

DESCRIPTION

Title of Invention

CARRIER SYSTEM

5 **Technical Field**

[0001] One aspect of the present invention relates to a transport system.

Background Art

[0002] Conventionally, a transport system including a plurality of transport vehicles configured to travel along a track and a controller
10 configured to control the transport vehicles has been known. As a technique related to such a transport system, for example, Patent Literature 1 describes a system in which a transport command is assigned to each traveling vehicle (transport vehicle) from the controller to convey, deliver, and receive an article (load).

15 **Citation List**

Patent Literature

[0003] [Patent Literature 1] Japanese Unexamined Patent Publication No. 2009-214974

Summary of Invention

20 **Technical Problem**

[0004] In the above-described transport system, there is a case in which a transport vehicle that is going to pass through a junction point of the track needs to stop in order to wait until another transport vehicle that is passing through this junction point has passed therethrough. In this
25 case, the efficiency of conveying loads may decrease.

[0005] One aspect of the present invention has been made in view of

the above-described circumstance, and it is an object thereof to provide a transport system that can improve the efficiency of conveying loads.

Solution to Problem

- [0006] A transport system according to one aspect of the present invention is a transport system including: a plurality of transport vehicles each configured to travel along a track and convey a load; and a controller configured to control traveling of the transport vehicles. The track includes a first main track, a plurality of junction points arranged on the first main track so as to be apart from each other, and a plurality of branch tracks each connected to the first main track via a different one of junction points. The respective junction points are apart from each other on the first main track. On each of the branch tracks, a stop position is provided, the stop position corresponding to a delivery port for each transport vehicle to deliver and receive a load.
- The controller controls the respective transport vehicles stopping at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports of the branch tracks, so as to cause a transport vehicle on a downstream branch track to start moving simultaneously with or before a transport vehicle on an upstream branch track.
- [0007] This transport system includes the branch tracks each having the stop position corresponding to the delivery port, and these branch tracks merge into the first main track. This enables the transport vehicles to travel in a distributed manner for delivery and reception of loads. Furthermore, the start timing of a transport vehicle on a downstream branch track is set simultaneously with or earlier than the start timing of a transport vehicle on an upstream branch track. This enables the

transport vehicles to enter the first main track without being stopped as much as possible by utilizing positioning of the respective junction points that are physically apart from each other. Thus, the efficiency of conveying loads can be improved.

5 [0008] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present invention, the controller may control the respective transport vehicles, which arrive at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports of the branch tracks at different timings, so as to cause a transport vehicle arriving earlier to wait to start moving until a transport
10 vehicle arriving later arrives. By this control, a situation in which the respective transport vehicles stop simultaneously at the respective stop positions of the branch tracks can be reliably created. Thus, the above-described control of setting the start timing of a transport vehicle on a downstream branch track simultaneously with or earlier than the
15 start timing of a transport vehicle on an upstream branch track can be easily performed.

[0009] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present invention, the track may further include a second main track and a plurality of branch points arranged on the second main track so as to be
20 apart from each other. Each of the respective branch tracks may be connected to the second main track via a different one of the branch points. The controller may perform an entering control of causing the respective transport vehicles traveling on the second main track to enter the respective branch tracks sequentially in order from downstream to
25 upstream. By this control, the transport vehicles can be distributed on the branch tracks, such that the respective transport vehicles arrive at the

respective stop positions of the branch tracks at the same timing.

[0010] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present invention, the controller may perform the entering control for each transport vehicle group including a number of transport vehicles which
5 corresponds to the number of the branch tracks. By this control, the entering control can be performed with relatively simple logic.

[0011] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present invention, the controller may determine a delivery port as a destination for a transport vehicle traveling in a specified section upstream of the
10 branch points on the second main track. In the transport system, a situation in which the total number of the transport vehicles increases or decreases due to some circumstances may occur. However, for example, when a delivery port as a destination is determined immediately after loading onto a transport vehicle, this situation cannot
15 be handled appropriately, which may cause the row of the transport vehicles to become disordered. In view of this, according to this aspect of the present invention, because the delivery port as a destination is determined for a transport vehicle traveling in the specified section of the second main track, even if the above-described
20 situation has occurred, the delivery port as a destination can be easily determined accordingly. The row of the transport vehicles can be prevented from becoming disordered, and the efficiency of conveying loads can be improved.

[0012] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present
25 invention, the controller may cause the respective transport vehicles stopping at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery

ports of the branch tracks to start moving at a timing that is repeated at regular intervals for each of the branch tracks. By this control, each transport vehicle that has stopped starts at the corresponding timing even without being loaded. A higher priority is given to traveling of
 5 the transport vehicles, which in turn enables a higher priority to be given to increase of the number of deliveries and receptions of loads during a system operation period. Consequently, the efficiency of conveying loads can be improved.

[0013] In the transport system according to one aspect of the present
 10 invention, the track may include a circuit track along which the transport vehicles travel in a circling manner. The controller may cause the transport vehicles to travel along the circuit track such that their circling distances or their circling periods of time become the same. With this configuration, the row of the transport vehicles can be
 15 prevented from becoming disordered, and the efficiency of conveying loads can be improved.

Advantageous Effects of Invention

[0014] According to one aspect of the present invention, the transport system that can improve the efficiency of conveying loads can be
 20 provided.

Brief Description of Drawings

[0015] [FIG. 1] FIG. 1 is a schematic plan view illustrating a transport system according to one embodiment.

[FIG. 2] FIG. 2 is a side view illustrating a transport vehicle of
 25 the transport system according to the embodiment.

[FIG. 3] FIG. 3 is a schematic plan view of the transport

system according to the embodiment in a first building.

[FIG. 4] FIG. 4 is a schematic plan view illustrating the transport system according to the embodiment in a second building.

[FIG. 5] FIG. 5(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating a track
5 of the transport system according to the embodiment in the first building in an enlarged manner. FIG. 5(b) is a schematic plan view illustrating the track of the transport system according to the embodiment in the second building in an enlarged manner.

[FIG. 6] FIG. 6(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating an
10 example of operation of the transport system according to the embodiment. FIG. 6(b) is a schematic plan view illustrating a continuation of FIG. 6(a).

[FIG. 7] FIG. 7(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating a
continuation of FIG. 6(b). FIG. 7(b) is a schematic plan view
15 illustrating a continuation of FIG. 7(a).

[FIG. 8] FIG. 8(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating a
continuation of FIG. 7(b). FIG. 8(b) is a schematic plan view
illustrating a continuation of FIG. 8(a).

[FIG. 9] FIG. 9(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating a
20 continuation of FIG. 8(b). FIG. 9(b) is a schematic plan view illustrating a continuation of FIG. 9(a).

[FIG. 10] FIG. 10(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating a
continuation of FIG. 9(b). FIG. 10(b) is a schematic plan view
illustrating a continuation of FIG. 10(a).

25 [FIG. 11] FIG. 11 is a schematic plan view illustrating a
continuation of FIG. 10(b).

[FIG. 12] FIG. 12(a) is a schematic plan view illustrating an example of operation when loading operation cannot be completed in the transport system according to the embodiment. FIG. 12(b) is a schematic plan view illustrating a continuation of FIG. 12(a).

5 **Description of Embodiments**

[0016] One embodiment will now be described with reference to the drawings. In the description of the drawings, like elements are designated by like reference signs, and duplicate description is omitted. The scale in the drawings does not necessarily coincide with the size of
10 a described object.

[0017] As illustrated in FIG. 1, a transport system 1 is a system configured to perform transport between two points in which a source and a destination are patterned. The transport system 1 performs inter-building transport of delivering and receiving loads L between a
15 first building F1 and a second building F2. The loads L are containers each configured to store a plurality of semiconductor wafers, for example, and may be glass substrates and general parts, for example.

[0018] The transport system 1 includes a plurality of transport vehicles 10 and a controller 20. Each transport vehicle 10 travels along a track
20 3 to convey a load L. The transport vehicle 10 is configured to be able to transfer the load L. The transport vehicle 10 is an overhead traveling automated guided transport vehicle. The transport vehicle 10 is also called, for example, carriage (transport carriage), an overhead traveling vehicle (overhead traveling carriage), or a traveling vehicle
25 (traveling carriage). The number of transport vehicles 10 that the transport system 1 includes is about 50, for example, which depends on

the quantity of required transport and transport distance.

[0019] As illustrated in FIG. 2, each transport vehicle 10 includes a traveling carriage 144, a power-supply carriage 145 configured to receive power supply from the track 3, a θ drive 147, and a cross-feed unit 146 configured to feed a portion of the transport vehicle 10 lower than the cross-feed unit 146 laterally with respect to the track 3. The θ drive 147 turns a lifting drive unit 148 in a horizontal plane to control the attitude of a load L. The lifting drive unit 148 raises and lowers a lifting platform 149 holding the load L to deliver and receive the load L to and from a delivery port 4. The lifting platform 149 holds with a chuck a flange 120 of an upper portion of the load L. Herein, the cross-feed unit 146 and the θ drive 147 do not have to be provided.

[0020] The track 3 is installed on a ceiling, for example. The track 3 is supported by posts 141. The track 3 is a predetermined travel path, along which the transport vehicles 10 travel. The track 3 is a one-way travel path. In other words, in the transport system 1, as indicated by arrows in FIG. 3 and FIG. 4, the traveling direction (advancing direction) of each transport vehicle 10 on the track 3 is set to be one direction, and traveling in the opposite direction is prohibited. The track 3 has a closed track layout that is not affected by anything outside of the track 3. Hereinafter, the terms "upstream" and "downstream" correspond to "upstream" and "downstream" in the traveling direction of the transport vehicle 10, respectively.

[0021] In the example illustrated in FIG. 1, the track 3 includes a first main track 31, a second main track 32, four first branch tracks (branch tracks) 33a, 33b, 33c, 33d that diverge from the second main track 32

and merge into the first main track 31, and four second branch tracks 34a, 34b, 34c, 34d that diverge from the first main track 31 and merge into the second main track 32.

[0022] The first main track 31 and the second main track 32 are tracks
 5 extending within and between the first building F1 and the second building F2. The lengths of the first main track 31 and the second main track 32 are each 200 meters, for example. Within and between the first building F1 and the second building F2, the first main track 31 and the second main track 32 are surrounded and enclosed by a wall
 10 (not illustrated).

[0023] The first branch tracks 33a to 33d are disposed in the first building F1. The first branch tracks 33a to 33d extend straight in parallel. The first branch tracks 33a to 33d are provided in a comb-like shape between the first main track 31 and the second main track 32 that
 15 extend parallel. The first branch tracks 33a to 33d are located upstream of the first main track 31 (downstream of the second main track 32) in this order. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d are disposed in the second building F2. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d extend straight in parallel. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d
 20 are provided in a comb-like shape between the first main track 31 and the second main track 32 that extend parallel. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d are located upstream of the second main track 32 (downstream of the first main track 31) in this order.

[0024] As illustrated in FIG. 3 and FIG. 5(a), respective locations where
 25 the first branch tracks 33a to 33d merge into the first main track 31 are junction points 35a, 35b, 35c, 35d. The respective first branch tracks

33a to 33d are connected to the first main track 31 via the respective junction points 35a, 35b, 35c, 35d. In other words, the track 3 has the junction points 35a to 35d that are a plurality of junction points arranged on the first main track 31 so as to be apart from each other. The first
 5 branch tracks 33a to 33d are connected to the first main track 31 via the junction points 35a to 35d that are different from one another, respectively. The junction points 35a to 35d are apart from each other at predetermined distances on the first main track 31.

[0025] Respective locations where the first branch tracks 33a to 33d
 10 diverge from the second main track 32 are branch points 36a, 36b, 36c, 36d. The respective first branch tracks 33a to 33d are connected to the second main track 32 via the respective branch points 36a, 36b, 36c, 36d. In other words, the track 3 has the branch points 36a to 36d as a plurality of branch points that are arranged on the second main track 32
 15 so as to be apart from each other. The first branch tracks 33a to 33d are connected to the second main track 32 via the branch points 36a to 36d different from one another, respectively. The branch points 36a to 36d are apart from each other at predetermined distances on the second main track 32.

20 [0026] The "junction points" mean locations where branch tracks are connected to a main track. The "junction points" are locations where the branch tracks reach the main track. The "junction points" are connecting points of the branch tracks for entry therefrom into the main track. The "branch points" are locations where branch tracks are connected to a main
 25 track. The "branch points" are locations where the main track reaches the branch tracks. The "branch points" are

connecting points of the branch tracks for entry thereinto from the main track.

[0027] As illustrated in FIG. 4 and FIG. 5(b), respective locations where the second branch tracks 34a to 34d merge into the second main track 32 are junction points 37a, 37b, 37c, 37d. The respective second branch tracks 34a to 34d are connected to the second main track 32 via the respective junction points 37a, 37b, 37c, 37d. In other words, the track 3 has the junction points 37a to 37d as a plurality of junction points that are arranged on the second main track 32, so as to be apart from each other. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d are connected to the second main track 32 via the junction points 37a to 37d different from one another, respectively. The junction points 37a to 37d are apart from each other at predetermined distances on the second main track 32.

[0028] Respective locations where the second branch tracks 34a to 34d diverge from the first main track 31 are branch points 38a, 38b, 38c, 38d. The respective second branch tracks 34a to 34d are connected to the first main track 31 via the respective branch points 38a, 38b, 38c, 38d. In other words, the track 3 has the branch points 38a to 38d as a plurality of branch points that are arranged on the first main track 31, so as to be apart from each other. The second branch tracks 34a to 34d are connected to the first main track 31 via the branch points 38a to 38d different from one another, respectively. The branch points 38a to 38d are apart from each other at predetermined distances on the first main track 31.

[0029] As illustrated in FIG. 1, the first main track 31, the second main

track 32, the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d form circuit tracks along which the transport vehicles 10 travel in a circling manner. Other than these circuit tracks, the track 3 includes a stand-by track W on which, for example, a transport vehicle 5 10 having a problem or a backup transport vehicle 10 is kept on standby. The track 3 also includes a short-cut track S connecting directly between the first main track 31 and the second main track 32.

[0030] As illustrated in FIG. 5(a) and FIG. 5(b), each of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d has a stop 10 position corresponding to a delivery port 4 to and from which a transport vehicle 10 delivers and receives a load L. Each delivery port 4 has an unloading port 41 and a loading port 42. The delivery port 4 is provided above a conveyor C configured to convey loads L. The conveyor C is disposed below the track 3. The conveyor C extends in 15 a manner passing through the respective delivery ports 4 of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d. The conveyor C includes a conveyor 43 and a conveyor 44.

[0031] The unloading port 41 is a port for unloading a load L from a transport vehicle 10. At the unloading port 41, before the subsequent 20 transport vehicle 10 arrives after a load L has been put thereon, this load L is conveyed out. The unloading port 41 is disposed upstream of the loading port 42 at a predetermined spacing. In other words, the loading port 42 is disposed downstream of the unloading port 41 at the predetermined spacing. The unloading port 41 is provided above the 25 conveyor 43. The conveyor 43 conveys a load L unloaded onto the unloading port 41 to an automated warehouse (not illustrated), for

example.

[0032] The loading port 42 is a port for loading a load L onto a transport vehicle 10. The loading port 42 can convey a load L into a port in a span when a plurality of transport vehicles 10 continuously
5 arrive. The unloading port 42 is provided above the conveyor 44. The conveyor 44 conveys a load L to be loaded on the loading port 42 from the automated warehouse (not illustrated), for example.

[0033] Herein, the delivery port 4 may be displaced toward upstream or downstream in the transport direction of the transport vehicle 10 from a
10 transport surface of the conveyor C, so as not to stop transport of loads L by the conveyor C. The unloading port 41 and the loading port 42 are not limited to particular ones, and various known types of ports may be used. The specification, mechanism, configuration, or the like of the conveyors 43, 44 are not limited to particular ones, and various
15 known types of conveyors may be used.

[0034] As illustrated in FIG. 3, the controller 20 is an electronic control unit including a central processing unit (CPU), a read only memory (ROM), and a random-access memory (RAM). The controller 20 can be configured as, for example, software such that a program stored in
20 the ROM is loaded into the RAM to be executed by the CPU. The controller 20 may be configured as hardware such as an electronic circuit. The controller 20 communicates with the transport vehicles 10 to control traveling of the transport vehicles 10.

[0035] The controller 20 performs a starting control described below on
25 the respective transport vehicles 10 stopping at stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports 4 of the first branch track

33a to 33d (herein, stop positions corresponding to the loading ports 42, and the same applies, hereinafter).

[0036] In the starting control, a transport vehicle 10 stopping on a downstream first branch track of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d is
 5 caused to start moving or traveling simultaneously with or before a transport vehicle 10 stopping on an upstream first branch track thereof. The terms "downstream first branch track" and "upstream first branch track" mean that, among any two of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, one on the downstream side belongs to the former and the other on the
 10 upstream side belongs to the latter.

[0037] Specifically, in the starting control, a transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first branch track 33d is caused to start moving simultaneously with or before a transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first branch track 33c. The transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first
 15 branch track 33c is caused to start moving simultaneously with or before a transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first branch track 33b. The transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first branch track 33b is caused to start moving simultaneously with or before a transport vehicle 10 stopping on the first branch track 33a.

20 [0038] More specifically, by the starting control, each transport vehicle 10 that has stopped is caused to start moving (forcedly start) at a timing this is repeated at regular intervals for each of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d regardless of whether a load L is loaded. For example, in the starting control, for each of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, a pitch
 25 timer starts counting down from a reference pitch time. When the count of the pitch timer has reached zero, a transport vehicle 10

stopping at the corresponding stop position is caused to start moving and also the count of the pitch timer is reset to the reference pitch time. The pitch timer then continues to count down. The reference pitch time may be a fixed value that is set in advance, or may be a variable value. In the present embodiment, the time axes of the respective pitch timers of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d are shifted such that a transport vehicle 10 stopping on a downstream first branch track starts earlier.

[0039] Herein, in the starting control, a time limit may be set for assigning a load L to each transport vehicle 10 stopping at the stop position corresponding to each loading port 42. By setting the time limit, the loading operation can be reliably completed before the time of forced start.

[0040] The controller 20 performs, on the respective transport vehicles 10 that arrive at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports 4 of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d at different timings, stand-by control of causing a transport vehicle 10 arriving earlier to wait to start moving until a transport vehicle 10 arriving later arrives. Specifically, in the stand-by control, by setting the above-described reference pitch time of the starting control to a length that enables transport vehicles 10 to stop on all of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d at the same time, the transport vehicle 10 arriving earlier is caused to wait to start moving until the transport vehicle 10 arriving later arrives.

[0041] The controller 20 performs an entering control of causing the respective transport vehicles 10 traveling on the second main track 32 to enter the respective first branch tracks 33a to 33d sequentially in the

order from downstream to upstream. Specifically, in the entering control, a transport vehicle 10 is caused to enter the first branch track 33a, a subsequent transport vehicle 10 is caused to enter the first branch track 33b, a subsequent transport vehicle 10 is caused to enter the first
 5 branch track 33c, a subsequent transport vehicle 10 is caused to enter the first branch track 33d, and then such entries of transport vehicle 10 are repeated.

[0042] In the entering control, destination-determining control of determining (guiding) a destination is performed on a transport vehicle
 10 10 traveling in a specified section R upstream of the respective branch points 36a to 36d on the second main track 32. The specified section R is a straight section near the respective branch points 36a to 36d. The specified section R is not limited to a particular one if it is located upstream of the respective branch points 36a to 36d. In the
 15 destination-determining control, a delivery port 4 (herein, any one unloading port 41 in the first branch tracks 33a to 33d) as a destination in an already-received transport command is determined. The already-received transport command is a command received when a load L has been assigned at this loading port 42 in the second branch
 20 tracks 34a to 34d, and includes at least a command to cause the transport vehicle 10 to travel to the specified section R.

[0043] The controller 20 performs virtual coupling control of performing the starting control, the stand-by control, and the entering control described above for each transport vehicle group including four
 25 transport vehicles 10, i.e., the number of transport vehicles 10 in the group corresponds to that of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d.

[0044] The controller 20 performs controls the same as the above-described controls, which are the starting control, the stand-by control, the entering control, the destination-determining control, and the virtual coupling control also described above on transport vehicles 5 10 that enter the second branch tracks 34a to 34d illustrated in FIG. 4 and are going to exit therefrom.

[0045] As illustrated in FIG. 3 and FIG. 4, the controller 20 causes a plurality of transport vehicles 10 to travel along the circuit tracks (the first main track 31, the second main track 32, the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d) such that their circling 10 distances or their circling periods of time become the same. Specifically, in the entering control, the controller 20 causes a transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the first branch track 33d to enter the second branch track 34a, causes a transport vehicle 10 that has 15 been caused to enter the first branch track 33c to enter the second branch track 34b, causes a transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the first branch track 33b to enter the second branch track 34c, and cause a transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the first branch track 33a to enter the second branch track 34d. Furthermore, in 20 the entering control, the controller 20 causes the transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the second branch track 34d to enter the first branch track 33a, causes the transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the second branch track 34c to enter the first branch track 33b, causes the transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the second branch track 34b to enter the first branch track 33c, and 25 causes the transport vehicle 10 that has been caused to enter the second

branch track 34a to enter the first branch track 33d.

[0046] The following describes one example of controls performed by the controller 20 in detail with reference to FIG. 6 to FIG. 11.

[0047] Hereinafter, traveling of transport vehicles 10 on the track 3 in the first building F1 will be described for convenience in description, and description of traveling of transport vehicle 10 in the second building F2 is omitted. In these drawings, only a transport vehicle group including four transport vehicles 10a to 10d is illustrated, and the other transport vehicles 10 are omitted. A transport vehicle 10 that a load L overlaps indicates a state of being loaded with the load L. A transport vehicle 10 that a load L does not overlap indicates an empty state of not being loaded with a load L. A transport vehicle 10 filled with light gray indicates a state of being assigned with a transport command. The transport vehicles 10a to 10d travel on the track 3 in this order.

[0048] As illustrated in FIG. 6(a), the transport vehicle 10a traveling on the second main track 32 is caused to enter the first branch track 33a by the entering control. Specifically, when the transport vehicle 10a is traveling in the specified section R, the destination-determining control is performed to determine that the destination is the unloading port 41 of the first branch track 33a. The transport vehicle 10a is caused to travel toward the determined destination, and the transport vehicle 10a is caused to enter the first branch track 33a. In the same manner, as illustrated in FIG. 6(b), the transport vehicles 10b to 10d traveling on the second main track 32 are caused to enter the first branch tracks 33b to 33d in this order by the entering control.

[0049] Subsequently, as illustrated in FIG. 7(a), the respective transport vehicles 10a to 10d are caused to stop sequentially at the stop positions corresponding to the respective unloading ports 41 of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d. As illustrated in FIG. 7(b), the loads L of the transport vehicles 10a to 10d are unloaded onto the respective unloading ports 41. As illustrated in FIG. 8(a), the transport vehicles 10a to 10d are caused to move sequentially to the respective loading ports 42, and the transport vehicles 10a to 10d are caused to stop sequentially at the stop positions corresponding to the respective loading ports 42. Movement from the unloading ports 41 to the loading ports 42 can be performed by known general travel control. For example, when a transport vehicle 10 that is a previous vehicle of the transport vehicle 10a and has stopped at the stop position of the loading port 42 starts, the transport vehicle 10a is caused to move accordingly.

[0050] As illustrated in FIG. 8(b), loads L are assigned to the respective transport vehicles 10a to 10d that have stopped at the stop positions corresponding to the respective loading ports 42. At this time, transport commands including commands to cause the transport vehicles 10 to travel to the specified section R in the second building F2 (see FIG. 4) are assigned. As illustrated in FIG. 9(a), the assigned loads L are loaded onto the respective transport vehicles 10a to 10d that have stopped.

[0051] As illustrated in FIG. 9(b), by the starting control, the transport vehicle 10d stopping on the first branch track 33d is caused to start moving before the transport vehicle 10c stopping on the first branch track 33c. As illustrated in FIG. 10(a), by the starting control, the

transport vehicle 10c stopping on the first branch track 33c is caused to start moving before the transport vehicle 10b stopping on the first branch track 33b. As illustrated in FIG. 10(b), by the starting control, the transport vehicle 10b stopping on the first branch track 33b is caused
5 to start moving before the transport vehicle 10a stopping on the first branch track 33a. As illustrated in FIG. 11, by the starting control, the transport vehicle 10a stopping on the first branch track 33a is caused to start moving after the transport vehicles 10b to 10d have started.

[0052] In the starting control herein, for each of the first branch tracks
10 33a to 33d, the pitch timer repeats counting down from the reference pitch time to zero. The counting down is repeated such that the count of the pitch timer becomes zero earlier in the order of the first branch tracks 33d, 33c, 33b, and 33a. When the count of the pitch timer has reached zero, each transport vehicle 10 stopping at the corresponding
15 stop position is caused to start moving forcibly. Consequently, the transport vehicles 10d, 10c, 10b, 10a stopping are caused to start moving in this order.

[0053] Herein, the counts of the pitch timers in the first branch tracks 33a, 33b may be set so as to become zero at the same timing. In this
20 case, the transport vehicles 10a, 10b stopping at the stop positions of the first branch tracks 33a, 33b are caused to start moving simultaneously. Alternatively or in addition to this, the counts of the pitch timers in the first branch tracks 33b, 33c may be set so as to become zero at the same timing. In this case, the transport vehicles 10b, 10c stopping at the
25 stop positions of the first branch tracks 33b, 33c are caused to start moving simultaneously. Alternatively or in addition to any one of

these, the counts of the pitch timers in the first branch tracks 33c, 33d may be set so as to become zero at the same timing. In this case, the transport vehicles 10c, 10d stopping at the stop positions of the first branch tracks 33c, 33d are caused to start moving simultaneously.

[0054] FIG. 12 includes schematic plan views illustrating an example of an operation when the loading operation cannot be completed. As illustrated in FIG. 12(a), for example, if a time required for loading onto the transport vehicle 10d has been determined to exceed a time limit, it is considered that the loading operation onto the transport vehicle 10d cannot be completed, and the transport vehicle 10 is left empty without assigning a load L to the transport vehicle 10d. As illustrated in FIG. 12(b), when the count of the pitch timer has reached zero, the transport vehicle 10d is caused to start moving even without being loaded.

[0055] As described in the foregoing, the transport system 1 includes the first branch tracks 33a to 33d each having a stop position corresponding to the delivery port 4, and these first branch tracks 33a to 33d merge into the first main track 31. The transport system 1 also includes the second branch tracks 34a to 34d, each having a stop position corresponding to the delivery port 4, and these second branch tracks 34a to 34b merge into the second main track 32. This configuration enables a plurality of transport vehicles 10 to travel in a distributed manner for delivery and reception of loads L.

[0056] Furthermore, by the above-described starting control, the start timing of a transport vehicle 10 on a downstream branch track of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d is set simultaneous with or earlier than the start timing of a transport vehicle 10 on an upstream branch track of the

first branch track 33a to 33d. Thus, by utilizing the positioning of the respective junction points 35a to 35d that are physically apart from each other, in comparison with the case in which an upstream transport vehicle 10 is caused to start moving earlier, the transport vehicles 10 can be caused to enter the first main track 31 without being stopped as much as possible. In the same manner, by the above-described starting control, the start timing of a transport vehicle 10 on a downstream branch track of the second branch tracks 34a to 34d is set simultaneously with or earlier than the start timing of a transport vehicle 10 on an upstream branch track of the second branch tracks 34a to 34d. Thus, by utilizing the positioning of the respective junction points 37a to 37d that are physically apart from each other, in comparison with the case in which an upstream transport vehicle 10 is caused to start moving earlier, the transport vehicles 10 can be caused to enter the second main track 32 without being stopped as much as possible. Consequently, with the transport system 1, the efficiency of conveying loads L can be improved.

[0057] In the transport system 1, the respective transport vehicles 10 arriving at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports 4 at different timings are controlled such that a transport vehicle 10 arriving earlier is caused to wait to start moving until a transport vehicle 10 arriving later arrives. By this control, a situation in which the respective transport vehicles 10 stop simultaneously at the respective stop positions can be reliably created. The above-described starting control can be easily performed.

[0058] In the transport system 1, the respective branch points 36a to

36d of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d are apart from each other on the second main track 32. By the entering control, the respective transport vehicles 10 traveling on the second main track 32 are caused to enter the respective first branch tracks 33a to 33d sequentially in the order from downstream to upstream. By this control, the transport vehicles 10 can be distributed on the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, such that the respective transport vehicles 10 arrive at the respective stop positions of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d at the same timing. Branch traveling in which one certain transport vehicle 10 branches off from the second main track 32 can be prevented from hindering branch traveling in which another transport vehicle 10 branches off from the second main track 32. The above-described starting control can be smoothly operated. The waiting time for the above-described stand-by control can be reduced.

[0059] In the same manner, the respective branch points 38a to 38d of the second branch tracks 34a to 34d are apart from each other on the first main track 31. By the entering control, the respective transport vehicles 10 traveling on the first main track 31 are caused to enter the respective second branch tracks 34a to 34d sequentially in the order from downstream to upstream. By this control, the transport vehicles 10 can be distributed on the second branch tracks 34a to 34d such that the respective transport vehicles 10 arrive at the respective stop positions of the second branch tracks 34a to 34d at the same timing. Branch traveling in which one certain transport vehicle 10 branches off from the first main track 31 can be prevented from hindering branch traveling in which another transport vehicle 10 branches off from the

first main track 31. The above-described starting control can be smoothly operated. The waiting time for the above-described stand-by control can be reduced.

[0060] In the transport system 1, by the above-described virtual coupling control, the entering control for entry into the first branch tracks 33a to 33d is performed for each transport vehicle group including a number of transport vehicles 10 which corresponds to the number of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d. By the above-described virtual coupling control, the entering control for entry into the second branch tracks 34a to 34d is performed for each transport vehicle group including a number of transport vehicles 10 which corresponds to the number of the second branch tracks 34a to 34d. This enables the entering control to be performed with relatively simple logic.

[0061] In the transport system 1, a situation in which the total number of the transport vehicles 10 increases or decreases due to some circumstances may occur. However, for example, when a delivery port 4 as a destination is determined immediately after loading onto a transport vehicle 10, this situation cannot be handled appropriately, which may cause the row of the traveling transport vehicles 10 to become disordered. In view of this, in the transport system 1, the delivery port 4 as a destination is determined for a transport vehicle 10 traveling in the specified section R. Thus, even if this situation has occurred, the delivery port 4 as a destination can be easily determined accordingly. The row of the transport vehicles 10 can be prevented from becoming disordered, traffic jam of the transport vehicles 10 can be prevented from occurring, and the efficiency of conveying loads L

can be improved.

[0062] In the transport system 1, the respective transport vehicles 10 stopping at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports 4 are caused to start moving at a timing that is repeated at regular intervals for each of the first branch tracks 33a to 33d and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d (when the count of the pitch timer has reached zero). Thus, each transport vehicle 10 that has stopped starts at the corresponding timing even without being loaded. A higher priority is given to traveling of the transport vehicles 10, which in turn enables a higher priority to be given to increase of the number of deliveries and receptions of loads L during a system operation period, and the limiting value of transport amount can be increased. Consequently, the efficiency of conveying loads L can be improved.

[0063] In the transport system 1, the track 3 includes the circuit tracks (the first main track 31, the second main track 32, the first branch tracks 33a to 33d, and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d) along which the transport vehicles 10 travel in a circling manner. In the transport system 1, the transport vehicles 10 are caused to travel along the circuit tracks such that their circling distances or their circling periods of time become the same. With this configuration, in comparison with the case in which the circling distances or the circling periods of time of the transport vehicles 10 are different, the row of the transport vehicles 10 can be prevented from becoming disordered. Traffic jam of the transport vehicles 10 can be prevented from occurring. The efficiency of conveying loads L can be improved.

[0064] The transport system 1 can perform control, such that the

transport vehicles 10 are unloaded simultaneously in parallel and the transport vehicles 10 are loaded simultaneously in parallel. In the transport system 1, in comparison with blocking control using a passage permission request, a passage permission command, or a passage prohibition command, for example, the transport vehicles 10 can be controlled with relatively simple logic. In the transport system 1, in comparison with a transport system that communicates by polling communication, the time required for communication can be reduced.

[0065] The transport system 1 performs control such that, when a transport vehicle 10 is going to enter a junction point or a branch point, permission for this entry is requested of the controller 20, and this entry is performed when the permission has been received from the controller 20. Under the control described above, in the transport system 1, there is no case in which the permission cannot be received from the controller 20, and the transport vehicle 10 can travel smoothly without being stopped in front of the junction point or the branch point.

[0066] Although one embodiment has been described above, one aspect of the present invention is not limited to this embodiment, and various modifications may be made within the scope not departing from the gist of the invention.

[0067] In the above-described embodiment, the track 3 includes four first branch tracks 33a, 33b, 33c, 33d. However, the number of the first branch tracks may be two, may be three, or may be five or more. The track 3 also includes four second branch tracks 34a, 34b, 34c, 34d. However, the number of the second branch tracks may be two, may be three, or may be five or more.

[0068] In the embodiment, the destination-determining control of determining a destination for a transport vehicle 10 traveling in the specified section R is performed. However, the destination-determining control does not have to be performed, and a delivery port 4 as a destination may be determined at any timing. In the embodiment, the stand-by control of causing a transport vehicle 10 arriving at a stop position earlier to wait to start moving is performed. However, the stand-by control does not have to be performed. In the embodiment, the entering control of causing transport vehicles 10 to enter the first branch tracks 33a to 33d and the second branch tracks 34a to 34d sequentially in the order from downstream to upstream is performed. However, the entering control does not have to be performed. In the embodiment, the virtual coupling control of performing control for each transport vehicle group including a plurality of transport vehicles 10 is performed. However, the virtual coupling control does not have to be performed.

Reference Signs List

[0069] 1 ... transport system, 3 ... track, 4 ... delivery port, 10, 10a to 10d ... transport vehicle, 20 ... controller, 31 ... first main track (circuit track), 32 ... second main track (circuit track), 33a to 33d ... first branch track (branch track, circuit track), 34a to 34d ... second branch track (circuit track), 35a to 35d ... junction point, 36a to 36d ... branch point, L ... load, R ... specified section

CLAIMS

1. A transport system comprising:
a plurality of transport vehicles each configured to travel along a track and convey a load; and
5 a controller configured to control traveling of the transport vehicles, wherein
the track includes a first main track, a plurality of junction points arranged on the first main track so as to be apart from each other, and a plurality of branch tracks each connected to the first main track via a
10 different one of the junction points ,
the respective junction points are apart from each other on the first main track,
on each of the branch tracks, a stop position is provided, the stop position corresponding to a delivery port for each transport vehicle to
15 deliver and receive a load, and
the controller controls the respective transport vehicles stopping at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports of the branch tracks so as to cause a transport vehicle on a downstream branch track to start moving simultaneously with or before a transport
20 vehicle on an upstream branch track.
2. The transport system according to claim 1, wherein the controller controls the respective transport vehicles, which arrive at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports of the branch tracks at different timings, so as to cause a transport vehicle
25 arriving earlier to wait to start moving until a transport vehicle arriving later arrives.

3. The transport system according to claim 1 or 2, wherein
the track further includes a second main track and a plurality of
branch points arranged on the second main track so as to be apart from
each other,
5 each of the respective branch tracks is connected to the second
main track via a different one of the branch points, and
the controller performs an entering control of causing the
respective transport vehicles traveling on the second main track to enter
the respective branch tracks sequentially in order from downstream to
10 upstream.
4. The transport system according to claim 3, wherein the
controller performs the entering control for each transport vehicle group
including a number of transport vehicles which corresponds to the
number of the branch tracks.
- 15 5. The transport system according to claim 3 or 4, wherein the
controller determines a delivery port as a destination for a transport
vehicle traveling in a specified section upstream of the branch points on
the second main track.
6. The transport system according to any one of claims 1 to 5,
20 wherein the controller causes the respective transport vehicles stopping
at the stop positions corresponding to the respective delivery ports of
the branch tracks to start moving at a timing that is repeated at regular
intervals for each of the branch tracks.
7. The transport system according to any one of claims 1 to 6,
25 wherein
the track includes a circuit track along which the transport

vehicles travel in a circling manner, and

the controller causes the transport vehicles to travel along the circuit track such that their circling distances or their circling periods of time become the same.

5