Harry Potter series by author J.K. Rowling is the best-selling book series in the past 50 years. The series as a whole has sold over 450 million books in over 65 languages. This hugely successful series sports an equally large fandom of amateur writers, readers, and Quidditch players who all find their sense of community amongst other fans of the series. These writers write everything from additions and alterations of the story to erotic tales involving various characters. Rowling has historically been supportive of her very large and active fan base. This support from the author has made some wonder if her involvement with the fan community influences her view on the world, and the characters she created. Critics argue that fan fiction does little to generate lasting impact on the main work at all, but the evidence in Rowling’s Harry Potter provides a potential counter to that stance. In Rowling’s case, the relationship between producer and consumer is a dynamic, ever-changing dialogue in which the readers can have a profound effect on the stories. This relationship creates the possibility of a cyclical flow of information between the author and the audience—allowing those who were originally consumers of stories to potentially produce new sources of canon.

The relationship that exists between cultural producers and consumers is best addressed by first discussing the concept of “poaching,” as Henry Jenkins III borrowed it from Michel de Certeau. “Poaching” refers to fan writers taking cultural source material as it is officially recognized by the producers (generally referred to as “the canon”) and breaking it apart, using only specific details for their own tales. These details are then utilized and ordered in a way that best serve the interests of the amateur writer who is producing the new story (87). According to de Certeau’s concept of “poaching,” the details of the stories that don’t suit the fan author’s purposes are either ignored or deliberately altered. Stories written in this way have a tendency to be personalized to the needs of the writer and the small community for whom they write. When described this way—as poachers of the original author’s ideas rather than as creators in their own right—fan writers have a very negative stigma attached to their work.

On the surface, poachers would appear to have virtually no impact on the canon as a whole. By choosing to serve as producers for their own small niche in their respective fandoms and par-
ticular fan communities, and by refusing to contain their writings within the confines of undisputed canonical fact, the fan authors bind themselves to only the most exclusive segments of the fan community. The belief that fan works are only of value to a small segment of the fan base is an easy belief to understand, but in some cases the writing of fan-made stories, regardless of how they were originally intended to be viewed, can become so noteworthy as to influence the existing canon of an ongoing series. Since the consumers who write fan fiction are able to potentially contribute to the canon and culture surrounding the original work, they should be regarded as people that bring lasting life to a literary work, not as poachers who denigrate or destroy it without making any meaningful contributions of their own.

The influence from consumer to producer in the *Harry Potter* fandom can be most effectively demonstrated through the “slash” section of fan fiction. Slash fan fiction, for the uninitiated, is a form of fan fiction that focuses on erotic relationships between characters. There is no requirement for the characters to have an actual relationship in the original work; the justification for slash relationships is entirely at the discretion of the fan who is writing it. In the *Harry Potter* fandom, a significant portion of the slash writings are homoerotic (Tosenberger 200). One particularly popular sub-set of *Harry Potter* slash fan fiction focuses on an assumed relationship between Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and his boyhood friend Grindelwald. Grindelwald and Dumbledore’s perceived relationship took advantage of the character’s vague backstory, introduced in book 7 of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The fans’ response to the possibility of a Dumbledore/Grindelwald relationship was so immediate that Grindeldore.livejournal.com, a website devoted to Grindelwald/Dumbledore fan fiction, was created just one day after *The Deathly Hallows* was published. This infatuation among the fans with the possibility of such a relationship ultimately set the stage for a highly controversial announcement by Rowling herself. Nearly six months after *Deathly Hallows* was published, during a discussion at Carnegie Hall, Rowling was asked if Dumbledore ever found love. She replied that she “always thought of Dumbledore as gay” (Tosenberger 201). The announcement, while surprising to most, would not be a shock to the more active members of the online Potter fandom—especially those readers on Grindeldore.com.

Rowling’s announcement caused controversy on multiple fronts. In a column, journalist Jeffrey Weiss stated, “If you didn’t put it in the books, please don’t tell us now” (Weiss). The primary criticism of Rowling’s announcement centered on the fact that it seemed to be more in response to the growing speculation of her work by the fan community, rather than the existing canon. Others still believe Rowling’s announcement served political purposes, due to Rowling’s socially liberal leanings and support of the gay rights movement in Europe. Rowling claims that she “always” considered Dumbledore to be gay, and that her views were not “extra textual” (Tosenberger 204). It is impossible to truly know the full truth behind Rowling’s claims, but it seems atypical for an author to limit the potential interpretations of their writings after publication unless they believed it to be imperative to the understanding of the work as a whole—which Dumbledore’s sexuality clearly is not due to the fact that his orientation does not affect the story in any meaningful way.

Since Rowling asserts that Dumbledore’s homosexuality is present in the text, we shall turn to the text and visit one of the more often cited pieces of evidence of Dumbledore’s sexual orientation. One of the examples pointed to by *LA Times* staff writer Deborah Netburn is Dumbledore’s phoenix, Fawkes. Netburn cites Fawkes as gay symbolism, due to the phoenix being a burning bird—thus implying that Dumbledore is “flaming”. Netburn is correct in inferring a character symbol from the bird, but one could easily say that she is misinterpreting the bird as a sym-
bol of sexuality as opposed to the more clear symbolism of the phoenix being an allusion to Guy Fawkes—the man who is known for the Gunpowder Plot in England. If the phoenix represents Guy Fawkes, Rowling potentially intended the bird to represent of Dumbledore’s own rebellious nature, not as a statement on his sexuality. Both arguments may be considered in terms of symbolic value, as discussion and disagreement are an integral part of fan activity.

Dumbledore’s homosexuality is certainly debatable, but it brings us to question the honesty of Rowling’s statement, and it also brings forth the question of whether Rowling was influenced by an outside source. The outside source in this case would be fan fiction—and in this instance, the slash variety depicting the love between Grindelwald and Dumbledore in countless ways.

To understand the legitimacy of the slash fan fiction speculation towards Rowling’s announcement of Albus Dumbledore’s homosexuality, it is important to understand Rowling’s own tendency to participate in and cultivate the growth of her series’ growing fandom. Rowling has established the online fan forum Pottermore. Pottermore is a website that promotes fan writing and discussion—Rowling herself has been known to participate in these discussion on occasion, as well as introduce previously unknown information into the Harry Potter canon. Rowling’s activity in the fan forums, along with her penchant for adding new information is indicative of the existing dialogue that she has created between herself and the fans of her series.

In 2007, Rowling elected not to pursue legal action against George Lippert, a fan author who had written his own fan fiction sequels to the Harry Potter series. According to a representative of the author, “J.K. Rowling’s reaction is that she is very flattered that there is such great interest in her Harry Potter series” (Waters). This information suggests that Rowling is invested in both her series and the continuation of her books’ universe through the fans’ work. Rowling’s heavy investment and participation in her own series’ fandom points to the potential for the creative discussions, critical essays, and fan fiction that stem from her creation to influence the author’s official definition of the canon.

The accusation that Rowling was influenced by the Harry Potter fan fiction has quite large implications, because it shows a potential shift in creative power to the fans. The growth of the various theories revolving around Dumbledore, Grindelwald, and their alleged sexual relationship, coupled with the belated timing of Rowling’s announcement, creates an unusual situation for the fans. The timing of Rowling’s announcement and the controversy surrounding it both highlight the possibility of fan communities having a real impact on a story’s canon. This marks the first instance in the post-internet age of consumers potentially breaking the traditional, one-way stream of canon from author to audience. This potential exchange creates the possibility of a new dynamic—one where consumers and producers exist in a cycle of canon that is responsive to the audience that experiences it. The subtractive nature of fan fiction is still an obstacle to be overcome in regards to canonicity (where fan authors often ignore key details within the canon), but with the recent nature of the Harry Potter fan fiction, the obstacle would appear to be more and more surmountable.

Does this even matter? Is the cleverness of Rowling’s fans really that important? Does this fact have any real impact on fandoms or the works they follow? The answer to these questions is not a simple one. The most important thing to take away from this idea is that the fans were able to create real, tangible, ideas about the story before the author of the series revealed them and that Rowling was aware of these fan-made stories’ existence. This illustrates how close the ties between producers and consumers have become, and that in these ties the potential now exists for canon to change. The once linear, manufactured nature of communication between an author and
her audience can now exist as a more cyclical process, allowing for a continued flow of new information between the author and audience. In the case of Dumbledore’s sexuality, it does not ultimately matter whether Rowling was inspired by her fans to change one of her characters’ sexual preference or not. What matters is that the potential for this eventuality existed due to the nature of the Harry Potter fandom’s canon. This key point is essential to the understanding of canonicity in relationship to fandoms, especially when the original cultural producers are active in those fandoms. Thanks to the Harry Potter fandom, fandoms now have been demonstrated as having the potential to create and enforce canon in certain situations.

It is important to realize that ultimately the controversy and claims against Rowling will remain, for the most part, irrelevant in terms of the story as a whole. What is truly worthy of notice is the fact that so many people care so passionately about Harry Potter and the preservation of its universe. The passion demonstrated by most fans, be they for or against Rowling’s announcement, illustrates the fact that the writers of fan fiction, through their various means, have managed to become truly relevant in any discussion surrounding the world that Rowling has created. While the stories may at first be influenced by an amateur author’s own experiences, it is apparent that fan fiction, as it pertains to the Harry Potter franchise, has evolved into much more. So now, whenever an author makes changes without an apparent cause, one must look first to the fan fiction.

Works Cited