HTC announces Vive Pro lip tracking module and new VR body trackers

HTC has announced a new set of trackers for its Vive virtual reality headsets, including one that captures facial expressions and mouth movements. The $129.99 Vive Facial Tracker attaches to the Vive Pro headset. It uses two cameras and an infrared illuminator to record lip, cheek, and jaw movements and then translates that into virtual facial expressions. HTC says the product is “coming soon.”

HTC unveiled an experimental VR facial tracker in 2019, and it teased the product earlier this week on Twitter. A few developers, like the creators of social space Neos VR, have worked with the tool. Until today, though, HTC hadn’t confirmed a wide commercial release. The Facial Tracker supports 38 distinct facial movements, and users can also pair it with the Vive Pro Eye, a Vive Pro variant with built-in eye tracking. That could effectively translate most of a user’s face onto an avatar or into a motion capture system.

[embedded content]

There’s also a new, third-generation version of HTC’s general purpose VR tracker. The palm-sized tracking pucks are 33 percent smaller and 15 percent lighter than the last generation, and HTC promises a 75 percent increase in battery life. They will also be released “soon” for $129.99. Depending on the exact date, they could end up competing with the upcoming Tundra Tracker — a smaller, SteamVR-based alternative that is expected to ship this summer.

These HTC modules offer precise, accurate tracking for body parts that standard VR headset sensors don’t capture. Several VR social experiences, for instance, already estimate people’s lip motion based on the sound of their voice. But the new facial tracker can directly capture how their faces move, reflecting expressions like smiles and frowns. Similarly, the VR trackers can be fixed to custom controllers or attached with straps to people’s legs or feet — which are often given rudimentary animation or not displayed at all in VR.

Unfortunately, the facial tracker apparently has limited compatibility. It’s listed as working with the professional-level Vive Pro line, but not the newer, consumer-focused Vive Cosmos. As VR developer Olivier JT notes on Twitter, it also doesn’t appear to support Valve’s Index, a high-end headset whose hardware setup overlaps with the Vive Pro’s.

Despite this, face tracking could become an increasingly important part of current-generation VR. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said earlier this week that Facebook’s VR division, Oculus, will prioritize capturing eye movement and facial expressions in future hardware as well as releasing more realistic virtual avatars.

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