Project Athena's road not taken

(Continued from page 4)

I, providing MIT with conventional powerful operating system to run on ing UNIX environment - a pow-
creation of a distributed process-
Rather, one of the biggest payoffs
fessors could write a new genera-
computing resources so that pro-
Schools.

got rich selling computers to
business, and no company ever
but it doesn't sell computers to
hardware.

the next generation of computer
for IBM and Digital will be the
IBM PC/AT. Several schools
purchase the same computer
quiring every entering student to
-
1983 for students/staff

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A logical extension would have be-
have Project Athena offer computer
personal computers such as the
IBM PC/AT. Several schools had used this strategy, re-
quiring every entering student to
purchase the same computer
typically Apple Macintoshes). Athena's most mod-
developed fancy educational software;
which is now used as a basis to a
computer into a sub-
ject, the software copied
those students could run either in
public clusters or in the privacy
of their own room.
This approach would have sub-
stantially minimized Project Ath-
ena's operational expenses. Criti-
cisms of this approach usually
attack the PC/AT as a "losing
device," without defining the
value in the way of system
development or hardware innova-
tion would have been accom-
plished.
This approach would also have
barred Digital from supplying a
hardware base, since Digital does
not manufacture a computer with
price and power similar to those
of IBM's AT line.

Option 3: research only
Another option for research in
computers and education at MIT
could have been just that: keep
the project a research project,
without directly affecting our cur-
cents. The pay-off of the pro-
ject would be several years away,
in the form of software, text-
books, and entire curriculums
which would be published and
used at other universities and
high schools.
Students would be involved in
the project to the extent that stu-
dents are needed to test software
and to be experimented on, but
there would be no large-scale clas-
s such as the Student Center to un-
realistically raise student expecta-
tions.
From the perspective of the
outside world, it does not matter
if Athena affects every student at
MIT or just a few. What matters
is how much of the Athena soft-
ware gets out from MIT to the
rest of the world. Of secondary
care is how the project affects
the caliber of students which MIT
graduates during the five years
of the experiment.
To be an educational research
experiment was never the goal of
Project Athena. The irony is that
many students believe that Aths-
a considers itself to be so. The
Project reinforced this attitude
with its publication a few months
ago stating that "Project Athena
is an experiment; it is not a
service." A research-only project
would have had greater flexibility, since
it would not be important to con-
sider wide-scale implementation of
the programs developed.
Many more of the applications
could have grown beyond the
limits of the "standard Athena
workstation." Although parts of
Project Athena do match these
descriptions, they are currently in
the minority.

Option 4: no campus-wide program
MIT didn't have to have a Pro-
ject Athena. While advances in
computer engineering are begin-
ing to challenge assumptions of
the past 20 years, MIT is not
been a revolution in microcom-
puters in the past few years.
Without Project Athena, com-
puters still would have been inte-
gated into the non-engineering
aspects of the MIT curriculum,
but at a much slower pace. Some
of the current participants in the
Project might have been better off if they had waited two or five
years before embarking on their
programs in order to allow the
computational environment time
to settle.

Of course, the wait-and-see at-
titude was never characteristic of
MIT, and some departments
might never have mustered the
economic resources and technical
expertise to accomplish even
Athena's most modest aims.
Without Athena, the split in
resources between the departments
development of electrical engineering and com-
puter science and the rest of the
Institute would have been intensi-
Fed. Almost certainly many stu-
dents would have majored in
Course VI simply to get exper-
ience with computers that Athena
hopes to provide.

The benefits which students have received from Project Aths-
a to date are actually real
s compared so what could have been done with the
money, although it is doubtful that the
money would have been available to provide a world-class com-
puter system.
Gives the MIT community, the
goals of IBM and DEC, and the
current level of development in
computer industry, it is doubtful that any other project would have been possible.

Project Athena Survey Recipients
Please return surveys as soon as possible to
Room E40-338. Every response is important.
Thank you for your help. If you have any
questions please call Dr. Karen C. Cohen on
x3-0135.

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