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‘Who wants the pressure of being super all the time?’

‘Who wants the pressure of being super all the time?’ Mid-century modern fashions and their influence on costume development in *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine period fashions in character costumes in the two Pixar/Disney computer-animated films, *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2*. These films have a strong mid-century modern design influence interwoven into the films’ narratives and aesthetic designs. The films have previously raised interest in fashion studies, due to their superhero concept. However, an analysis of the characters’ everyday dress is also valuable for understanding the influence of fashion and pop culture references on contemporary animated film costuming and how those elements embed within the technological development of digital characters’ clothing. We employ historical and visual analyses to highlight the integration of design elements of period-appropriate fashions into character costumes. Additionally, we examine the relationship between
animation software development and the films’ design aesthetics to inspect how technological advancements support the behaviour of cloth, narrative progression and characters’ personal emotional arcs by reviewing industry articles as well as animator and designer interviews from the making of the films. This is a unique case study that explores the influences and inspiration of period-specific fashion in constructing costumes for computer-animated films, which are ostensibly set in an environment also inspired by the period and specific cultural zeitgeist.

**Keywords:** costume design, animation, mid-century modern, fashion history, Pixar, Disney, digital textures

**Introduction**

Fashion is a key visual element when developing costumes for films. This is especially true when the garments are inspired by or are intended to reflect specific time periods in which the story takes place or to define characters’ personal proclivities. Similarly, in the context of computer-animated feature films, clothing is inextricably linked to a character’s persona, and historical fashions function as an inspirational resource to assist in visually depicting a film’s evolving narratives. However, costumes for animated films are commonly designed by an animator, not by a costume designer, as is the case in live-action films. Costumes are an integral aspect of animated character development, and much is often hidden in this process as it happens in tandem with other elements of animation and story development. Therefore, relatively little is known about the motivation and inspiration behind animated character costume design. Without the expertise of a costume designer, a comprehensive understanding of historical fashion references is often missed or underutilized by the animators creating the characters. This
is especially ironic in the case of Disney/Pixar’s computer-animated films *The Incredibles* (Bird 2004) and *Incredibles 2* (Bird 2018), where an important ancillary character is a fashion designer who exclusively designs for superheroes. Through the examples of *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2*, this article shines a light on areas of production related to character costume design, specifically the mid-century-inspired fashions depicted in the films’ visual storytelling.

While many sources examine fashion in film, they typically focus on costumes in live-action films rather than computer animation, with much of the literature concentrating on Hollywood costume history. For instance, Jorgensen and Scoggins (2015) discuss the history of fashion in film and examine the work of some of Hollywood’s most prolific costume designers such as Edith Head, Cecil Beaton and Colleen Atwood. In the realm of Disney, there is no shortage of analyses of character fashion, both scholarly and amateur, that identify historical references in the garments of princesses, villains and contemporary characters. There is also an abundance of exploration of Disney’s films and characters in the scope of their social and cultural impacts by the academic community, as well as some costume analyses. A glossy coffee table book, *The Art of Disney Costuming* (Kurtti 2019), sheds some light on costumes from Disney’s live-action film catalogue. Although numerous stark differences exist between live-action and animated films, many of the design principles governing a live-action character’s costumes are analogous to how an animator approaches costumes for an animated character. This intersection of costume design and animation, therefore, merits further examination and reflection and can give rise to a much more comprehensive understanding of costume design for film at large.
The superhero concept stands out as a major theme in the *Incredibles* franchise, and the dual lives of superheroes have provoked interest in prior fashion research. Specifically, the styles and meaning of superhero costumes have piqued interest as they visually illustrate the division between an ordinary person and a superhero (see Brownie and Graydon 2016; Gilmore and Stork 2014). Hence, Karaminas (2005: 15) remarks that superhero costumes transform the character’s body and ‘appropriates it for specific contexts, endowing the superhero psyche with attributes and energies that are beyond the “natural” world’. The superhero costume’s tight-fitting form has been discussed specifically in the context of the overly sexualized body shape of female superheroes (Reynolds 1992; Madrid 2009) and the exaggerated figure of male superheroes (Pyle 1994). Geraffo (2021) contributes to the study of superhero costumes by studying the live-action television series *Arrowverse* and *Runaways*. Even though her article primarily examines the superhero adaptations in the physically created costumes on live actors, she notes that, in fact, superheroes’ civilian clothing demands attention as it delineates the characters’ true identities and connects them in the world of the film. Geraffo (2021: 234) attests that it is exactly the civilian dress that is at the forefront of illustrating the character ‘rather than the archetypal superhero suit’.

In this article, we focus on civilian clothing and analyse the digital adaptations of mid-century-inspired costumes in the computer-animated feature films *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2*. The films tell the story of the Parr family and their superpowers. They wear functional super suits while performing superhero feats and simultaneously have a separate wardrobe of everyday clothing while living under the guise of a non-super life. *The Incredibles* is set in a town called Metroville, which shows distinct mid-century
design influences, where the Parr family lives in a mid-century modern style home. *Incredibles 2* continues the story immediately following the events in the first film; therefore, the mid-century influence remains evident in the environments, characters’ everyday wear and, to a certain extent, their superhero costumes. Bob Parr, the patriarch, doubles as the superhero Mr Incredible and possesses super strength, whereas his wife Helen, aka Elastigirl, can overly stretch her body. Their eldest child, Violet, can become invisible and create a shield to resist impacts. Their second child Dash has super speed, and their baby boy Jack-Jack enjoys multiple, albeit uncontrolled, superpowers. Although their powers are incredible and used for the greater good, the Parrs and other superheroes have been banned from using their powers and must live in hiding. In the first part of this article, we analyse the adaptations made to mid-century modern clothing that served as an inspiration for the films’ costumes by focusing on Bob and Helen Parr as well as Edna Mode. To highlight certain points of the analysis, we also discuss some of the supporting characters’ costumes. We employ historical and visual analyses to identify design elements of period-appropriate fashions that are reproduced in the characters’ civilian clothing. Our analysis aims to assess how contemporary fashion elements and influences are translated into costumes in cases where films hold a certain period aesthetic quality defined by the art direction and to further contextualize the costumes by examining additional historic references that are, perhaps unintentionally, present.

The visual and narrative concept of the *Incredibles* films combines details of the real world with futurism and fantasy. These aspects were created via the medium of computer animation, which differs from live-action filming in production, character design and creation processes. The medium of computer animation brought stylistic
parameters to the first film, thus forcing a certain aesthetic appearance for the second film. This allows an opportunity to view the *Incredibles* costumes from a technological point of view. In the latter part of the article, we examine historical fashion styles used as reference points in design development and animation process, thus further understanding the effect of certain software on the costumes. We inspect the relationship between animation software development and how costume and technological advancements support the behaviour of cloth, narrative progression and characters’ personal emotional arcs in both films. Industry articles (e.g. Crow et al. 2018; Kutt et al. 2018), as well as animator and designer interviews from the making of the films, illuminate these aspects.

The digital creation of character costume consists of a tight collaboration across departments. In order to skilfully implement period fashions in digitally created costumes, character designers, tailors, animators and shaders, for example, work towards designing and realizing final animated costumes. In the case of *The Incredibles*, costume design was a collaborative effort by character designers Teddy Newton and Tony Fucile, Production Designer Lou Romano and Writer–Director Brad Bird. In the case of *Incredibles 2*, costume design resulted from the collective efforts of Character Designer Deanna Marsigliese, Tailoring Lead Fran Kalal and the team of tailoring and shading artists. Tailoring artists oversee the digital pattern making and garment constructions, whereas shading artists build the digital surface textures that depict fabrics. In the costume design process, for many characters, tailoring and shading artists received a rough costume sketch and garment photo, and the ‘specifics of fit, detail, and construction were defined through our iterative exploration, and often modified with Art [Department’s] approval’ (Kutt et al. 2018: n.pag.), revealing that they also contributed to
the design of the film’s costumes and creation of the coherent mid-century modern style. The design and creation process of digital costumes stems from a multidisciplinary effort. This article also employs an interdisciplinary study to contribute to the underexplored topics of fashion and costume design in the context of computer-animated films.

Mid-century modern fashions illustrated in the character costumes

Many of Hollywood’s animation studios have established their own distinctive style, visible in their films’ overall aesthetic design. Environments, props and characters, along with their costumes, follow these styles. In Pixar movies specifically, ‘[l]arger and chunkier elements tend to look better’ (Kutt 2018: n.pag.), so the *Incredibles* films follow an aesthetic design to illustrate graphic silhouettes and emphasize the characters’ different exaggerated body forms. Some of the first visual representations of the characters were created by Character Designer Teddy Newton via the collage method of cutting simple shapes out of paper (Newton 2016). These simple shapes came to largely resemble the final overall look of the main characters in the *Incredibles* and match with Pixar’s own aesthetic design. Costumes, often intentionally, play with proportions and, in animated films, can notably emphasize a character’s exaggerated body proportions. In addition, this is consistent with the aesthetic of superhero costumes in film in general; superheroes tend to have exaggerated features that allude to their abilities. In these films, fashion styles of the 1950s and 1960s are exploited in a similar manner to highlight those exaggerated proportions.

The atmosphere of the mid-century was implemented in both films’ art direction, and the period fashions were embedded in clothing and environments. For instance, in *The Incredibles*, the enormity of Bob Parr’s upper body is conspicuous in contrast to the
skinniness of his tie, and Helen Parr’s cropped pants and three-quarter-length shirt sleeves suggest that perhaps she is just a little ‘tall’ for them. The stylistic decisions derived from the Writer and Director Brad Bird, who wished the film to ‘seem like the early-sixties vision of the future’ with a highly stylized take on humans (Vaz 2004: 9, 47). Production Designer Lou Romano attests that ‘Brad [Bird] wanted to establish a definite contrast between the real world and the fantastic, but he wanted both to be grounded in the same reality’ (Vaz 2004: 13). The real world is notably illustrated by the mundane clothing of every day and contrasts with the fantastic where the superhero work is executed. Producer John Lasseter remarks that ‘part of why the Incredibles aesthetic worked so well was because the optimism of the mid-century modern-inspired look connected powerfully with the underlying spirit of the story’ (Paik 2018: 4, original emphasis), not to mention the compatibility Pixar design has with the linear and geometric style of mid-century design aesthetics (see Kutt 2018: n.pag.). Against the background of progressive innovation and optimism of the mid-century modelled by the films’ art direction, a challenge is presented to the middle class, White American social and gender norms that were prevalent at the time. This is evident in particular in Incredibles 2 when Helen takes up the public superhero work while Bob remains home managing domestic chores. That being said, the mid-century inspirations in the films are heavily focused on prevalent design aesthetics rather than on social norms of the period.

At the outset of the first film, viewers learn that ‘civilian litigation has led to the outlawing of “Supers”, forcing heroes to blend into the mass of ordinary humanity’ (Vaz 2004: 47). After several unfortunate instances of property damage and lawsuits, superheroes are publicly lambasted by the government and legally barred from
performing hero work. The need to ‘blend in’ is a key struggle of the films’ main characters who are retired superheroes attempting to live ordinary lives by engaging in typical everyday activities like school, office work, home management and childcare. While engaging in these activities, the characters’ greatest assimilation into society takes place through their adoption of regular civilian clothing and hanging up their super suits for the foreseeable future. Brownie and Graydon note, ‘the appearance of a costumed character immediately prompts the expectation of spectacular action [...] Conversely, civilian clothing establishes the expectation of civilian behaviour’ (2015: 35). It is absolutely the Parrs’ intention in their style of dress to remain as inconspicuous as possible in order to maintain a civilian lifestyle whilst hiding their abilities. Their civilian clothes protect them from the expectations, and the potential ire, of neighbours as well as the government.

In general, the civilian clothing in the Parrs’ world is evocative of styles popular in the United States in the 1960s. Although not exactly recreated, their outfits contain elements of those styles that help give them an anonymous and innocuous appearance within their community. This corresponds to Brownie and Graydon’s remark that ‘the superhero’s civilian disguise must be so stereotypical to the extent that it is bland. It must be so unremarkable that those who meet him [any character] can never suspect any connection to the superhero’ (2016: 71). The blandness of Helen and Bob’s clothing, in particular, is further accentuated by the casual or even sloppy quality added to their ensembles. In *The Incredibles*, Helen’s ensembles reflect the domestic sphere in which she resides since putting off the superhero work. Her civilian clothes appear unremarkable in design and pattern but comfortable and adaptable for the tasks of
motherhood and household management. Similarly, Bob’s generic job attire conveys a sense of conformity to the average and mundane.

Themes of progress and futurism are readily apparent in the art direction of both films, but at the outset, ‘Incredibles’ design schemes ranged from a stylized take on human and superhuman characters to the aesthetics of early James Bond production designer Ken Adam to the distinctive sixties notion of the future’ (Vaz 2004: 9, original emphasis). Much of that aesthetic is observed in the mid-century modern-inspired architecture and decorative furnishings of the films’ locations (offices, homes, etc.), and, of course, the superhero costumes also overtly indicate a sense of futurism. However, there also exists an allusion to ‘superhuman’ characters from the 60s’ pop culture, like James Bond, in the costumes of Bob Parr, for instance, who is often seen wearing polo shirts and trousers after he begins his clandestine superhero work (Figure 1). While he may physically stand out in comparison to Sean Connery’s James Bond from the original 1960s films, Bob’s everyday fashion begins to adopt the tailored and tapered trappings of Bond, especially as his confidence resumes in tandem with his superhero work. In her analysis of the fashion of James Bond, Llewella Chapman (2022) discusses the pervasive influence of the fictional style icon on international fashion and merchandizing, especially in 1960s Europe and the United States, when the early Bond films were released. She states that the popularity of the films helped disseminate the simple sophistication of Bond’s wardrobe, which strongly followed the principles of mid-century modern design values. This explains an aesthetic reference to the Bond character in Bob’s more sophisticated everyday wear once he leaves his desk job.
The 1960s were a dramatic time in fashion history with radical shifts in clothing for men and women, as well as for young people for whom the time had finally arrived to influence the world around them. ‘Increasingly, new fashions were created from within youth culture; the styles were then adopted and modified by European couturiers’ (Steele 1997: 61), meaning that for the first time, innovation and progress in fashion were actually being established by the public rather than dictated by the industry. Valerie Steele notes that ‘social and economic developments had given young people around the world a self-conscious awareness of themselves as a distinct and unified group so that they were able to respond to political events, in the process creating their own culture’, and these distinctions translated into fashion statements that reflected those allegiances, ideologies and predilections (1997: 50). Parallels can be drawn between 60s’ youth culture and the films’ superheroes who faced the cynicism and derision of the prior generation. In the films, Bob Parr, in particular, is frustrated with the ban on superheroes and finds difficulty coping with his life in hiding. In The Incredibles, he is set working a
mundane job at an insurance company. His desire to do good by performing heroic acts leads us through the first film’s narrative, although tension remains between superheroes and the government despite the value of their work at the film’s conclusion. The sequel picks up the story, following Helen Parr’s character this time, as she embarks on a mission to overturn the ban on superheroes and shift the populace’s opinion in favour of superheroes resuming their former roles. In both films, as both Bob and Helen plunge back into hero work defying the status quo, they adopt radical new super suits to highlight their new foray into changing the world.

In *Incredibles 2*, some key individuals of the mid-century inspired the principal characters’ visual appearances. Images of Paul Newman influenced Bob Parr’s overall character design and costumes. Inspiration for Helen Parr stemmed from films and images of Audrey Hepburn, Mary Tyler Moore and Marilyn Monroe (Kutt 2018: n.pag.). These are all career-minded women, a topic reflected in the narrative of *Incredibles 2* where Helen goes to work and Bob stays home with the children. During this period, the typical American family dynamic showed mom as the master of all things related to domestic work and child-rearing while dad existed more in the public sphere, leaving the home to work and support his family. In the first film, Helen and Bob’s respective clothing styles reflect those roles. Helen never appears in a dress or skirt; in fact, with the exception of a bathrobe, she is always in some style of bifurcated bottoms. Her go-to daily uniform consists of cigarette style capri pants, button-up three-quarter-length blouses and ballet flats (Figure 2). Helen, however, is noticeably more casual in her styling often with her blouse untucked. Conversely, in the second film, these roles are reversed, and Bob’s daily clothing reflects his domestic responsibilities and Helen spends
more time in her super suit. For instance, where viewers saw Bob Parr dressing more confidently in the first film as he regained his prowess acting as a superhero, in *Incredibles 2* he shifts back into an uncomfortable role, which sees him fall into a more harried and sloppy dressing style.

Figure 2: In *The Incredibles*, Helen Parr is never seen wearing a dress or skirt, which is reflective of her busy lifestyle, a ‘woman on the go’, Brad Bird (dir.), *The Incredibles*, 2004. USA. © Pixar Animation Studios.

For animators, studying period-specific fashions by examining images and exploring physical garments assists in achieving a rich, coherent visual look across all characters, which continues throughout the film. A collection of visual images, such as photographs of famous figures of the mid-century period, worked as a guide for ‘time-period details: like plaid, pearlized buttons, leather watch straps, sunglasses, and clean, simple lines’ for the characters’ costumes (*Kutt 2018*: n.pag.). Character Designer Deanna Marsigliese used her personal enthusiasm for vintage fashion to influence her costume illustrations. She remarks that
[f]or Incredibles 2, my love of Mid-Century style was particularly helpful. The tailoring department used many of my authentic vintage clothing pieces as reference. Together, we studied each piece’s construction, fabric weight and movement to achieve an authentic, yet stylish vintage look for the characters in the film.

(Voyage LA 2019: n.pag., emphasis added)

The overall style of the Incredibles films is genuinely a pastiche of visual culture of the 1950s and 60s because the artists were able to pick and choose design elements that complemented their imagined world. Animated films rarely intend to accurately depict specific time periods, but instead focus on motifs and strong aesthetic qualities that enhance a viewer’s conception of a cohesive, themed look in the overall art direction. Although the characters’ costumes were heavily inspired by the shapes and styling of Marsigliese’s vintage garments, they served a functional purpose to the animators rather than remain as specific examples of fashion to copy.

An extraordinary preoccupation of the society in the mid-century was the concept of design for the future, and this applied to everything from technology to home decorating to fashion. Brad Bird’s vision of an early-60s and futuristic film is clearly seen in the general art direction for both films. During the mid-century, the public was enamoured with scientific and technological advancements that were adapted into tools and materials that promoted easier, streamlined living. Kristina Wilson analyses contemporary published sources like home decorating and design books, explaining how ‘they demonstrate the fantasies and expectations that may have shaped how individuals imagined their lives’ (2021: 26). Although her book is focused on modernism as it applies to home and interior design in the suburban experience, there is much applicable discourse on specific gendered experiences within that space amongst that design.
Everything from transportation to home management was reimagined to reflect the ‘future is now’ attitude of a generation that longed to escape an old-fashioned, humdrum way of living. With this aggressive march into the future, there emerged an immense preoccupation with technological gadgetry and space travel as evidenced by popular films, television shows and books of the decade. Besides the obvious technologies featured in the films, the real paragon to futurism is the character of Edna Mode, designer to the supers, and the technology-infused fashion garments that she creates.

Given that the films demonstrate the Parrs’ experience with mundane, day-to-day clothing, there must, conversely, be a special source of super suit development that supplies superheroes with the clothing they need to perform their feats. ‘Supers never went out to do good unless they looked good, fully accessorized with fantastic uniforms and logos’ (Vaz 2004: 62, original emphasis), but where do such garments come from? Who creates them? The existence and influence of a fashion designer character in the world of the Incredibles lend credence to the magnitude of fashion and clothing’s influence on all of the characters, both in their ordinary and super lives. Edna Mode, designer to superheroes but currently settling for supermodels, is easily the most fashion-centric character in the films because of the nature of her job. She also stands out as the most uniquely costumed non-super character in the films, given that her personal choices in clothing do not align with either the ordinary background characters or the heroes that she dresses (see Figure 1). According to Bryn Imagire, shading art director for Incredibles 2, ‘Brad [Bird] said for the first time she [Edna] is Japanese and German, so I looked at Japanese fashion designers like Rei Kawakubo’ (Disney Official Website 2018: n.pag.), so it is not surprising that the visual reference for Mode, although not her
clothing, strongly resembles the designer. Interestingly enough, the inspiration from Kawakubo in creating Mode is doubly appropriate considering Kawakubo’s own anomalous educational background before launching her unconventional brand Comme de Garçons. Although viewers are not provided with any background on Mode, it becomes apparent that her professional work eclipses traditional fashion design due to the magnitude of science and technology that she merges into the design of super suits. While the superhero costumes in the *Incredibles* films merit their own separate discussions, they warrant a brief examination in this article as fashion-inspired costumes within these films.

According to Character Designer Deanna Marsigliese, ‘[Edna] admires supers and aspires to help them in their line of duty. She’s all about smart design; elegance that employs functionality, practicality, and safety’ (*Paik 2018*: 161). The fabrics that Mode uses include elements such as flame and bullet resistance, protection against friction and super-stretching capabilities among a host of additional utilitarian functions. In the 1950s and 1960s, there emerged a growing interest in the technological possibilities of clothing and the development of synthetic materials. As advertising gained new footholds in television, ‘the media encouraged consumer demand for the most modern and technologically innovative textiles, fashions and modern housewares’ (*Milford-Cottam 2017*: 6), especially given mass production opportunities that increased affordability of items like clothing and appliances. While she may be fictional, Mode’s vision for innovation is in tune with several real-life fashion designers of the 1960s such as Pierre Cardin, Paco Rabanne and André Courrèges, who all pursued futuristic takes on women’s fashion. Embracing a progressive attitude and exploring synthetic materials allowed some
designers to challenge the rigid parameters set by fashion designers until this point. Rabanne manipulated plastic and metal to create chainmail-inspired dresses, while Cardin used stretch fabrics in his ultra-modern, space-age aesthetic. According to fashion historian Linda Watson, ‘André Courrèges, who trained at Balenciaga, approached couture as an engineer constructs an inter-planetary craft’, and his ‘look was clean, streamlined and always looking towards the future’ (2008: 99, 202). These descriptions fit Edna Mode perfectly and align well with her design philosophy that is demonstrated throughout both films.

The coherent mid-century modern style across the Incredibles franchise is partly achieved via the costumes of the background characters who wear modified versions of typical period fashion styles. Background characters in film, also referred to as ‘extras’, hold an important visual function. In The Incredibles, many adult men dress somewhat formally in suits, ties and hats of muted colours. Women have defined waists and wear full skirts or high-waisted trousers with blouses tucked in, evoking mainstream styles popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Because Incredibles 2 takes place mostly in and around cities, the fashions represented by the background characters are particularly indicative of a mid-century style, albeit a simplified one. These styles are an important and decisive part of the film’s visual narrative: the background characters contribute to establishing the coherent visual aesthetic, sometimes almost ‘staging’ the environments with mid-century modern style (Figure 3).
The variation in the background characters’ costumes is achieved by designing a small selection of garments and multiplying these on different body types. The appearance of a new type of costume ensemble is created by using a different colour and pattern. For example, in *Incredibles 2*, costume variation for 72 male background characters was achieved by rotating twelve garments on six different body types, notes the film’s Tailoring Lead Fran Kalal ([Disney Official Website 2018](https://www.disney.com)). This included recolouring and adding different prints to a set of blouses, skirts, jackets and trousers for male and female characters. The technique of creating the appearance of a new costume by reusing and rotating the same garments but changing the colours, textures and patterns on them is a typical way of designing costumes for animated characters, including those for principal character costumes ([Kalmakurki 2021](https://www.disney.com)): 158–69). This method is specifically popular in animation where silhouettes and costumes are essential for the recognition of a character ([Kalmakurki 2021](https://www.disney.com)). In the case of multiple
background characters, clean and strong silhouettes are employed to correspond with the other costume silhouettes.

**Digitally reproduced fashions**

The concept of superheroes is interesting in digital animation as their super suits connect to the fictional world that can be created digitally, whereas the non-super life portrays everyday clothing and can be viewed as more realistic. Due to the development of animation software, recent digital cinema has aspired designers ‘to achieve seamless photorealism, creating a perfect illusion of the real’ (Gotto 2014: 49). Pixar films aims for believability rather than realism, which guides the aesthetic quality of the company’s films where storytelling drives technological innovation (Herhuth 2017). *The Incredibles* was Pixar’s first film to introduce humans as the protagonist characters. Their stylized graphic body forms matched with the art direction of illustrating exaggerated human forms, and the early developments of computer animation software guided the stylized character forms. *Incredibles 2* took advantage of animation software development by depicting more authentic-appearing facial and body features as well as garment textures. One ‘major design goal [in *Incredibles 2*] was to add details in whatever ways possible to help give this sequel a more sophisticated look and feel when compared to the original film’ (Crow et al. 2018: n.pag.). However, the aim was to retain the essence of the character looks established in the first film (Crow et al. 2018; Hamou-Lhadj et al. 2018). Newly developed animation software was used for altering the character forms by enhancing their anatomical features such as muscles. These are visible in the ways the garments fit on a body and are especially evident when the Parr family wears their tight super suits (Hamou-Lhadj et al. 2018).
The narrative progression and characters’ personal emotional arcs are supported by costume and technological advancements in both films. We demonstrate this via the case of Bob Parr as his emotional arc and performance are supported by changing the appearance of his clothing, whereas not that of Helen’s everyday wear. Bob’s everyday attire, a white, short sleeve shirt with a narrow collar, and his work attire, which includes a narrow tie, continue the pastiche of mid-century modern fashions. As discussed earlier in this article, they also function as a humorous contrast to his overly large upper body. The impact of clothing is powerful in this case as it completely supersedes any other defining features about the character, even obvious ones, in the eyes of their peers. For example, the physicality of Bob’s enormous upper body could easily give away his super strength abilities regardless of the ensemble he is wearing. However, the full character design in the beginning of the first film, including his somewhat slovenly appearance at his desk job, coupled with his body language, renders him so downtrodden that his co-workers are completely unsuspecting of his abilities and previous life as a superhero.

The behaviours of cloth, such as wrinkles and stains, are important clues to illustrate the cause of action and emotion in a scene (Dierker 2019). Such details are embedded in costumes in live-action films. Hence, Stutesman refers to a process of ‘re-fashioning’ in which garments are always altered in a creative process before they appear on screen (2021: 29). Manipulating a garment material enhances the storytelling via carefully considered details. This kind of process was applied in *The Incredibles* with animation software that was able to create, for example, a loose fit and creases on Bob Parr’s shirt. To emphasize Bob’s unhappiness with his desk job, his shirt shifts from a fitted garment to a loose and wrinkly one mirroring his emotion in the scenes. Bob’s shirt
creases on the front side of the body (see Figure 4) visually represent his discomfort and unhappiness with his role in the office. The creasing is a decisive addition of detail to his shirt in contrast with his prior appearance and posture. Pixar developed their cloth simulation programme from their previous film *Monsters, Inc* (2001) to create a more truthful appearance of clothing (Vaz 2004: 18). Therefore, the cloth simulation software enhanced the illustration of Bob’s lack of confidence not only through his posture and movement but also by the fit of the garment.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4:** Bob Parr working at his desk at Insuricare insurance company. His discomfort is visually illustrated through the fit of his clothing, Brad Bird (dir.), *The Incredibles*, 2004. USA. © Pixar Animation Studios.

Due to the development and improvement of animation software between the two films, smaller detailed nuances depicting Bob Parr’s emotional arc were achieved in his clothing in the sequel. In the *Incredibles 2* narrative, Bob tries to manage the life of a full-time father while Helen Parr does superhero work, performing mostly in her super suit. Bob’s sloppiness at home, however, is sharply contrasted by the sleek, well-finished
lines and shapes of the modern furniture and decor around him, illuminating his descent into frustration and discomfiture within his new role as a primary caregiver. Pixar’s Bump-To-Roughness (BtoR) software enabled the creation of fine detailing in clothing, such as different material textures. BtoR software previously added realism on surfaces other than cloth textures, such as creating metal flakes and small scratches on car surfaces in *Cars 3* (Fee 2017) and the more detailed dinosaur skin in *The Good Dinosaur* (Sohn 2015) (Crow et al. 2018: n.pag.). Thus, the same software can create similar kinds of surface textures digitally, regardless of the surface being a garment, prop or environment.

As noted previously, Bob’s lack of confidence was visually indicated by the fit of his clothing in *The Incredibles* with their cloth simulation software, whereas in the sequel, fine details such as wrinkles in cloth texture were possible with the more developed BtoR software. In the sequel, Bob expresses feelings of uncertainty and unhappiness that are illustrated, for example, by much finer wrinkles on his pyjama shirt texture (Figure 5) than in the previous film. The appearance of worn and wrinkled cloth as well as intentionally poor garment fit could be achieved for stylized graphic characters with the technique called ‘Dynamic Alterations’ in *Incredibles 2* (Kutt et al. 2018: n.pag.). This addition assists in depicting the characters’ personal emotional arcs through more realistic depictions of the real-world fabric behaviour in the film’s clothing.
In *Incredibles 2*, Bob Parr’s scruffy look was achieved by wrinkles on his shirt. This was a result of developed animation technology, Brad Bird (dir.), *Incredibles 2*, 2018. USA. © Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios.

In *The Incredibles*, Bob Parr mostly wears either the same white shirt or his superhero suit; therefore, his wardrobe does not particularly reflect his emotional arcs or changes in the film’s narrative. It was fairly easy to bring variation to costumes by changing colours and textures on costumes via the software available at the time of the film’s production; however, this was not employed systematically in Bob’s clothing to illustrate his personal emotions or actions in a scene.\[1\] In the scene that presents Bob’s commitment to become more fit, he often wears the same shirt but in different colours, illustrating the passage of time. *Incredibles 2* presents a stronger visual progression through colours and textures on Bob’s costume where his same shirt style has been reused and recoloured. This indicates the character designers’ increased focus on the more psychological meaning of costume, a consideration that has grown in importance in recent computer animations. The colouring of Bob’s costume shifts to white and blue in scenes that illustrate the happier points in his life, and then when his self-confidence decreases, it is reflected in his
clothing with stuffy beige and brown tones. The advancements in software also allowed creation of a better reflection on changes in scenes and the character’s personal emotions. On this point, Kutt (2018) remarks that the messy look in the lowest point of Bob’s personal story arc is also represented via the fit and wrinkles in his shirt in addition to the drab colours. Technology’s improved capacity to illustrate the physical condition of a costume ultimately strengthens the storytelling in animated films.

The lack of texture and wrinkles in Helen’s costumes in both films is curious next to the detail in Bob’s attire. In The Incredibles, Helen’s everyday shirt shows hardly a crease from her physical activity, and the surface texture depicts silky and shiny material without a more specific indication of the yarn quality or weaving technique. This digital production renders the texture flat and new, although her shirt does include a subtle and earthy coloured print. Together, this emphasizes her ‘blandness’ as described earlier in this article, adapting to civilian life and motherhood. In Incredibles 2, when she no longer appears in her super suit, Helen mostly wears black or red tight-fitting tops with no indication of wear or texture. The digital production of this top has most likely been reused from the design of her super suit and recoloured to depict a new kind of garment. The lack of texture or wrinkles in Helen’s everyday wear imparts less of a reflection of physical activity and personal emotion.

In order to reproduce realistic wrinkles, textures, cloth behaviour and garment structures digitally, animators examine physical material examples. Physical fabrics and patterns are explored as references in design development and also employed as references while simulating material textures and cloth. In Incredibles 2, digital garment tailoring was accomplished in parallel with animating the sequences. This enabled testing
the digitally created mid-century modern fashions on the characters and adjusting the details (Kutt et al. 2018). Character Designer Deanna Marsigliese remarks that the inspiration for the male and female background character appears derived from studying home sewing patterns and reproducing the tailored fit of the era (Disney Official Website 2018: n.pag.). Patterns are useful ‘for character animators and cloth simulators to better understand the creation of different costumes and the fit of a garment on a human body’ (Kalmakurki 2021: 231). In the case of the Incredibles films, they provided clear reference on the kind of period-specific garment structures that are available. The patterns were not only inspirational for design ideas but also helpful for digitally building certain types of costumes on a character.

Realistic tailoring, garment construction and physical details in clothing such as pockets or rolled cuffs were examined via physical clothing in order to replicate real-world characteristics and to stylize garment proportions to match the art direction (Kutt et al. 2018). For this process, Marsigliese provided fabrics and garments for visual reference and even wore some of the garments herself so that the tailoring team could analyse the specific construction of mid-century clothing on a human body (Kutt 2018). Physical garments are examined because of their multisensorial quality; the material textures, when examined through touch, and the embodied feeling of wearing garments transfer further inspiration to the designers in the costume design process and animators in the digital garment creation (Kalmakurki 2021). Marsigliese explains that examining real garments is essential for ensuring that the fabrics seen in the film are recreated as ‘era appropriate’. She guided the tailors on garment fit on a real body and how different materials react in movements (Becky 2018). Garment analysis on a human body links to
‘motion studies’, which have been part of the character animation process since the early attempts of animating hand-drawn human characters. At Pixar, motion study meant examining the late 1950s’ and early 1960s’ clothing on Marsigliese and to ‘feel the weight and movement of the fabric, and take note of where tension and wrinkles naturally occur’ (Kutt 2018: n.pag.). In Incredibles 2, the majority of the female everyday clothing consists of narrow waist skirts with full hem or trousers with tapered hem and collared blouses, following the mid-century modern fashions. On this point, Shading Art Director Bryn Imagire remarks that ‘it’s always good to have tangible pieces of fabric so that the team knows [...] what the material acts like, how shiny it is, what the stitching looks like’ (Disney Official Website 2018: n.pag.). Studying these fashion features as real garments assists in their digital reproduction via embodied and multisensorial examination. This attention contributes to how well the animators convey the ordinary world in contrast to the futuristic superhero concept in the Incredibles films.

Conclusion

While the super suits are certainly the most sensational costume elements of the Incredibles films, it is equally important for viewers to note the civilian clothes worn by the films’ characters. These everyday outfits with their dull details provide a richer depth into the individuals wearing them and assist in fleshing out the art direction of the entire world in which they exist. This article has offered insights into the historical analysis and technological development of mid-century modern-inspired costumes in the computer-animated films The Incredibles and Incredibles 2. The principal and background character costumes powerfully supported the films’ art direction, and due to the ‘Pixar style’ of highly exaggerated character forms, mid-century design influences were a
perfect source of visual inspiration for the films’ character silhouettes. The films’ scenic and costume elements operate as a pastiche of mid-century modern design, as the designers could choose and combine any type of period-appropriate reference for the digital reproduction. While serving the theme of futurism and supers, the computer animation also built mundane clothing that contrasted the Parr family’s super suits. Hence, the animation medium affected the stylization of the costumes instead of designers directly copying materials and fashion styles from real life. Technology development between the two films also influenced the realism of everyday clothing, resulting in, for example, more accurate material textures and behaviour in the sequel. The technological aspect of creating digital costumes requires the efforts and collaboration of many professionals in an animated film’s production. Instead of a principal person acting as the costume designer, several types of animation professionals contribute to the design development and final creation of digital costumes. Although they are not costume designers in a traditional sense, these animators still examine real materials, period patterns and period-appropriate visual references to effectively reproduce digitally a mid-century modern-inspired look in these films.

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Bird, Brad (2004), The Incredibles, Burbank, CA, USA: Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures.

Bird, Brad (2018), Incredibles 2, Burbank, CA, USA: Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures.


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Newton, Teddy (2016), oral lecture delivered at the University of California Los Angeles, Animation class, Los Angeles, CA, 8 February.


In both hand-drawn and digital animation, tight-fitting costumes are often used because they allow an easier and faster animation process for character movement. Loose garments and excess cloth create secondary movements from the body, which are more time-consuming to animate.

Pixar style has been extensively discussed by Herhuth (2017).

Kalmakurki (2021) explains the ways digital characters have a certain ‘costume model’, and this is reused in a film and across film franchises to maintain the same character silhouette. The appearance of a ‘costume change’ is achieved by adding contrasting colours and textures to costumes.

Prior to Incredibles, Pixar’s Toy Story (1995) included some human characters, but their visual appearance looked plastic due to the underdeveloped animation software. Presiding software techniques rendered characters' surfaces plastic due to a lack of light to penetrate skin surfaces, which would create realistic skin textures (Vaz 2004: 9).
For more on how costume changes were simply made by changing the colours and textures on character’s costume prior to *Incredibles* in *Shrek* (Adamson and Jenson 2001), see Kalmakurki (2021).

For more on the ways tangible materials are part of costume design development and creating digital material textures in other computer animations than *The Incredibles* and *Incredibles 2*, see Kalmakurki (2021).

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