

[Title of the Invention] Facility Control System And Facility Control Method

[Field of the Invention]

[0001]

5 The present invention relates to a facility control system comprising
an apparatus controller that controls an operation of a facility apparatus, a
first-layer computer that executes a first-layer program for issuing an
apparatus operating command for the facility apparatus to the apparatus
controller that the first-layer computer is assigned to and for managing an
operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the apparatus
10 controller, a second-layer computer that executes a second-layer program for
issuing a task command to the first-layer computer in order to cause the
facility apparatus required to process a task request to be operated in
accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is
to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatus, and for managing a
15 result of a task that is related to the task request based on the operation
result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the first-layer computer, as
well as to a facility control method using such a facility control system.

[Background Art]

[0002]

20 Facility control systems such as one described above are used, for
example, in a distribution facility that includes, as facility apparatuses, an
automated warehouse having stacker cranes each of which transfers an
article between an article storage rack and itself, sorting carriages for
transporting articles along a predetermined track, storing-and-retrieving
25 conveyers for storing and retrieving articles between carrying-in-and-out
locations for the stacker cranes in the automated warehouse and
carrying-in-and-out locations for the sorting carriages, and
receiving-and-delivering conveyers for receiving and delivering articles
between the carrying-in-and-out locations for the sorting carriages and
30 article shipment locations, etc.

[0003]

35 The facility control system in such distribution facility includes
computers (first-layer computers) each of which runs a computer program
(first-layer program) that issues apparatus operating commands for the
facility apparatuses to the apparatus controllers which control operations of
the facility apparatuses and that manages the operation results of the

facility apparatuses transmitted from the apparatus controllers, and a computer (second-layer computer) which runs a computer program (second-layer program) that issues task commands to the first-layer computers and that manages the operation results of the facility apparatuses transmitted from the first-layer computers.

[0004]

The second-layer computer issues a task command in accordance with a task request based on a storing-and-retrieving schedule, etc., to the first-layer computers that are assigned to the facility apparatuses that are required to operate in order to process the task command. And the first-layer computer issues apparatus operating commands for the facility apparatuses based on the task command, to the apparatus controllers that the first-layer computer is assigned to. (See, for example, JP Application Publication No. H09-136705 (Patent Document 1)).

[0005]

In the facility control system of the distribution facility disclosed in Patent Document 1, the first-layer computers (control devices for the automated warehouse) issue the apparatus operating commands to the apparatus controllers each of which individually controls the operation of each apparatus, such as a stacker crane, based on the task command from the second-layer computer (facility controller) which manages the entire facility. And the first-layer computers are configured to manage article management information which is information that specifies the articles stored in the article storage unit based on information on operation results from the apparatus controllers, such that storage position information given uniquely to each of a plurality of article storage units of the article storage rack is associated with identifying information unique to each article stored in the storage position. This article management information is outputted to the second-layer computer through a communication line. And the second-layer computer is configured to perform inventory management based on the storage position information and on the identifying information unique to each article, by creating rack data (inventory data) by associating the storage position information with the unique identifying information.

[0006]

Because the facility control system for the distribution facility disclosed in the above-described Patent Document 1 is configured in this

manner, for example, if an abnormal condition occurs in the second-layer computer and even if normal operation of the second-layer computer is subsequently restored in such a manner that the data etc. that were stored before the occurrence of an abnormal condition were initialized, the rack data (inventory data) for inventory management can be reconstructed based on the article management information stored in the first-layer computers, which makes it possible to restore the system quickly.

[0007]

However, while the inventory data can be recovered easily with such a configuration after an abnormal condition occurs in the second-layer computer, the facility apparatuses which one of the first-layer computers is assigned to can not continue to operate if an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer.

[Prior Art Reference]

[Patent Documents]

[0008]

[Patent Document 1]

JP Application Publication No. H09-136705

[SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION]

[Problems To Be Solved By The Invention]

[0009]

In the field of information processing systems using a computer, non-stop computer systems have been implemented to avoid the problem that it becomes impossible to continue a process that a program executed by the computer has been performing if an abnormal condition occurs in the computer executing the program for performing the process. A non-stop computer system includes a computer under operation (referred to as an operational computer) and a computer (referred to as a standby computer) whose sole purpose is to provide the functions of the operational computer in substitution therefor. And when an abnormal condition occurs in an operational computer, a failover is performed from the operational computer to the standby computer, in which the standby computer takes over the process performed by the program that had been executed by the operational computer in which the abnormal condition occurred. Thus, the process is continued to be performed without interrupting or stopping the information processing system. Such a non-stop computer system is called a high

availability cluster.

[0010]

When employing a high availability cluster, a mutually monitoring mechanism called Heartbeat, etc. is provided between the operational
5 computer and the standby computer to detect an abnormal condition. However, in a high availability cluster, because, among other reasons, the mutually monitoring mechanism may misinterpret a momentary disruption of the network communication between the operational computer and the
10 standby computer as an abnormal condition occurring in the operational computer, there is a possibility that a condition (so-called split-brain syndrome) may occur in which the standby computer is automatically activated by the system despite the fact that the operational computer is functioning normally.

[0011]

15 In a facility control system such as one disclosed in Patent Document 1 described above, when a high availability cluster is introduced, in which the first-layer computers are the operational computers, there would be two first-layer computers that execute the same first-layer program if and when the above-described split-brain syndrome occurs because, for example, a
20 momentary disruption of the network communication between the operational computer and the standby computer is misinterpreted as an abnormal condition occurring in the operational computer. Then, there is a possibility that a plurality of apparatus operating commands may be issued to the apparatus controller assigned to one facility apparatus. For example,
25 if an advance command and a retreat command are issued simultaneously, as the plurality of apparatus operating commands, to the apparatus controller assigned to a stacker crane, there is a possibility that it may become impossible for the apparatus controller to determine what operation it should cause the stacker crane to perform. In such a case, the apparatus
30 controller issues a command for stopping the operation in order to protect the facility apparatus, which leads to a lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus. For this reason, there has been a need, in the field of facility control systems, for a non-stop computer system that can reliably prevent occurrences of the split-brain syndrome and thus, can reduce a
35 lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatuses. In addition, in a high availability cluster, it is necessary to provide, for a given operational

computer, a standby computer whose sole purpose is to substitute for the operational computer, which lead to an increase in the overall cost for the facility.

[0012]

5 To this end, in a facility control system having a first-layer computer that issues an apparatus operating command for a facility apparatus to an apparatus controller, there is a need for such a system that can reduce the possibility of stopping the operation of the facility apparatus in order to reduce a lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus, even
10 when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer, and that can reduce an increase in the apparatus costs.

[Means for Solving the Problems]

[0013]

15 A facility control system in accordance with the present invention comprises

an apparatus controller that controls an operation of a facility apparatus;

20 a first-layer computer that executes a first-layer program for issuing an apparatus operating command for the facility apparatus to the apparatus controller that the first-layer computer is assigned to and for managing an operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the apparatus controller;

25 a second-layer computer that executes a second-layer program for issuing a task command to the first-layer computer in order to cause the facility apparatus required to process a task request to be operated in accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatus, and for managing a result of a task that is related to the task request based on the operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the first-layer computer;

30 characterized by,

a selection processing portion that selects, based on a manual operation, whether to cause the second layer computer to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer;

35 a substitute command output processing portion that issues a substitute command for executing, as a substitute-execution-subject

program, the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred;

wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to output the substitute command in accordance with a selection
5 information selected by the selection processing portion,

wherein the second-layer computer is configured to execute the substitute-execution-subject program based on the substitute command that the substitute command output processing portion outputs.

[0014]

10 That is, whether the second-layer computer is to be caused to execute the first-layer program that the first-layer computer concerned had been executing is selected based on a manual operation, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer. And in accordance with the selection information, the second-layer computer executes the first-layer
15 program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred.

[0015]

In other words, since whether the second-layer computer is to be caused to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer can be selected based on a user's manual operation, the
20 second-layer computer can be caused to execute the first-layer program after the user has confirmed that an abnormal condition occurred in the first-layer computer and that the first-layer program executed in the first-layer computer is not functioning. Therefore, this avoids a situation where a system misinterprets that an abnormal condition has occurred in the
25 first-layer computer, for some reason (for example, because a momentary disruption occurred in the network between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer) despite the fact that no abnormal condition has in fact occurred in the first-layer computer, and where the first-layer program
30 that had been executed by the first-layer computer is automatically executed by the second-layer computer, which results in the same first-layer program being executed by both the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer.

When the same first-layer program is executed by both the first-layer
35 computer and the second-layer computer as described above, there is a possibility that different apparatus operating commands are issued to the

apparatus controller assigned to one facility apparatus, from the first-layer program executed by the first-layer computer and from the first-layer program executed by the second-layer computer. Thus, when different apparatus operating commands are issued to one apparatus controller, the apparatus controller would stop the operation of the facility apparatus to protect the apparatus, which leads to a lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus. In contrast, with the configuration described above, the situation where the same first-layer program is executed by both the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer can be avoided so that issuance of different apparatus operating commands from these first-layer programs is prevented, which reduces lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus.

[0016]

Moreover, with the configuration described above, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer, because the second-layer computer can be caused to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer, that is, because the second-layer computer, which has already been used in the facility control system, can substitute for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, it is unnecessary to provide an additional computer whose sole purpose is to substitute for the first-layer computer, which can reduce an increase in the apparatus costs.

[0017]

In short, with the configuration described above, in a facility control system having a first-layer computer that issues an apparatus operating command for a facility apparatus to an apparatus controller, a system can be provided that can reduce the possibility of stopping or interrupting the operation of the facility apparatus in order to reduce a lowering in the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus, even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer, and that can reduce an increase in the apparatus costs.

[0018]

In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, the substitute command output processing portion is preferably configured to issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute, as the substitute-execution-subject

program or programs, all of the first-layer program or programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred.

[0019]

5 That is, since all of the first-layer program or programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred can be executed by the second-layer computer, it is possible to have the first-layer programs executed by the substituting second-layer computer even when a plurality of first-layer
10 programs had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred, in addition to when a single first-layer program had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred. Therefore, even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer, the operation of the facility
15 apparatus is prevented from being interrupted or stopped, which leads to a reduction in a lowering of the operation efficiency of the facility apparatus.

 When the second-layer computer does not have sufficient processing power to execute a plurality of first-layer programs in addition to the second-layer program, the second-layer computer is caused to operate such
20 that the processing speed for each of the plurality of first-layer programs is reduced to reduce the load on the second-layer computer (referred to as a reduced operation) so that the second-layer computer can execute the second-layer program and the first-layer programs without having to terminate execution of any of the plurality of first-layer programs.

25 [0020]

 In short, with the configuration described above, all facility apparatuses can continue to operate even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer.

[0021]

30 In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, a plurality of the first-layer programs are preferably executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers, wherein the selection processing portion is preferably configured to be able to select, as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, a part of the
35 plurality of the first-layer programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition

occurred, and wherein the substitute command output processing portion is preferably configured to be able to issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program or programs that is or are selected by the selection processing
5 portion.

[0022]

That is, when a plurality of first-layer programs had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred, a part of the plurality of first-layer programs
10 can be executed as a substitute-execution-subject program or programs by the second-layer computer.

In other words, when there are programs, among the plurality of first-layer programs, that are of higher importance to the operation of the system and programs that are of lower importance, then the programs of
15 higher importance can be selectively caused to be executed by the substitute computer at user's discretion when there is a concern that problems may arise where, if the second-layer computer executes all of the first-layer programs including the program of higher importance as well as the program of lower importance, the processing load may exceed the upper limit of the
20 processing power of the second-layer computer which may result in the second-layer program originally executed by the second-layer computer not being processed properly, or in the processing speed of the second-layer program being reduced. This would keep the load on the second-layer computer confined within a proper range, which makes it possible to execute
25 the programs of higher importance, among the plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs, with the second-layer computer while allowing the second-layer program that had originally been executed by the second-layer computer to be executed properly.

[0023]

30 In short, with the configuration described above, a facility control system may be provided in which it is possible to execute programs of higher importance, among a plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs, with the second-layer computer while allowing the second-layer program that had originally been executed by the second-layer computer to be
35 executed properly.

[0024]

In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, the system preferably further comprises a buffer processing portion that relays data for the task command and data for the operation result communicated between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer, wherein the buffer processing portion is preferably configured to relay an exchange of the data between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer based on identifying information assigned to each of the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer, and wherein the substitute command output processing portion is preferably configured to issue an identifying information take over command for causing the second-layer computer to take over the identifying information that had been assigned to the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, before outputting the substitute command.

[0025]

That is, the buffer processing portion is configured to relay an exchange of the data between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer based on the identifying information (for example, an IP address or a host name) assigned to each of the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer. And the substitute command output processing portion issues an identifying information take over command for causing the second-layer computer to take over the identifying information that had been assigned to the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, before outputting the substitute command. Thus, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer and thus the first-layer program that had been executed in the first-layer computer should be caused to be executed by the second-layer computer, the buffer processing portion will be able to relay the data, which used to be exchanged with the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, to or from the substituting second-layer computer.

[0026]

Thus, even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer and thus the first-layer program that had been executed in the first-layer computer should be caused to be executed by the second-layer computer, neither the first-layer program nor the second-layer program has to modify the identifying information which each program manages and to which commands and reported data are to be transmitted.

[0027]

In short, with the configuration described above, a facility control system can be provided in which, even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer and thus the first-layer program that had been
5 executed in the first-layer computer should be caused to be executed by the second-layer computer, neither the first-layer program nor the second-layer program has to modify the identifying information which each program manages and to which commands and reported data are to be transmitted so that the configuration of the system can be simplified.

10 [0028]

In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, the facility control system preferably further comprises a monitoring computer that executes a monitoring program which collects and displays information on an operational state of the facility
15 apparatus from the first-layer computer or the second-layer computer, wherein the substitute command output processing portion is preferably configured to issue a second substitution command for executing the monitoring program that had been executed by the monitoring computer in which an abnormal condition occurred, as a second
20 substitute-execution-subject program, and wherein the substitute command output processing portion is preferably configured to issue the second substitution command to the second-layer computer based on selection information selected by the selection processing portion.

[0029]

25 That is, when a monitoring computer is provided that executes a monitoring program which collects and displays information on an operational state of the facility apparatus from the first-layer computer or the second-layer computer, and when an abnormal condition occurs in the monitoring computer, the monitoring program that had been executed by the
30 monitoring computer can be executed by the second-layer computer. Thus, it is not necessary to provide an additional computer to substitute for the monitoring computer, which can reduce the costs for constructing the facility control system.

[0030]

35 In short, with the configuration described above, a facility control system can be provided in which it is not necessary to provide an additional

computer to substitute for the monitoring computer, which can reduce the costs for constructing the facility control system.

[0031]

5 In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, a plurality of the first-layer computers are preferably provided, wherein two or more of the first-layer computers are preferably defined as first-layer substitution candidate computers that can execute the substitute-execution-subject program, and wherein the selection processing
10 portion is preferably configured to be able to select one of the first-layer computers, that are defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers except for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, for executing the substitute-execution-subject program, based on a manual operation.

[0032]

15 That is, because a plurality of the first-layer computers are provided and because two or more of the first-layer computers are defined as first-layer substitution candidate computers that can execute the substitute-execution-subject program, the substitute-execution-subject program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the
20 abnormal condition occurred can be executed by any of the first-layer substitution candidate computers. And the computer for executing the substitute-execution-subject program can be selected among the first-layer substitution candidate computers. Thus, for example, when another first-layer computer has surplus processing power, that first-layer computer
25 can be selected to execute the program in substitution for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred so that a facility control system with high availability can be provided.

[0033]

30 In an embodiment of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention, the facility apparatus is preferably an article transport device in a distribution facility, wherein the first-layer computer is preferably configured to manage the apparatus controller that controls the operation of the article transport device, wherein the second-layer computer is preferably configured to manage article transport information for the
35 entire distribution facility, and wherein the task request is preferably a transport request for an article in the distribution facility.

[0034]

That is, even when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer which manages the apparatus controller which controls the operation of an article transport device, it is possible to have the first-layer program, that had been executed by the first-layer computer, executed by the second-layer computer which manages the article transport information for the entire distribution facility in substitution for the first-layer computer in question. Therefore, interruption is prevented to the extent possible in the operation of the article transport device controlled by the apparatus controller which the first-layer computer is assigned to so that the article transport device in the distribution facility can operate properly.

[0035]

The technical features of the facility control system in accordance with the present invention having each configuration described above may be applied to a facility control method. And such a method is within the scope of the present invention. Such a facility control method can also provide the functions and effects associated with the facility control system described above.

That is, a facility control method in accordance with the present invention is a method using a facility control system having

an apparatus controller that controls an operation of a facility apparatus; a first-layer computer that executes a first-layer program for issuing an apparatus operating command for the facility apparatus to the apparatus controller that the first-layer computer is assigned to and for managing an operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the apparatus controller; and a second-layer computer that executes a second-layer program for issuing a task command to the first-layer computer in order to cause the facility apparatus required to process a task request to be operated in accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatus, and for managing a result of a task that is related to the task request based on the operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the first-layer computer;

the facility control method comprises the following steps that are performed by the facility control system:

a selection processing step of selecting, based on a manual operation,

whether to cause the second layer computer to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer;

5 a substitute command output processing step of issuing a substitute command for executing, as a substitute-execution-subject program, the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred;

10 wherein in the substitute command output processing step, a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program is issued in accordance with selection information selected in the selection processing step.

[0036]

15 In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, in the substitute command output processing step, a substitute command is preferably issued for causing the second-layer computer to execute, as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, all of the first-layer program or programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred.

20 [0037]

In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, a plurality of the first-layer programs are preferably executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers, wherein, in the selection processing step, a part of the plurality of the first-layer programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred is preferably selected as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, and wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, a substitute command is preferably issued for causing the second-layer computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program or programs that is or are selected in the selection processing step.

[0038]

35 In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, the method preferably further comprises a buffer processing step of relaying data for the task command and data for the operation result communicated between the first-layer computer and the

second-layer computer, wherein, in the buffer processing step, an exchange of the data between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer is preferably relayed based on identifying information assigned to each of the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer, and wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, an identifying information take over command is preferably issued for causing the second-layer computer to take over the identifying information that had been assigned to the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, before outputting the substitute command.

10 [0039]

In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, the facility control system preferably further includes a monitoring computer that executes a monitoring program which collects and displays information on an operational state of the facility apparatus from the first-layer computer or the second-layer computer, wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, a second substitution command is preferably issued for executing the monitoring program that had been executed by the monitoring computer in which an abnormal condition occurred, as a second substitute-execution-subject program, and wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, the second substitution command is preferably issued to the second-layer computer based on a selection information selected in the selection processing step.

[0040]

In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, a plurality of the first-layer computers are preferably provided in the facility control system, wherein two or more of the first-layer computers are preferably defined as first-layer substitution candidate computers that can execute the substitute-execution-subject program, and wherein, in the selection processing step, one of the first-layer computers, that are defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers except for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, is preferably selected for executing the substitute-execution-subject program, based on a manual operation.

[0041]

35 In an embodiment of the facility control method in accordance with the present invention, the facility apparatus is preferably an article

transport device in a distribution facility, wherein the first-layer computer is preferably configured to manage the apparatus controller that controls the operation of the article transport device, wherein the second-layer computer is preferably configured to manage article transport information for the entire distribution facility, and wherein the task request is preferably a transport request for an article in the distribution facility.

[Brief Description of the Drawings]

[0042]

Fig. 1 is an overall plan view of a distribution facility,

Fig. 2 shows functional blocks of a facility control system as well as its network connections,

Fig. 3 is a flow chart for the processing at the time of a substitute execution,

Figs. 4A and 4B show an example of a display screen which displays a window generated by a selection processing portion,

Figs. 5A and 5B show an example of a display screen which displays a window generated by the selection processing portion,

Fig. 6 shows an example of programs in a substituted state,

Fig. 7 shows an example of programs in a substituted state,

Fig. 8 shows an example of programs in a substituted state,

Fig. 9 shows an example of programs in a substituted state,

Fig. 10 shows an example of programs in a substituted state, and

Fig. 11 shows an example of programs in a substituted state.

[BEST MODES FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION]

[0043]

A facility control system in accordance with the present invention is described next where the control system is applied to a distribution facility 1, with reference to the drawings.

As shown in Fig. 1, this distribution facility 1 includes an automated warehouse J which primarily includes article storage racks 2 and stacker cranes 51, storing-and-retrieving conveyers 52 each of which transfers an article B to or from the stacker crane 51 provided to the automated warehouse J, receiving-and-delivering conveyers 53 which function as receiving portions for receiving articles B from outside the facility or as delivering portions for delivering articles B to outside the facility, and sorting

carriages 50 which can travel along the travel rail 4 and which support and transport articles between the storing-and-retrieving conveyors 52 and the receiving-and-delivering conveyors 53.

[0044]

5 Each article storage rack 2 has a plurality of article storage units that are arranged in the vertical and lateral direction (that is, in the vertical direction and a right-and-left direction) such that the front side of the article storage rack 2 is open for taking articles in or taking articles out of the article storage rack 2. A plurality of the article storage racks 2 are provided
10 such that the front side of a rack 2 faces the front side of the other rack 2 and such that the article storage racks 2 are spaced apart from each other. In addition, a travel rail 3 on which a stacker crane 51 travels is provided between any two article storage racks 2 that face each other.

[0045]

15 Each stacker crane 51 includes a traveling carriage having travel wheels which can travel on the travel rail 3 and a vertical movement guiding mast arranged vertically on the traveling carriage, and thus is configured to allow a vertically movable platform to move vertically while the platform is supported by the vertical movement guiding mast. And the stacker crane 51
20 is configured to transfer an article between a transfer device provided to the vertically movable platform and any article storage unit of the article storage rack 2.

 A ground side controller 51h for controlling operation of the stacker crane 51 is provided in one end area of each travel rail 3. While not shown, a
25 movable body side controller is provided to the traveling carriage of each stacker crane 51. And the ground side controller 51h and the movable body side controller are configured to be able to communicate with each other by means of infrared lights etc. The stacker crane controller 51C is configured with, or defined by, the ground side controller 51h and the movable body side
30 controller.

 Provided close to the transfer device of each stacker crane 51 is an article identifying sensor S1 which reads in identifying information (information recorded in a bar code, an IC tag, etc.) of articles. And the article identifying sensor S1 is configured such that the information it reads
35 in is inputted into the stacker crane controller 51C.

[0046]

Each storing-and-retrieving conveyer 52 has a rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a and a carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b. Each rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a is an end portion on the side of the article storage rack 2 where
5 an article can be transferred to or from the stacker crane 51. Each carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b is an end portion on the side of the travel rail 4 for the sorting carriages 50 where an article can be transferred to or from the sorting carriage 50. And the carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b is located at a lateral side of the travel
10 rail 4, to be more specific. And the storing-and-retrieving conveyer 52 is configured such that its operation is controlled by the storing-and-retrieving conveyer controller 52C.

An article identifying sensor S2a, S2b for reading in identifying information (information recorded on a bar code, an IC tag, etc.) of articles is
15 provided at each of the rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a and the carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b.

[0047]

Each sorting carriage 50 is configured to be able to travel while sensing its travel position by means of a known method such as a rotary
20 encoder or a dog detector, and is configured such that its operation is controlled by the sorting carriage controller 50C. Provided close to an article support portion provided to the sorting carriage 50 is a carriage article sensor S0 which reads in identifying information (information recorded on a bar code, an IC tag, etc.) of the article B supported and transported by the
25 sorting carriage 50.

[0048]

The receiving-and-delivering conveyors 53 include receiving conveyors 5 each of which functions as a receiving portion for receiving articles B from outside the facility, and delivering conveyors 6 each of which
30 functions as a delivering portion for delivering articles B to outside the facility. And the system is configured such that operation of each of the receiving conveyors 5 and the delivering conveyors 6 is controlled by a receiving-and-delivering conveyor controller 53C. In addition, article identifying sensor S5, S6 for reading in identifying information (information
35 recorded on a bar code, a wireless IC tag, etc.) of articles B is provided at each of an end portion, on the upstream side in the article transport direction,

of each receiving conveyor 5, and an end portion, on the upstream side in the article transport direction, of each delivering conveyor 6.

[0049]

In other words, the distribution facility 1 includes, as facility
5 apparatuses, the stacker cranes 51, the storing-and-retrieving conveyers 52, the receiving-and-delivering conveyors 53, and the sorting carriages 50. Also the distribution facility 1 includes the stacker crane controllers 51C, the storing-and-retrieving conveyor controllers 52C, the receiving-and-delivering conveyor controllers 53C, and the sorting carriage controllers 50C, as
10 apparatus controllers C each of which is provided for, or in association with, each facility apparatus and each of which controls the operation of the respective facility apparatus.

[0050]

Each apparatus controller C includes, for example, a microcomputer,
15 etc. and is configured to be able to exchange data with each facility apparatus by means of a communication interface, such as, a serial interface and an infrared transmission interface. The communication interface is not limited to those described above. And various kinds of interfaces may be used instead as long as real-time communication can be reliably performed.

20 [0051]

The facility control system includes the apparatus controllers C, first-layer computers 10, and a second-layer computer 20. As shown in Fig. 2, in the present embodiment, the facility control system includes a plurality of the apparatus controllers C, a plurality of the first-layer computers 10 (two
25 first-layer computers in the example shown in Fig. 2), and a single second-layer computer 20. Each first-layer computer 10 executes a first-layer program 11 for issuing apparatus operating commands for the facility apparatuses, to the apparatus controllers C that the first-layer computer 10 is assigned to, and for managing the operation results of the facility
30 apparatuses transmitted from the apparatus controllers C. Each first-layer computer 10 executes one or more first-layer program or programs 11. In addition, each first-layer computer 10 is assigned to one or more apparatus controller or controllers C. And when the facility control system includes a plurality of apparatus controllers C, the first-layer computer 10 is assigned
35 to all or a part of the plurality of apparatus controllers C. The second-layer computer 20 executes a second-layer program 21 for issuing a task command

to the first-layer computers 10 in order to operate the facility apparatuses that are required to process a task request, in accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatuses, and for managing the results of the operations for the task request based on the operation results of the facility apparatuses transmitted from the first-layer computers 10. The second-layer computer 20 issues one or more command or commands to one or more first-layer computer or computers 10 (more than one computers in the present example).

Each first-layer computer 10 is configured to execute the first-layer program 11 to issue an apparatus operating command to the apparatus controllers C which the first-layer computer 10 is assigned to in accordance with the task command from the second-layer computer 20.

[0052]

In addition, the facility control system includes a monitoring computer 30. In present embodiment, the facility control system includes a single monitoring computer 30 as shown in Fig. 2. The monitoring computer 30 executes a monitoring program 31 which collects and displays information about operational states of the facility apparatuses from the first-layer computers 10 or the second-layer computer 20.

[0053]

Next, the facility is described with reference to Fig. 2 which shows the configurations of, and the network connections among, the apparatus controllers C, the first-layer computers 10, and the second-layer computer 20 which are included in the facility control system as well as the monitoring computer 30 which accompanies the facility control system. Note that Fig. 2 merely illustrates one example of a facility control system. And one first-layer computer 10 or more than three first-layer computers 10 may be provided instead. And more than two monitoring computers 30 may be provided.

[0054]

As shown in Fig. 2, the apparatus controllers C, the first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30 are mutually connected by the communication lines L through a network interface. The communication lines L are configured, for example, as a LAN having a star topology, and are configured to provide communication using

TCP/IP.

In addition, the segment configuration within the LAN may be of any type so long as the apparatus controllers C, the first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30 can mutually
5 communicate. And it is not necessary for all computers illustrated in Fig. 2 to belong to the same segment.

[0055]

Fig. 2 shows an example of a configuration in which a first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors which is assigned to the
10 storing-and-retrieving conveyers 52 and a first-layer computer 10b for the cranes which is assigned to the stacker cranes 51 are provided as the first-layer computers 10.

In the present embodiment, the first-layer computers 10 also include, among other first-layer computers, a first-layer computer that is assigned to
15 the sorting carriages 50, and a first-layer computer that is assigned to the receiving-and-delivering conveyers 53 in addition to the first-layer computers described above. However, descriptions for these additional first-layer computers 10 are omitted here since they have the same configurations as the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the
20 first-layer computer 10b for the cranes.

Comparatively inexpensive computers, such as, personal computers, or PC servers, etc., that are not dedicated computers may be used as the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the first-layer computer 10b
for the cranes. Each of the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the
25 first-layer computer 10b for the cranes includes a CPU, main memory, a hard disk, a display, a keyboard, a pointing device (mouse), etc., as well as a network interface.

[0056]

A first-layer program 11a for the conveyors for the
30 storing-and-retrieving conveyers and a first-layer program 11b for the cranes for the stacker cranes are installed in each of the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes. Further, installed in each of the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes are a second-layer program 21, a data
35 base program 25 which the second-layer program 21 uses, a service switching program 43 which functions as a selection processing portion and a

substitute command output processing portion, a message queue program 44 which functions as a buffer processing portion, and a monitoring program 31. [0057]

5 Among the above-mentioned installed programs, the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors for the storing and-retrieving conveyers and the service switching program 43 are being executed by, and in, the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors during a normal operation (that is, when a program that should be executed by another computer is NOT executed on behalf of such another computer).

10 In addition, among the above-mentioned installed programs, the first-layer program 11b for the cranes for the stacker cranes, the service switching program 43, and the message queue program 44 are executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes during a normal operation. [0058]

15 A computer having a higher processing capacity than the first-layer computer 10 is used for the second-layer computer 20. Incidentally, the processing capacity as referred to above is a concept that is defined relatively in terms of the calculation speed of the CPU, or hard disk access speed, etc. The above-mentioned second-layer program 21 and a data base program 25
20 that the second-layer program 21 uses are installed in the second-layer computer 20. Further, the service switching program 43, the message queue program 44, the monitoring program 31, the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors, and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes are installed in the second-layer computer 20.

25 Among the above-mentioned programs installed, the second-layer program 21, the data base program 25, and the service switching program 43 are executed by the second-layer computer 20 during a normal operation. [0059]

30 A computer that has a comparable processing capacity as, or a lower processing capacity than, the first-layer computer 10 may be used as a monitoring computer 30. A monitoring program 31 is installed in the monitoring computer 30. Further, the service switching program 43, the message queue program 44, and the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors are installed in the monitoring computer 30.

35 Among the above-mentioned programs installed, the monitoring program 31 and the service switching program 43 are executed by the

monitoring computer 30.

[0060]

5 The processes or tasks performed by each program installed in the first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, or the monitoring computer 30 are described next. Each program is stored in memory that can be accessed by the computer in which the program in question is installed, and is executed by the arithmetic processing unit which the computer in question includes.

10 The message queue program 44 is installed in all of the above-mentioned first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30, and is configured to be executed by any one of these computers (e.g., first-layer computer 10b for the cranes). The message queue program 44 stores or accumulates a task command data transmitted from the second-layer computer 20 to the first-layer computers
15 10 as well as data on the operation results of the facility apparatuses transmitted from the first-layer computers 10 to the second-layer computer 20 in a message queue which includes a first-in-first-out (FIFO) memory area, and is configured to use IP address assigned to the first-layer computers and the second-layer computer as identifying information to relay
20 the exchange of the data among these computers based on the IP address.

More specifically, all of the first-layer computers 10 and the second-layer computer 20 transmit the task command data and operation result data to a first-layer computer 10b for the cranes that is functioning as the computer by which the message queue program 44 is being executed
25 (referred to hereinafter as the "message-queue-program-executing computer"). Upon receiving the task command data and operation result data, the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes then stores or accumulates them in the message queue of the message queue program 44.

Incidentally, the stored task command data and operation result data
30 are saved in the message queue for a set period, which is a sufficiently shorter time period than the amount of time required for switching, and are deleted from the message queue after the set period elapses.

[0061]

35 The second-layer program 21 transmits data (referred to as task command data) related to a task command for commanding the transport of an article to the IP address assigned to the first-layer computer 10b for the

cranes which is the message-queue-program-executing computer, in accordance with a task request (for example, "ship ten goods a to Customer A", etc.) generated by a superordinate input device or system. The task command data consists of, or includes, identifying information (article ID) of the article to be transported, a transport initial position (or "From" data) of the article, and a transport target position (or "To" data) of the article. Upon receiving the task command data, the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes uses the message queue program 44 described above to store or accumulate the task command data in the message queue formed in the memory area of the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes.

[0062]

The first-layer program 11a for the conveyors executed by the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors processes the task command data transmitted from the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes and stored in the message queue of the message queue program 44 as a task command in the order of arrival. That is, an apparatus operating command is issued to the apparatus controllers C in accordance with task command data in order to operate the facility apparatuses required to process a task request.

Since a task command for task command data is carried out using one or more of the facility apparatuses of different kinds in the distribution facility 1, one or more first-layer computer or computers 10 controls, or control, the facility apparatuses that the computer or computers 10 is, or are, assigned to for one task command data.

[0063]

More specifically, when the contents of the task command data are "transport article B having article ID 8 from a certain article storage unit in the article storage rack 2 to the delivering conveyor 6", the first-layer program 11b for the cranes for stacker crane 51 first issues an apparatus operating command for operating a stacker crane 51 to the stacker crane controller 51C in order to transport the article B having article ID 8 from an article storage unit to a rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a of the storing-and-retrieving conveyor 52.

When the stacker crane 51 finishes transferring the article B having article ID 8 to the rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a of the storing-and-retrieving conveyor 52, the stacker crane controller 51C reads in the article ID of the article with the article identifying sensor S2a provided

at the rack-side storing-and-retrieving location 52a, and transmits the article ID to the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors for the storing-and-retrieving conveyer 52.

[0064]

5 When the article ID received from the stacker crane controller 51C is the article ID 8 for which the transport is commanded by the task command data, the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors issues an apparatus operating command for transporting the article B placed in the storing-and-retrieving conveyer 52 from the rack-side storing-and-retrieving
10 location 52a to the carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b in order to have the article B transported to the transport target position.

 When the article B reaches the carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b, the storing-and-retrieving conveyer controller 52C reads in the article ID of the article with the article identifying sensor S2b provided at
15 the carriage-side storing-and-retrieving location 52b, and transmits the article ID to the first-layer program 11 that is assigned to the sorting carriage 50 that takes over the transport operation of the article B.

 As such, the article is transported in such a manner that the first-layer computers 10 issue task commands to the apparatus controllers C
20 which they are assigned to, until the article B having the article ID 8 which is the subject of the task command data arrives at the transport target position.

[0065]

 In addition, when the operation required to process the task
25 commanded by the task command data is completed, each of the apparatus controllers C submits its operation result. In other words, each apparatus controller C transmits an identification number unique to each task command data as well as data (referred to, hereafter, as operation result data) indicating the completion of the operation that corresponds to the task
30 command data, to the first-layer computer 10 that executes the first-layer program 11 that is assigned to the apparatus controller C in question.

 Each first-layer program 11 transmits the operation result data received from the apparatus controller C to the IP address assigned to the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes that is the
35 message-queue-program-executing computer.

[0066]

Upon receiving the operation result data, the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes stores or accumulates the operation result data in the message queue of the message queue program 44, and transmits it to the second-layer computer 20 which is predetermined as the receiver of the data.

5 The second-layer program 21 executed by the second-layer computer 20 processes the operation result data that are transmitted from the message-queue-program-executing computer and that are stored in the message queue of the message queue program 44, in the order that the data are stored.

10 More specifically, the second-layer program 21 is configured to, upon receiving the operation result data, issue a command to the data base program 25 executed by the same computer that executes the second-layer program 21 to update, as required, the data base that associates the identification numbers of the task command data with the operation result
15 data from the apparatus controllers C. And the second-layer program 21 can be aware of, or keep track of, the transport operation performed by the facility apparatus that the processing for the task command data has been completed up to by referring to the data base.

[0067]

20 The monitoring program 31 is executed by the single monitoring computer 30 (a server) provided in the system. More than one such monitoring computers 30 may be provided. A plurality of terminals for monitoring may be connected to the monitoring computer 30. And the monitoring terminals display statistical data, etc. , which the monitoring
25 program 31 processed. The monitoring program 31 is configured to be able to collect information from one or more of the apparatus controllers C, the first-layer programs 11, and the second-layer program 21 to monitor the state of some or all of the facility apparatuses and the facility control system. As an example, the monitoring program 31 is configured to display, on the
30 display unit of the monitoring computer 30 or on the monitoring terminals, various kinds of information such as information on the operating positions of the stacker cranes 51 and the sorting carriages 50 that function as the facility apparatuses, their MTBF (Mean Time Between Failures), or failure information of the storing-and-retrieving conveyers 52, etc.

35 [0068]

The service switching program 43 is configured to identify a program

that has been executed by a computer in which an abnormal condition occurred as a program that is the subject of execution ("substitute-execution-subject program") by a substitute computer; to carry out a selection processing step to select, based on an manual operation, whether to cause the substitute-execution-subject program to be executed by another computer; and to carry out a substitute command output processing step to issue a substitute command for causing the another computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program. The manual operation is performed by a user by using, for example, an input device, such as a keyboard and a pointing device (e.g. a mouse), provided to the computer that is executing the service switching program 43. And the service switching program 43 selects whether to cause the substitute-execution-subject program to be executed by another computer, based on the result of the selection (more specifically, on an output signal from the input device) by the manual operation. In the present embodiment, while the "selection processing portion" in accordance with the present invention is configured, or defined by, a program (more specifically the service switching program 43) as described above, the "selection processing portion" in accordance with the present invention may be configured by both a program (software) and hardware (input device).

More specifically, the service switching program 43 includes a background execution portion that is executed in the background and a user interface portion which displays information to a user and which is used to input a command from the user. The service switching program 43 is installed in one or more computer or computers. And the computer in which the service switching program 43 is installed performs the selection processing step and the substitute command output processing step. The computer in which the service switching program 43 is installed may be one or more of the first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30 included in the facility control system or may be other computer which belongs to the same network as these computers and which can communicate therewith (e.g., servers, such as an email server, a file server, or a job-oriented terminal etc.)

[0069]

When an abnormal condition occurs in a first-layer computer 10, the service switching program 43 is configured to issue an identifying

information take over command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to take over the IP address assigned to the first-layer computer 10 in question. This identifying information take over command is issued to the message queue program 44.

5 This allows the data transmitted and received by the first-layer computer 10 before the identifying information take over command was issued to be transmitted and received by the second-layer computer 20 which has taken over the IP address of the first-layer computer 10 after the identifying information take over command issued. Therefore, the computers
10 included in the facility control system can exchange information with no regard to the fact that the computers which the data is sent to and from which data is received have been changed between before and after the substitution of the computers.

[0070]

15 The background execution portion is started or activated as a background process simultaneously with the startup of the computer in which the service switching program 43 is installed. In addition, the service switching program 43 transmits activation notice data which indicates that the service switching program 43 has been activated, at every set period (for
20 example, every 5 seconds) since the activation, to all the computers in which the service switching program 43 is activated. Incidentally, the activation notice data are transmitted by the UDP multicast. And the background execution portion of the service switching program 43 is configured to update the list of activated computers, which list is used to manage activations and
25 powering down of the computers in which the service switching program 43 is executed (referred to, hereinafter, as a service switching program executing computer), based on the received activation notice data.

[0071]

30 The user interface portion is not executed during a normal operation, but is activated by an activation command from a user (for example, by clicking an icon, etc.). As shown in Figs. 4A, 4B, 5A, and 5B, when the user interface portion is activated, information window W1 which shows a list of the activation state of each of the service switching program executing computers is displayed to the user on the display. Fig. 4A shows a state in
35 which the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors (server 3), the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes (server 2), the second-layer computer

20 (server 1), and the monitoring computer 30 (server 4) are operating normally. And Fig. 4B shows a state in which an abnormal condition occurred in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes (server 2) for the stacker cranes 51, and in which its first-layer program 11b for the cranes has stopped running. That is, in the present specification, the expression "abnormal condition" of a computer means that a program which should be being executed in the computer in question in a normal operation has stopped running (i.e., the program is not functioning). The facility control system includes an abnormal condition detection processing portion (abnormal condition detection program) for detecting the abnormal condition of such computers.

In other words, the service switching program 43 includes the selection processing portion which selects whether to cause the first-layer program 11 that a first-layer computer 10 had been executing to be executed by the second-layer computer 20 and not causing the program 11 to be executed by the second-layer computer 20 based on a manual operation when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10 in question, and the substitute command output processing portion which issues a substitute command for causing the first-layer program 11 that was executed by the first-layer computer 10 in which the abnormal condition occurred to be executed as a substitute-execution-subject program, in accordance with selection information (information on the result of the selection) selected by the selection processing portion.

[0072]

The flow of operations for when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes stops running, until the first-layer program 11b for the cranes is executed by another computer, is described next with reference to the flow chart in Fig. 3 as well as Figs. 4A, 4B, 5A, and 5B which show how the display changes.

[0073]

As shown in Fig. 3, when the user activates the user interface portion of the service switching program 43 after learning that an abnormal condition occurred in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes and that the first-layer program 11b for the cranes stopped running, by means of a warning display etc., an information window W1 shown in Fig. 4B is

displayed (Step #1).

An "End" button is displayed in the information window W1. And a command to end the session can be issued (Step #2) when it is determined that there is no need to take any actions after checking the state of each computer in the information window W1.
[0074]

If "End" is not selected in Step #2, the service switching program 43 proceeds to wait for an input that specifies the computer that is to be the subject of the process.

10 In the present embodiment, two first-layer computers 10 are provided and these two first-layer computers 10 are defined as first-layer substitution candidate computers. And the two first-layer substitution candidate computers, one second-layer computer 20, and one monitoring computer 30 are defined, or specified, as computers that can execute the substitute-execution-subject program.
15

When the user specifies the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in the information window W1 (for example, by placing the mouse pointer in the square area associated with the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, and clicking a mouse button), a selection window W2 is displayed which
20 displays the computers that can execute the first-layer program 11b for the cranes, as shown in Fig. 5A, based on the information managed by means of the list of activated computers and in which the computer to execute the first-layer program 11b for the cranes is selected by a manual operation (i.e., the substitution computer is selected by an input).

25 In the selection window W2, the first-layer computer 10 that is not the first-layer computer 10 in which the abnormal condition occurred, among the first-layer computers 10 defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers, as well as the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30 are displayed as computers that can be selected. That is, the service switching program 43 (selection processing portion) is configured to
30 be able to select one of these computers for executing the substitute-execution-subject program based on a manual operation. And the service switching program 43 makes a selection to cause the computer that is selected by the manual operation to execute the substitute-execution-subject program (Steps #3-5).
35

It should be noted that, although Figs. 4A, 4B, 5A, and 5B illustrate

an example in which information on the four computers, namely, two first-layer computers 10, the second-layer computer 20, and the monitoring computer 30, is displayed in the information window W1, the information window W1 may be able to display information on more than four computers, for example, by scrolling the contents to be displayed or by changing the page.

[0075]

When a user selects Server 1, (i.e., the second-layer computer 20) as the substitution computer and presses or click the "Confirm" button in the selection window W2, the service switching program 43 issues a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to execute the first-layer program 11b for the cranes, that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, as a substitute-execution-subject program based on this manual operation (more specifically, the pressing or clicking operation) (Step #6, and Step #7). That is, the service switching program 43 issues a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to execute, as a substitute-execution-subject program, the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes. Thus, the selection processing step is performed by the service switching program 43 whereas the substitute command output processing step is performed by the same program in accordance with the selection information selected in this selection processing step in the above-described manner. In addition, in light of the possibility that the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which the abnormal condition occurred did not stop running properly when it happened, it is desirable to have the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes physically disconnected from the network (for example, by unplugging the LAN cable or by other method).

[0076]

After activating the first-layer program 11b for the cranes installed in the second-layer computer 20 in accordance with the substitute command, the service switching program 43 assigns the IP address, that used to be assigned to the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which the abnormal condition occurred, to the network interface of the second-layer computer 20 as a virtual IP address. That is, the second-layer computer 20 executes the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that is a

substitute-execution-subject program based on the substitute command that is issued or output by the service switching program 43 (substitute command output processing portion). In addition, it is also possible to assign the virtual IP address simultaneously with, or before, the activation of the first-layer program 11b for the cranes. From that point on, the computers in the facility control system exchange information with (i.e., transmit information to and receive information from) the first-layer program 11b for the cranes executed by the second-layer computer 20 in place of the first-layer program 11b for the cranes which had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes. In addition, while not shown, in the present embodiment, the message queue program 44 is also configured to be executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes. Thus, if an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, the message queue program 44 will also stop running. Therefore, a command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to execute the message queue program 44 as a substitute-execution-subject program is also issued simultaneously with the issuance of the substitute command described above. That is, the service switching program 43 issues, to the second-layer computer 20, the substitute command for causing the message queue program 44 that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes to be executed as a substitute-execution-subject program.

And the first-layer program 11b for the cranes executed by the second-layer computer 20 issues an apparatus operating command to the stacker crane 51 based on the task command data stored in the message queue through the message queue program 44 executed by the second-layer computer 20.

[0077]

In addition, when an abnormal condition has occurred in the monitoring computer 30 and when the monitoring computer 30 is selected in Step #3, the computers which can execute the monitoring program 31 that had been executed by the monitoring computer 30 are displayed in the selection window W2. And the service switching program 43 selects the computer for executing the monitoring program 31 based on a manual operation (more specifically, selection of the substitution computer by the user) (Steps #3-#5). And as described above, when the user selects the substitution computer and presses or clicks the "Confirm" button in the

selection window W2, the service switching program 43 issues, to the monitoring computer 30, a stop command for stopping the monitoring program 31 executed by the monitoring computer 30, and subsequently, issues the second substitution command for causing the monitoring program
5 31 which had been executed by the monitoring computer 30 in which the abnormal condition occurred to be executed by the substitution computer as a substitute-execution-subject program (Step #6, and Step #7). That is, the service switching program 43 issues, to the substitution computer, the second substitution command for causing the monitoring program 31 that
10 had been executed by the monitoring computer 30 in which the abnormal condition occurred to be executed as a substitute-execution-subject program.

After activating the monitoring program 31 installed in the substitution computer (for example, the second-layer computer 20) in accordance with the second substitution command, the service switching
15 program 43 assigns, as a virtual IP address, the IP address assigned to the monitoring computer 30 in which the abnormal condition occurred, to the network interface of the substitute computer (i.e., the computer that was selected among the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors, the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, and the second-layer computers 20). It is also
20 possible to assign the virtual IP address simultaneously with, or before, the activation of the monitoring program 31. From that point on, the computers in the facility control system exchange information with (i.e., transmit information to and receive information from) the monitoring program 31 executed by the computer selected as the substitution computer, in place of
25 the monitoring program 31 that had been executed by the monitoring computer 30.

[0078]

The service switching program 43 is configured to return to the processing of Step #2 after the processing of Step #7 is finished. This is
30 because there are cases where, in the event that abnormal conditions occur in more than one first-layer computers 10, the processing of Step #3 - Step #7 needs to be repeated by the number of first-layer computers in which the abnormal conditions occurred. And the user interface portion can be ended by commanding an "End" in Step #2.

35 [0079]

Examples of the patterns of a substitute command issued by the

service switching program 43 is described next with reference to Figs. 6-11. Fig. 6 illustrates a configuration of a substitution described with reference to the flow chart of Fig. 3 as well as Fig. 4A, Fig. 4B, Fig. 5A, and Fig. 5B, and shows a case where, in the event that an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which the abnormal condition occurred is executed by the second-layer computer 20. In the example illustrated in Fig. 6 as well as in the examples illustrated in Figs. 7, 8, and 11, the message queue program 44 that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which the abnormal condition occurred is also executed by the second-layer computer 20.

[0080]

Fig. 7 shows a case where, in the event that an abnormal condition occurs in both the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, the second-layer computer 20 is caused to execute only the first-layer program 11b for the cranes, between the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that are substitute-execution-subject programs. That is, for example, when the second-layer computer 20 does not have sufficient processing power left to execute both the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes, a substitute-execution-subject program can be selected to execute the program that is more important than the other between the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes.

[0081]

Fig. 8 shows a case where, in the event that an abnormal condition occurs in both the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors and the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes, the second-layer computer 20 is caused to execute both the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes. In other words, when an abnormal condition occurs in more than one first-layer computers 10, or when an abnormal condition occurs in one first-layer computer 10 that execute two or more first-layer programs 11, the service switching program 43 is configured to be able to issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to execute, as substitute-execution-subject programs, all of the

first-layer programs 11 that had been executed by the first-layer computer or computers 10 in which the abnormal condition occurred. That is, the service switching program 43 is configured to be able to issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to execute, as
5 substitute-execution-subject programs, all of the first-layer programs 11 that had been executed by the first-layer computer or computers 10 in which the abnormal condition occurred. At this time, if the second-layer computer 20 does not have the processing power required to execute both the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the
10 cranes, the processing speeds of the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors and the first-layer program 11b for the cranes are reduced to reduce the load on the second-layer computer 20 so that neither the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors nor the first-layer program 11b for the cranes has to be stopped and so that all the facility apparatuses may be kept operating even
15 when abnormal conditions occur in the first-layer computers 10.
[0082]

Fig. 9 shows a case where in the event that two or more of the first-layer computers 10 are defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers each of which can execute a substitute-execution-subject program,
20 the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors in which an abnormal condition has not occurred is caused to execute a substitute-execution-subject program, among the first-layer computers 10 defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers. In the example illustrated in Fig. 9, the message queue program 44 that had been executed
25 by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which an abnormal condition occurred is also executed by the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors.
[0083]

Fig. 10 shows a case where, in the event that an abnormal condition
30 occurs in the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors, the monitoring computer 30 is caused to execute the first-layer program 11a for the conveyors that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors in which the abnormal condition occurred.
[0084]

35 Fig. 11 shows a case where, in the event that an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes and in the monitoring

computer 30, the second-layer computer 20 is caused to execute the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which the abnormal condition occurred as well as the monitoring program 31 that had been executed by the monitoring computer 30 in which the abnormal condition occurred.

[0085]

Thus, with the facility control system in accordance with the present embodiment, when an abnormal condition occurs in one or more of the first-layer computer or computers 10, the operations of the facility apparatuses are prevented from stopping to the extent possible by selecting, based on a manual operation, whether to cause the second-layer computer 20 or the monitoring computer 30 to execute the first-layer program 11 that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10. This makes it possible to reduce a lowering in the operation efficiency of the facility apparatuses. And by causing the second-layer computer 20 or the monitoring computer 30, which has already been in use in the facility control system to execute the first-layer program 11 that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10 in which an abnormal condition occurred, a facility control system can be provided in which the cost of the facility can be reduced.

[0086]

[Alternative Embodiments]

(1) In the embodiment described above, an example was described in which the selection processing portion is configured to be able to select whether to cause the second-layer computer 20 to execute a single substitute-execution-subject program. However, in place of this configuration, when there are a plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs (for example, when there are a plurality of first-layer computers 10 that execute the first-layer program 11 and an abnormal condition occurs in the plurality of first-layer computers 10, or when a plurality of first-layer programs 11 are executed by one first-layer computer 10 and an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10), the selection processing portion may be configured to be able to select which one of the plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs is to be executed by the second-layer computer 20 (see Fig. 7).

[0087]

The following becomes possible by adapting this configuration. When

there are programs that are of higher importance to the operation of the system and programs of lower importance among the plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs, and if both the programs of higher importance and the programs of lower importance are executed by the second-layer computer 20, processing load on the second-layer computer 20 may exceed the upper limit of the processing power of the second-layer computer 20, which may lead to a concern that the processing speed or processing efficiency of the second-layer computer 20 may deteriorate. When there is this concern, a program of higher importance can be selectively executed at the user's discretion. This allows the second-layer computer 20 to execute a program of high importance among the plurality of substitute-execution-subject programs while reducing the deterioration in the processing speed or the processing efficiency of the second-layer computer 20.

[0088]

(2) In the embodiment described above, an example was described in which, when the substitute command output processing portion issues a substitute command, a stop command is also issued to the first-layer computer 10 in order to stop the first-layer program 11 that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10 in which an abnormal condition occurred. In place of this configuration, the system may be configured to check whether the first-layer program 11 has stopped and displays the result of the checking.

[0089]

(3) In the embodiment described above, an example was described in which the message queue program 44 is configured to use the IP address assigned to the first-layer computers and the second-layer computer as identifying information to relay the exchange of data among these computers based on the IP address, and to issue an identifying information take over command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to take over the IP address that was assigned to the first-layer computer 10 in question when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10. In place of this configuration, the message queue program 44 may be configured to use host names as identifying information to relay the exchange of data among these computers based on the host names and to issue an identifying information take over command for causing the second-layer computer 20 to

take over the host name that was assigned to the first-layer computer 10 in question when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer 10.

[0090]

In addition, in the embodiment described above, the service switching program 43 is configured to assign, as a virtual IP address, the IP address that was assigned to the computer in which an abnormal condition occurred, to the network interface of the substitute computer after activating a substitute-execution-subject program installed in the substitution computer in accordance with the substitution command. However, in place of this configuration, the service switching program 43 may be configured to use host name as identifying information and to assign the host name that was assigned to the computer in which an abnormal condition occurred, to the substitute computer after activating a substitute-execution-subject program installed in the substitution computer.

[0091]

(4) In the embodiment described above, an example was illustrated in which the substitute command output processing portion is configured to be able to output the second substitution command for causing the monitoring program 31, that had been executed by the monitoring computer 30 in which an abnormal condition occurred, to be executed as the second substitute-execution-subject program. However, the substitute command output processing portion may be configured not to cause the monitoring program 31 to be executed as a substitute-execution-subject program.

[0092]

(5) In the embodiment described above, an example was illustrated in which, the first-layer programs 11 issue apparatus operating commands to the apparatus controllers C such that, when an article B arrives at the end location of a transport operation by a facility apparatus, its article ID is transmitted to the first-layer program 11 that is assigned to the apparatus controller C of the facility apparatus that takes over the transport operation of the article B, in order to operate the facility apparatuses one after another from the transport initial position to a transport target position in task command data. In place of this configuration, a configuration may be adapted in which information may be exchanged between or among the first-layer programs 11 such that an apparatus controller C reports completion of an operation by a facility apparatus to the first-layer program

11 that is assigned to the apparatus controller C, and such that this first-layer program 11 transmits a transport start request, for causing the transport of the article B to be started, to the first-layer program 11 that is assigned to the facility apparatus that should be operated next.

5 [0093]

(6) In the embodiment described above, an example was illustrated in which, the first-layer computer 10 issues apparatus operating commands to one kind of apparatus controllers C. However, in place of this configuration, one first-layer computer 10 may be configured to issue apparatus operating
10 commands to two or more kinds of apparatus controllers C. An example of such configuration may be one in which only one first-layer computer 10 is provided to the facility control system for controlling the operations of the facility apparatuses of the warehouse having, for example, stacker cranes 51, the storing-and-retrieving conveyers 52, and sorting carriages 50, etc.,
15 When configured in this manner, the first-layer computer 10 would transmit commands sequentially to the stacker crane controller 51C, the storing-and-retrieving conveyor controller 52C, and the sorting carriage controller 50C in accordance with a command in the received task command data.

20 [0094]

(7) In the embodiment described above, the facility control system of the present invention was described using a configuration where the control system is applied to a distribution facility 1. However, in place of this configuration, it is also possible to apply the facility control system of the
25 present invention to, for example, a production line. That is, the facility apparatus may be various production devices in the product line. The first-layer computers 10 may be configured to manage the apparatus controllers C that control the operations of the production devices. The second-layer computer 20 may be configured to manage transport
30 information of the entire production facility. And each task request may be a production request for an article in the production facility.

[0095]

(8) In the embodiment described above, an example was illustrated in which the communication lines L are configured to be a LAN having a star
35 topology and to perform communication using TCP/IP. However, the invention is not limited to such configuration. For example, the network

topology may be a bus network topology or a ring network topology. In addition, an original protocol can also be used for the network protocol.

[0096]

(9) In the embodiment described above, an example was illustrated in which the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes is caused to execute the message queue program 44. However, the invention is not limited to such configuration. For example, the message queue program 44 may be configured to be executed by other first-layer computers 10 (such as, the first-layer computer 10a for the conveyors, etc.) or the second-layer computer 20. And as such, the computer for executing the message queue program 44 may be selected as desired. In addition, in such a case, when an abnormal condition occurs in the computer that executes the message queue program 44, instead of causing a substitute computer to take over through a substitute command issued by the service switching program 43 as illustrated in the embodiment described above, various configurations may be adapted, such as causing a predetermined back-up computer to take over.

[0097]

(10) In the embodiment described above, a configuration was adapted in which the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes is physically disconnected from the network when an abnormal condition occurs, in light of the possibility that the first-layer program 11b for the cranes that had been executed by the first-layer computer 10b for the cranes in which an abnormal condition occurred did not stop running properly. However, in place of this configuration, a configuration may be adapted in which, when the service switching program 43 that functions as the substitute command output processing portion issues a substitute command, it also issues a stop command to the first-layer computer 10 in order to stop the first-layer program 11 executed by the first-layer computer 10 in which an abnormal condition occurred.

Claims

1. A facility control system comprising:

5 an apparatus controller that controls an operation of a facility apparatus;

 a first-layer computer that executes a first-layer program for issuing an apparatus operating command for the facility apparatus to the apparatus controller that the first-layer computer is assigned to and for managing an
10 operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the apparatus controller;

 a second-layer computer that executes a second-layer program for issuing a task command to the first-layer computer in order to cause the facility apparatus required to process a task request to be operated in
15 accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatus, and for managing a result of a task that is related to the task request based on the operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the first-layer computer;

 characterized by

20 a selection processing portion that selects, based on a manual operation, whether to cause the second layer computer to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer;

 a substitute command output processing portion that issues a
25 substitute command for executing, as a substitute-execution-subject program, the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred;

 wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to output the substitute command in accordance with a selection
30 information selected by the selection processing portion, and

 wherein the second-layer computer is configured to execute the substitute-execution-subject program based on the substitute command that the substitute command output processing portion outputs.

35 2. The facility control system as defined in claim 1, characterized in that the substitute command output processing portion is configured to

issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute, as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, all of the first-layer program or programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred.

5

3. The facility control system as defined in claim 1, characterized in that

a plurality of the first-layer programs are executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers,

10 wherein the selection processing portion is configured to be able to select, as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, a part of the plurality of the first-layer programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred, and

15 wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to be able to issue a substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program or programs that is or are selected by the selection processing portion.

20 4. The facility control system as defined in one of claims 1-3, further comprising:

a buffer processing portion that relays data for the task command and data for the operation result communicated between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer,

25 wherein the buffer processing portion is configured to relay an exchange of the data between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer based on identifying information assigned to each of the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer, and

30 wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to issue an identifying information take over command for causing the second-layer computer to take over the identifying information that had been assigned to the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, before outputting the substitute command.

35 5. The facility control system as defined in one of claims 1-4, further comprising:

a monitoring computer that executes a monitoring program which

collects and displays information on an operational state of the facility apparatus from the first-layer computer or the second-layer computer,

wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to issue a second substitution command for executing the
5 monitoring program that had been executed by the monitoring computer in which an abnormal condition occurred, as a second substitute-execution-subject program, and

wherein the substitute command output processing portion is configured to issue the second substitution command to the second-layer
10 computer based on selection information selected by the selection processing portion.

6. The facility control system as defined in one of claims 1-5, characterized in that

15 a plurality of the first-layer computers are provided, wherein two or more of the first-layer computers are defined as first-layer substitution candidate computers that can execute the substitute-execution-subject program,

wherein the selection processing portion is configured to be able to
20 select one of the first-layer computers, that are defined as the first-layer substitution candidate computers except for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, for executing the substitute-execution-subject program, based on a manual operation.

25 7. The facility control system as defined in one of claims 1-6, characterized in that

the facility apparatus is an article transport device in a distribution facility,

wherein the first-layer computer is configured to manage the
30 apparatus controller that controls the operation of the article transport device,

wherein the second-layer computer is configured to manage article transport information for the entire distribution facility, and

wherein the task request is a transport request for an article in the
35 distribution facility.

8. In a facility control method using a facility control system having: an apparatus controller that controls an operation of a facility apparatus; a first-layer computer that executes a first-layer program for issuing an apparatus operating command for the facility apparatus to the apparatus
5 controller that the first-layer computer is assigned to and for managing an operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the apparatus controller; and a second-layer computer that executes a second-layer program for issuing a task command to the first-layer computer in order to cause the facility apparatus required to process a task request to be operated
10 in accordance with the task request which is a request for an operation that is to be accomplished by operating the facility apparatus, and for managing a result of a task that is related to the task request based on the operation result of the facility apparatus transmitted from the first-layer computer;

the facility control method comprising the following steps that are
15 performed by the facility control system:

a selection processing step of selecting, based on a manual operation, whether to cause the second layer computer to execute the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer, when an abnormal condition occurs in the first-layer computer;

20 a substitute command output processing step of issuing a substitute command for executing, as a substitute-execution-subject program, the first-layer program that had been executed by the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred; and

wherein in the substitute command output processing step, a
25 substitute command for causing the second-layer computer to execute the substitute-execution-subject program is issued in accordance with selection information selected in the selection processing step.

9. The facility controlling method as defined in claim 8, characterized in that
30 in the substitute command output processing step, a substitute command is issued for causing the second-layer computer to execute, as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, all of the first-layer program or programs that had been executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred.

35 10. The facility controlling method as defined in claim 8, characterized in

that

a plurality of the first-layer programs are executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers, wherein, in the selection processing step, a part of the plurality of the first-layer programs that had been
5 executed by one or more of the first-layer computer or computers in which the abnormal condition occurred is selected as the substitute-execution-subject program or programs, and

wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, a substitute command is issued for causing the second-layer computer to
10 execute the substitute-execution-subject program or programs that is or are selected in the selection processing step.

11. The facility controlling method as defined in one of claims 8-10, further comprising, as a step performed by the facility control system:

15 a buffer processing step of relaying data for the task command and data for the operation result communicated between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer,

wherein, in the buffer processing step, an exchange of the data between the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer is relayed
20 based on identifying information assigned to each of the first-layer computer and the second-layer computer, and

wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, an identifying information take over command is issued for causing the second-layer computer to take over the identifying information that had been
25 assigned to the first-layer computer in which the abnormal condition occurred, before outputting the substitute command.

12. The facility controlling method as defined in one of claims 8-11, characterized in that

30 the facility control system further includes a monitoring computer that executes a monitoring program which collects and displays information on an operational state of the facility apparatus from the first-layer computer or the second-layer computer,

wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, a second
35 substitution command is issued for executing the monitoring program that had been executed by the monitoring computer in which an abnormal

condition occurred, as a second substitute-execution-subject program, and
wherein, in the substitute command output processing step, the
second substitution command is issued to the second-layer computer based
on a selection information selected in the selection processing step.

5

13. The facility controlling method as defined in one of claims 8-12,
characterized in that

10 a plurality of the first-layer computers are provided in the facility
control system, wherein two or more of the first-layer computers are defined
as first-layer substitution candidate computers that can execute the
substitute-execution-subject program,

15 wherein, in the selection processing step, one of the first-layer
computers, that are defined as the first-layer substitution candidate
computers except for the first-layer computer in which the abnormal
condition occurred, is selected for executing the substitute-execution-subject
program, based on a manual operation.

14. The facility controlling method as defined in one of claims 8-13,
characterized in that

20 the facility apparatus is an article transport device in a distribution
facility,

wherein the first-layer computer is configured to manage the
apparatus controller that controls the operation of the article transport
device,

25 wherein the second-layer computer is configured to manage article
transport information for the entire distribution facility, and

wherein the task request is a transport request for an article in the
distribution facility.