Call to boycott killer robots
21 August 2012

(Phys.org) -- Engineers should stop working on killer robots and kick the habit of military funding, a leading Australian applied ethicist has said.

In a paper published in IEEE Technology and Society Magazine, Monash University philosopher Dr Robert Sparrow, called on engineers to boycott work on military robots such as the controversial 'Predator' drone from the United States.

"It is clear that military organisations fund a significant amount of, and perhaps even most of, robotics research today," Dr Sparrow said.

"Recent technological progress, which has greatly increased the potential for robots to keep soldiers 'out of harm's way' and the perceived success of the US's Predator and Reaper drones in Afghanistan, has lead to a massive influx of funding from governments all around the world for research on military robotics."

In his research paper, 'Just Say No' to Drones, Dr Sparrow said military robots are making war more likely by lowering the threshold of conflict.

"Military robots are making it easier for governments to start wars, thinking that they won't incur any casualties on their own side", Dr Sparrow said.

"The ethics of working on military robotics today cannot be entirely divorced from the ethics of the ends to which military robots are used."

He said the invasion and occupation of both Iraq and Afghanistan were immoral.

"If robots are not defending our homelands against foreign invaders or 'terrorists' but rather killing people overseas in unjust wars then this raises serious questions about the ethics of building robots for the military in the current period," Dr Sparrow said.

Dr Sparrow, of the School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies, said he realises individuals, particularly engineers, could pay a high personal price for refusing to work on projects that receive military funding.

"Given how much robotics research is funded by the military, engineering students looking for a job or a place to undertake their doctorates may face a choice between working on a military project or not gaining entry into their desired profession at all," Dr Sparrow said.

"For this reason, the argument that engineers should 'just say no' to military funding is best addressed to the robotics community as a whole, rather than individual engineers."

Dr Sparrow said he hoped his research will spur discussion within the robotics community as to how it might support those who do refuse military funding.

"Hopefully most engineers can agree that we would all be better served if robots were being researched, designed and built to confront some of the urgent social and environmental challenges facing humanity today, rather than to kill or wield
political power in foreign lands," Dr Sparrow said.