Electronic Arts standing behind Tiger Woods

JORDAN ROBERTSON - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

Electronic Arts Inc. said Monday it will stand behind Tiger Woods — at least for the release of a new online golf game featuring the embattled athlete.

The relationship between EA and Woods stretches back more than a decade, and Tiger Woods-branded games have pulled in hundreds of millions of dollars for the company over the years.

Woods' image has been tarnished following a Thanksgiving holiday car accident at the golfer's Florida home, which led to an admission of extramarital "transgressions." He is taking a break from golf and has been dropped by major corporate sponsors AT&T Corp. and Accenture.

Gillette, a unit of the Procter & Gamble Co., and Swiss watch maker Tag Heuer, a unit of LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton, have also said they will cut back their use of Woods in their advertising campaigns.

On Monday, EA Sports President Peter Moore said the company decided to stick with Woods because he is "still one of the greatest athletes in history" despite his "mistakes" off the golf course.

Moore added in a statement that the company has spent "considerable time" developing and testing the new "Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online" game, which he called a "breakthrough experience."

The game will be released in so-called "open beta" later this month, which means it is still being tested but anyone can play and help find areas that can be improved. EA said it doesn't have a date yet for the launch of the finished game.

The company, which is based in Redwood City, wouldn't comment on whether Woods' sex scandal will affect EA's plans for a new edition of Woods' popular console game, "Tiger Woods PGA Tour," a franchise that that doesn't do as well as the company's enormously successful "Madden" football series but is still a serious moneymaker. EA has raked in more than $670 million from the Woods franchise in the United States alone over the length of the partnership, according to estimates by market research firm NPD Group.

The most recent installment of the console game, "Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10," was launched in June 2009. The next one is scheduled for the summer of 2010. The games are especially popular on the Nintendo Wii, whose intuitive motion controls lend themselves to sports games.

EA can continue to make "PGA Tour" games without Woods. It could pick another golfer with a more pristine family life. Or it could go back to the pre-Woods days,

and simply call it "PGA Tour."

The game has no real competitors. EA is the only company licensed by the PGA to make games that carry its name. It lets players play in a setting that looks as close to the real thing as possible.

Most of Woods' $100 million in annual earnings have come not from tournament winnings but from companies that wanted to be associated with his persona.

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AP Technology Writer Barbara Ortutay contributed to this story from New York.

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