought the crowd to its feet as the engineer loaded several web pages, played three videos side by side, executed database lookups, pulled up file after file, sent wave after wave of MIDI sound crashing through the speakers, used drag-and-drop for graphics and text, and played "Let It Be" by The Beatles — all simultaneously.

The crowd roared its approval. From the back someone shouted "'How much?'"

Gasée leaned toward the microphone: "'$1,600 for the bare-bones machine.'"

That, ladies and gentlemen, is how it oughta be. No pun intended.

Gasée is not pulling that number out of nowhere. By "'bare-bones'" he means no hard drive, monitor or keyboard, but for a little over $2,000 he expects to put a very, very powerful machine to market. Real soon now, in fact.

What makes this possible is Be's philosophy. In 1990, Gasée realized that systems like the Mac, while far ahead of the competition, were weighed down by the need to support old users. One look at the DOS hidden behind Windows95 shows how supporting an old architecture can hobble even technically advanced operating systems.

The BeBox is an all new machine with an all new OS, built from scratch. It owes nothing to DOS, Windows, UNIX or the MacOS. Although the company describes BeOS as having been influenced by UNIX and the Mac, it's the first all-native, fully multitasking operating system.

The BeBox rests on a fresh architecture as well, and recognizing that today's computing problems, like full-motion video, needed a new approach, Gasée shrugged off all the existing hardware standards. Although the BeBox can use standard PC peripherals and perhaps even expansion cards, it runs on two 66 MHz PowerPC 603s. This may not seem like much, but the OS is so powerful that those two processors get more done than today's fastest machines. The BeBox even sports a "'Geek Port,'" a non-standard 37-pin opportunity for hobbyists and people with too much time on their hands to make input and output devices of their own.

This is how it oughta be!

The lack of a hardware legacy makes the BeBox easy to program, and the demonstrations that Be's been putting up around the country have convinced developers to give the new platform a try. CodeWarrior for the BeBox is in development now, and, if developers decide to take the plunge the BeOS could be a new — and perhaps dominant — force in the OS wars.

Still, the BeBox is a blank slate. With no software to speak of, Gasée is marketing it as a truly personal PC, a machine for the rest of the rest of us, the users who use their computers for more than just work. Much like the Mac in '84, the BeBox

has no killer app. The hope is that, just as desktop publishing made the Mac a major player, some other application will develop itself for the BeBox. When asked what he would do when Be had saturated the gadget-hungry market, Gasée apparently responded: "We'll sell them a second computer."

It is tempting to draw a parallel between Gasée's BeBox and the NeXT machine designed by Apple founding-father Steve Jobs. The NeXT, once viewed as the successor to the Mac, has faded into nothing — all that survives is the software. But there are key differences between the two. NeXT broke no new ground. It was a new machine, not much faster than existing models, which had a nice OS and good programming tools but was hampered by obvious problems, like the lack of a floppy drive. It had no market. The NeXT, it is often noted, was targeted at the penny-pinching education system. It doesn't have money to throw around on unproven machines that are too expensive for even computer hobbyists.

What does this all mean to Mac users? In the final analysis, it boils down to several things. First, Apple now faces truly cutthroat competition. The Mac market is one that sticks with the Mac not because it's made by Apple per se, but because it's willing to pay a premium and to be in the minority if it has the best machines available. What could be more on the cutting edge than the BeBox?

Apple's going to have to push, more than they have so far, to get Copland out. Windows95 already has many of Copland's features. The BeOS, which is reported to best both the Mac and Windows, ups the ante — Apple's going to have to swim upstream to keep from falling into the growing pool of irrelevant technology companies. Because BeOS is written in almost entirely high-level code, it's highly portable — there's no plans for a Mac version, but it could still be in the cards. Since the BeBox is fully compliant with Apple's Common Hardware Reference Platform, it could theoretically run the MacOS at some point in the future.

Finally, it means that there is an alternative. For game players, the BeBox represents a faster, easier, way cooler machine than what's available now. For graphic designers, it represents a low-cost machine which does the work of today's more expensive Macs. For tinkerers, it represents the first computer in a long while that's made to be played with.

For all of us, it could mean that the wait is over.