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Systems and methods for adapting robotic retrieval to increasingly dense container arrangements

Abstract

Provided is a robotic retrieval system that adapts robot operations to different densities with which containers are stored. The system determines a position of a particular container in a slot. The system selects a first side of the slot from which to gain access to the particular container based on the particular container being blocked from the first side by a first number of containers and from an opposite second side by a larger second number of containers. The system uses robots to advance the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot by removing the first number of containers from the first side, and by inserting the first number of containers into the second side, and to transfer the particular container to a target destination after advancing the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side.

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Background/Summary

BACKGROUND

(1) Robots performing container or object retrieval or placement have limited reach. For instance, a robot that moves to a position before a rack may be able to extend a gripper a specified distance to grab a container from the rack. If the container is inset within the rack by more than the specified distance, the robot will be unable to engage and retrieve that container. Accordingly, warehouses that rely on the robots for container retrieval and placement adapt the rack configurations and the number of containers on the racks according to the robots' reach.

(2) FIG. 1 presents a prior art image of a warehouse layout that modifies the rack configurations and the density of containers stored on the racks to accommodate the limited reach of the robots. In FIG. 1, the robots have a reach that is limited to the containers at the rack edge or side. Accordingly, each rack is adapted to hold one container on either side to allow the robots to retrieve or place the containers about either side of the rack. Such a layout and usage of racks that are two containers deep result in lots of wasted space. Specifically, more aisles of empty space are created to accommodate the robots' limited reach to containers on the rack edges or sides.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

(1) FIG. 1 presents a prior art image of a warehouse layout that modifies the rack configurations and the density of containers stored on the racks to accommodate the limited reach of the robots.

(2) FIG. 2 illustrates a robotic retrieval system that adapts robotic retrieval and placement operations to increased densities of a modified storage architecture in accordance with some

embodiments presented herein.

(3) FIG. 3 illustrates an example of adapting the operations of one or more robots to access a container that is stacked behind other containers in a container slot of a densely arranged rack in accordance with some embodiments presented herein.

(4) FIG. 4 illustrates an example of using the tracked states of neighboring containers to optimize current and future operations in accordance with some embodiments presented herein.

(5) FIG. 5 illustrates an example of using container access history to modify robotic retrieval and placement of containers in accordance with some embodiments.

(6) FIG. 6 illustrates an example of modifying robotic retrieval and placement of containers based on predictive analytics in accordance with some embodiments.

(7) FIG. 7 presents a process for performing an optimized robotic retrieval of containers from a densely stacked arrangement of containers in accordance with some embodiments.

(8) FIG. 8 illustrates example components of one or more devices, according to one or more embodiments described herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

(9) The following detailed description refers to the accompanying drawings. The same reference numbers in different drawings may identify the same or similar elements.

(10) Provided are systems and methods for adapting robotic retrieval to increasingly dense container arrangements. Specifically, the system and methods increase the container density (e.g., the rack width and the number of containers that are stacked behind one another in a column) on storage racks within a storage facility, and increase the container depth that each robot is able to access without extending the robots' reach or modifying other robotic hardware for the increasingly dense container arrangements. Consequently, the robots are made to adapt to the density of the container arrangements rather than adapting the density of the container arrangements to the robots. This results in the warehouse or other storage facility, that employs the robots for container retrieval and placement, having fewer aisles for robots to move between, and the reduced aisle space is instead reconfigures for larger width racks that hold more than two containers in each slot, column, and/or row.

(11) FIG. 2 illustrates a robotic retrieval system that adapts robotic retrieval and placement operations to increased densities of a modified storage architecture in accordance with some embodiments presented herein. The robotic retrieval system includes controller **201** and robots **203**. The modified storage architecture includes a storage facility with racks. Each rack has one or more shelves at one or more heights that are reachable by robots **203**. Each rack shelf has one or more container slots, and each container slot has a width that accommodates three or more containers. As shown in FIG. 2, each container slot holds five containers stacked behind one another such that the retrieval of middle container **205** from container slot **207** requires the two containers in front of or behind middle container **205** (e.g., on either side of middle container **205**) to be moved before middle container **205** can be accessed. A container includes a box, receptacle, tote, package, or another object that holds one or more items.

(12) Robots **203** correspond to autonomous devices or machines that perform retrieval and placement operations without human intervention. Each robot **203** includes a motorized base, a lift, a retrieval element, a set of sensors, and/or other actuators and compute resources (e.g., one or more hardware processors, memory, storage, network connectivity, etc.).

(13) The motorized base includes one or more motors, wheels, articulating legs, and/or other means of locomotion to move a robot **203** within the modified storage architecture. The lift raises the retrieval element to different heights or different shelves. The retrieval element includes an articulating arm, a suction cup, vacuum, gripper arm, crane, and/or other means for engaging a container or another object from a side, top, or bottom, and for moving the engaged container off of or onto a particular container slot about a rack shelf. Specifically, robots **203** use the motorized base, lift, retrieval elements, sensors, actuators, and/or compute resources to move within the

storage facility, align with a vertical and horizontal position (e.g., a position in three-dimensional (“3D”) space) of a container or a container slot where a desired container is located, and to retrieve or place a container at the aligned position.

(14) However, the range of the retrieval element is limited. The retrieval element extends a distance that is less than a depth at which one or more of the containers within a rack are positioned. In other words, the reach of the retrieval element may prevent robots **203** from engaging containers that are not at the edge of the rack or that are arranged one or more containers behind the frontmost or outermost container on either the front side or the back side of any of the container slots on the different rack shelves. Nevertheless, these reach limitations are overcome by the robotic retrieval system and associated methods of operations.

(15) In some embodiments, controller **201** includes one or more devices that are separate from but that wirelessly communicate with robots **203**. In some other embodiments, controller **201** is a distributed system that is embedded as part of each robot **203**. Controller **201** tracks state of each container and controls or coordinates the retrieval and placement operations performed by robots **203**.

(16) The tracked state includes the current position of each container about the different container slots of the different shelves of the different racks within the modified storage architecture. In some embodiments, controller **201** tracks and updates the container positions based on messaging that is provided by robots **203** as they move containers. For instance, each container may include a first machine-readable fiducial that robots **203** scan to identify the container that is being moved, and each side or face of a container slot about a rack (e.g., the front and back sides) may include a different second machine-readable fiducial that robots **203** scan to identify the position that the container is being moved from or moved to (e.g., which side of which container slot a container is placed or retrieved from). Controller **201** tracks the depth of the containers within a container slot on a rack shelf based on the number of containers that are inserted or removed from either side of that container slot. Accordingly, when a first container is inserted into a front side of a particular container slot, controller **201** updates the positioning of the first container to be at the front side of the particular container slot, and also updates any other containers stored in the particular container slot that have been shifted one container position to the back side of the particular container slot as a result of inserting of the first container to the front side.

(17) The tracked state also includes access history of each container. The access history includes the number of times a container is retrieved as part of fulfilling different orders over a period of time, the frequency with which the container is requested, the remaining items in the container, patterns associated with the container retrieval, and/or events that are associated with the container retrieval.

(18) In some embodiments, controller **201** coordinates the operations of robots **203** based on the tracked container state. For instance, controller **201** determines a repositioning or movement of containers that is necessary for a robot **203** to gain access to a particular container that is stacked behind one or more containers in a container slot.

(19) FIG. 3 illustrates an example of adapting the operations of one or more robots to access a container that is stacked behind other containers in a container slot of a densely arranged rack in accordance with some embodiments presented herein. As shown in FIG. 3, controller **201** receives (at **302**) a request for retrieval of container **301**.

(20) Controller **201** locates a position of container **301** based on the tracked states and/or tracked positions of the containers within the site. Controller **201** determines that container **301** is the fourth container from the front side of a five stacked arrangement of containers in a particular slot of a rack.

(21) Based on the tracked state and/or tracked position of container **301**, controller **201** computes (at **304**) a most efficient retrieval of container **301**. The most efficient retrieval corresponds to the fewest robotic movements and/or operations that open access to container **301**. For instance,

controller **201** determines that three containers have to be removed before gaining access to container **301** from the front side, whereas only one container has to be removed before gaining access to container **301** from the back side of the particular slot of the rack.

(22) Controller **201** coordinates the operation of one or more robots **203** to access container **301** from the back side of the particular slot that is computed (at **304**) to be the most efficient retrieval of container **301**. Coordinating the operation of the one or more robots includes controlling first robot **203-1** in retrieving (at **306**) container **303**, that is the frontmost or outermost container at the back side of the particular slot, and in placing (at **308**) container **303** at the front side of the particular slot.

(23) By placing (at **308**) container **303** at the front side of the particular slot, first robot **203-1** pushes (at **310**) all other containers in the particular slot towards the back side. Consequently, targeted container **301** becomes the frontmost or outermost container at the back side of the particular slot.

(24) Coordinating the operation of the one or more robots further includes using first robot **203-1** or another second robot **203-2** to retrieve (at **312**) container **301** from the back side of the particular slot. In this manner, the robotic retrieval system allows for the site or storage facility to increase the density of containers that are stored in each container slot of a rack, and adapts one or more robots **203** with limited reach to access any container from any position or depth in the container slots without adapting the site configuration to accommodate the limited reach of robots **203** or modifying the retrieval element and/or other hardware used by robots **203** to retrieve, place, move, and/or otherwise interact with the containers. Consequently, the site requires fewer aisles for robots **203** to navigate between in order to access different containers from the dense arrangements. The reduced aisle space may instead be allocated to racks that have larger widths and that store more containers in a given container slot. Accordingly, the robotic retrieval systems adapts robots **203** to operate with increasingly dense container arrangements and/or in sites that store containers with different densities (e.g., slots with three containers, with four containers, etc.) without modifying robots **203** for longer or extended reach to access containers at different depths of the different container arrangements.

(25) The robotic retrieval system further optimizes the operation of robots **203** by leveraging the container state in other slots in determining which containers to move and where to move them to in order to gain access to a targeted container. In other words, rather than place a container retrieved from one side of a particular slot to the opposite side of the slot, the robotic retrieval system analyzes the state of the retrieved container and the state of containers in other slots to determine whether placement in a neighboring slot reduces the number of operations needed to access a targeted container, reduces the future retrieval time for the retrieved container, and/or reduces overall order fulfillment time for the current order and future or pending orders. For instance, placing the retrieved container in another slot may prevent the retrieved container from becoming stacked behind other containers during a subsequent retrieval or may place the retrieved container in a slot that is closer to a destination for a subsequent retrieval of that container.

(26) FIG. 4 illustrates an example of using the tracked states of neighboring containers to optimize current and future operations in accordance with some embodiments presented herein. Controller **201** receives (at **402**) a request to transfer container **401** to a particular destination as part of a fulfilling a first received order.

(27) Controller **201** looks (at **404**) up the state of container **401** to determine the position of container **401** and to further determine that container **401** is positioned behind another container **403** that is the frontmost container about the front side of a particular slot. Controller **201** looks up or obtains (at **406**) the state associated with other containers in the storage facility. Based on the obtained (at **406**) container states, controller **201** determines that neighboring slot **405** is not full and is therefore able to accommodate another container.

(28) Controller **201** also monitors the state of each robot **203-1**, **203-2**, and **203-3** based on

messaging provided by robots **203-1**, **203-2**, and **203-3** to controller **201**. The tracked robot state includes the position of each robot **203-1**, **203-2**, and **203-3** and/or a number of operations the robot is configured to perform.

(29) Based on the holistic container state, controller **201** determines the fewest number of container moves required to retrieve container **401**. To determine the fewest number of container moves, controller **201** may simulate different retrievals and placements of containers in different container slots with different robots **203-1**, **203-2**, and **203-3**, and may compute an estimated time and/or the number of movements associated with performing each simulated set of retrievals and placements in order to determine the retrievals and placements that result in the fewest number of container moves. In this example, the fewest number of container moves involves coordinated operation by two robot about the front and back sides of the rack storing containers **401** and **403**.

(30) Controller **201** selects (at **408**) second robot **203-2** to perform a first set of operations about the front side of the rack with containers **401** and **403**, and first robot **203-1** to perform a second set of operations about the back side of the rack with containers **401** and **403** based on the monitored robot states. Specifically, controller **201** determines that second robot **203-2** is the closest available robot to container **401**, and that first robot **203-1** is the closest available robot to the back side of the particular slot with containers **401** and **403**.

(31) Selecting (at **408**) second robot **203-2** and first robot **203-1** includes sending messaging from controller **201** to second robot **203-2** that configures and activates second robot **203-2** to execute the first set of operations about the front side of the rack, and sending messaging from controller **201** to first robot **203-1** that configures and activates first robot **203-1** to execute the second set of operations about the back side of the rack. Moreover, controller **201** coordinates the execution of the different sets of operations as execution of the second set of operations may be dependent on one or more of the first set of operations being completed.

(32) Second robot **203-2** moves (at **410**) frontmost container **403** to the front side of neighboring slot **405** which is a shorter distance to travel than moving container **403** down the aisle and to the back side of the particular slot from which container **403** was retrieved. Contemporaneously, first robot **203-1** retrieves container **407** that is the frontmost container on the back side of slot **405**, and pushes (at **412**) container **407** in from the back side of the particular slot with container **401**. Pushing (at **412**) container **407** into the back side of the particular slot causes all other containers in the particular slot to shift to the front side by one container position. Specifically, container **401** is pushed one container position to the front side, thereby becoming the frontmost container about the front side of the particular slot. Second robot **203-2** then completes the first set of operations by retrieving and transferring (at **414**) container **401** to the target destination.

(33) Robot **203** moves back to the particular slot, retrieves container **401**, and transfers (at **412**) container **401** to the desired destination. In some embodiments, the retrieval element of robot **203** has sufficient reach to directly engage and/or retrieve containers that are the first or second containers in a stacked arrangement (e.g., the container at the edge of a slot or a container at a depth that is one container removed from the slot edge), thereby allowing robot **203** to retrieve container **401** without moving container **403** to the back side of the particular slot and pushing all other containers including container **401** one container position closer to the front side with the insertion of container **403** about the back side of the particular slot. In some other embodiments, the particular slot may be gravity fed or at an incline such that removal of frontmost container **403** causes all other containers in the particular slot to slide down one container position closer to the front side of the particular slot.

(34) As shown in FIG. 4, the robotic retrieval system was able to access container **401** by moving container **403** over two slots about the front side of the rack, and by moving container **407** over two slots about the back side of the rack which results in fewer robotic movements than moving container **403** from the front side of the particular slot over to the back side of the particular slot. In other words, the robotic retrieval system leverages the container states and coordinate operations

between second robot **203-2** and first robot **203-1** to retrieve and transfer container **401** to the desired destination in less time than it would have taken if only one robot was used or if a robot retrieved container **403** from the front side of the particular slot and pushed container **403** into the back side of the particular slot.

(35) The robotic retrieval system may use additional container state besides the container positions to optimize the container retrieval and placement operations. For instance, container states such as tracked access history (e.g., last accessed time, frequency of access, percentage of orders involving a container, etc.), future or pending orders that involve a container, and/or other events that affect the frequency or timing with which the containers have been accessed in the past or will be accessed in the future may be used to coordinate the operations of the robots and control where retrieved containers are placed in order to open access to a targeted container. In some embodiments, predictive analytics may be derived from the container states and may be used for optimization of the container retrieval and placement operations.

(36) FIG. 5 illustrates an example of using container access history to modify robotic retrieval and placement of containers in accordance with some embodiments. Controller **201** receives (at **502**) a request for a targeted container **501** that is the second container from the front side of a particular slot of a rack.

(37) Controller **201** obtains (at **504**) comprehensive state for targeted container **501** and other containers stored within the same site or distributed amongst the racks in the common space. The comprehensive state includes the location, access history, and predictive analytics for each container. The access history and predictive analytics identify if a particular container is required to fulfill part of a future or pending order or the likelihood that items within the particular container will be ordered as part of future order.

(38) From the obtained (at **504**) comprehensive state, controller **201** identifies (at **506**) directly neighboring slot **507** with four containers and one open container slot, and slot **509** that is three slots away from the particular slot with four containers and one open container slot. Controller **201** analyzes the state of the containers in slots **507** and **509**, and determines (at **506**) that the frontmost containers in slot **507** are or will likely be required to fulfill future orders, whereas the containers in slot **509** are not and will likely not be required to fulfill future orders.

(39) Controller **201** determines the minimal number of robotic and/or containers movements for fulfilling the current order involving container **501** and also the future or pending orders. Even though moving frontmost container **503** from the particular slot to slot **507** requires less movements and can be completed in less time than moving container **503** to slot **509**, moving container **503** to slot **507** would increase the number of operations or movements that are needed to fulfill the future orders involving the containers in slot **507**. In other words, moving container **503** to slot **507** reduces the time to execute the current order involving container **501**, but increases the time to execute future orders. Accordingly, controller **201** defines the coordinated operations to avoid blocking the containers at the edges of the closer slot **507** and to move container **503** from the particular slot over to slot **509** so that execution time of the future orders is not increased. Controller **201** activates first robot **203-1** and second robot **203-2** to perform the coordinated operations.

(40) In response to the activations and coordinated operations, first robot **203-1** moves (at **508**) first container **503** from the front side of the particular slot to the front side of slot **509**. First robot **203-1** pushes first container **503** into slot **509** from the front side of slot **509** using its retrieval element. First robot **203-1** signals controller **201** once first container **503** has been moved. In some embodiments, first robot **203-1** provides the updated state (e.g., location) of first container **503** to controller **201**. The updated state indicates that first container **503** is now the frontmost container about the front side of slot **509** and that the particular slot now has an open container position.

(41) In response to the activations, the coordinated operations, and the signaling or updated state provided by first robot **203-1**, second robot **203-2** pushes (at **510**) container **505**, that is retrieved

from the back side of the closest slot to the particular slot, into the back side of the particular slot. These operations cause container **501** to move and become the frontmost container on the front side of the particular slot. Second robot **203-2** updates the state of container **505** and/or the states or positions of the other affected containers in the particular slot.

(42) In response to updated state from second robot **203-2**, controller **201** activates first robot **203-1** in moving (at **512**) container **501** from the frontmost position on the front side of the particular slot to a desired destination. The robotic retrieval system therefore simultaneously optimizes access to containers for future orders when moving those containers to open access to a particular container for a current order via an optimized set of operations that minimize robot and/or container movements without blocking access to the containers needed to fulfill future and/or pending orders.

(43) FIG. **6** illustrates an example of modifying robotic retrieval and placement of containers based on predictive analytics in accordance with some embodiments. Controller **201** receives (at **602**) an order that involves one or more items in container **601**. Controller **201** obtains (at **604**) the state of container **601** and other containers stored within the site, and determines that container **601** is located behind container **603** about the front side of a particular slot. Accordingly, container **603** has to be moved in order to gain access to container **601**.

(44) Controller **201** derives (at **606**) predictive analytics associated with container **603** based on the obtained (at **604**) state of container **603** and various tracked events. For example, deriving (at **606**) the predictive analytics may include analyzing the access history of container **603** to determine that container **603** becomes popular at an upcoming time of day or in the near future. Deriving (at **606**) the predictive analytics may also include predicting a probability that container **603** is to be accessed in the near future based on monitored events. For instance, controller **201** may track sales that reduce the price of the items contained in container **603**, marketing campaigns that promote the items contained in container **603**, seasonality, weather changes, news events, and/or other events that impact the demand for container **603**. Controller **201** may model behavioral patterns that associate different events or changes in events to demand changes affecting different containers.

(45) Based on the derived (at **606**) predictive analytics, controller **201** determines that container **603** is associated with a high priority, wherein the high priority indicates a high probability (e.g., greater than 80% likelihood) of the container **603** being requested in the next hour. Rather than move container **603** to closest slot **605** with an open container position or use container **603** to push container **601** to the front side of the particular slot, controller **201** optimizes the future retrieval of container **603** by identifying an open container position in slot **607** that is closest to target destination **609** where order fulfillment takes place.

(46) Controller **201** directs first robot **203-1** in retrieving and placing (at **608**) container **603** to slot **607** that has an open container position and that is closest to order fulfillment destination **609**. Controller **201** then identifies a container to push in from the back side of the particular slot storing container **601** in order to advance container **601** to the front side of the particular slot. However, rather than select any container to move, controller **201** derives the predictive analytics for the containers to identify high priority container that may be moved closer to target destination **609** or a low priority container that may be moved further away from target destination **609**.

(47) As shown in FIG. **6**, controller **201** determines that container **611**, that has become the frontmost container on the back side of slot **607** as a result of placing (at **608**) container **603** to the front side of slot **607**, is a low priority container or a container that has a low probability of included as part of a future order. Accordingly, controller **201** directs second robot **203-2** in moving (at **610**) container **611** from slot **607** to the back side of the particular slot where target container **601** is located. Consequently, target container **601** shifts a container position to the front side of the particular slot and becomes the frontmost container about the front side of the particular slot. The robotic retrieval system therefore makes target container **601** accessible while simultaneously reducing time for fulfilling future order by moving high priority container **603** closer to target destination **609** so that it may be transferred to target destination **609** in less time when requested as

part of a future order, and by moving low priority container **611** further away from target destination **609** so that another position open in slot **607** for placement of another high priority container.

(48) First robot **203-1** or a third robot then retrieves and transfers (at **612**) target container **601** to target destination **609**. One or more agents retrieve a desired quantity of items from container **601** at target destination **609** in order to fulfill the received order before a robot returns container **601** to a slot with an open container position that is selected based on the state and predictive analytics associated with container **601**.

(49) In this manner, the robotic retrieval system optimizes current, future, and predicted retrieval tasks at the same time instead of simply minimizing the retrieval time for a current order that is being fulfilled. As shown in FIG. **6**, first robot **203-1** and second robot **203-2** perform coordinated operations that not only minimize the retrieval time associated with requested container **601**, but that also optimize the placement of containers **603** and **611** based on derived predictive analytics for expected future usage of those containers **603** and **611** as part of yet to be received orders.

(50) FIG. **7** presents a process **700** for performing an optimized robotic retrieval of containers from a densely stacked arrangement of containers in accordance with some embodiments. The densely stacked container arrangement prevents robots **203** from directly accessing containers that are located behind other containers and/or from reaching containers that are not a specified distance from robots **203** or the reach of their retrieval elements. Process **700** is implemented by controller **201** and robots **203** of the robotic retrieval system.

(51) Process **700** includes receiving (at **702**) an order for one or more items stored within a particular container. In some embodiments, a set of received orders may be queued by the robotic retrieval system, and the robotic retrieval system may determine an optimized order with which to fulfill the set of orders. For instance, the robotic retrieval system may scan the orders to determine which orders include the same items that are stored in the same containers, and may change the fulfillment sequence to batch fulfill orders that include the same items so that the same containers are retrieved once.

(52) Process **700** includes obtaining (at **704**) container state for the particular container and other containers in the same storage facility as the particular container. The container state identifies the current position of each container within the storage facility. The current position includes the rack, the slot within the rack, and the container position within the slot for each container. Each time a robot moves a container into or out of a slot, the state or position of that container and other containers in that slot may be updated. The container state further identifies access histories associated with each container. The access history tracks the number of times that each container is included as part of an order as well as events associated with a requested container. The events may include different sales, marketing campaigns, temporal events, news, specific web searches, and/or other data that impacts when a container is requested.

(53) Process **700** includes deriving (at **706**) predictive analytics for the particular container and other containers based on the container state. Deriving (at **706**) the predictive analytics includes predicting a probability that each container will be accessed in the future based on trends or patterns in the access history, in incoming and past orders, and/or associations between events and each container.

(54) Process **700** includes determining (at **708**) the fewest robotic operations for accessing the particular container based on the container states. Determining (at **708**) the fewest robotic operations includes determining whether it is more efficient to access the particular container from the front side or the back side of the rack or slot where the particular container is stored based on the number of other containers that need to be moved from each of the front side or the back side. Determining (at **708**) the fewest robotic operations further includes determining the fewest operations for moving the other containers that block access to the particular container, and for moving the particular container to a slot position where it is directly accessible by a robot. Moving

the other containers includes identifying other slots with open container positions that the robots can move the other containers to in the least amount of time.

(55) Process **700** includes defining (at **710**) a modified set of robotic operations to optimize fulfillment of the current order and also future or pending orders based on the states associated with the other containers that need to be moved to open access to the particular container and/or to move the particular container to a position that is accessible by the robots. Defining (at **710**) the modified set of robotic operations includes adjusting the determined (at **708**) fewest robotic operations based on whether the other containers may be buried in the middle of a slot or placed in a slot far away from an order fulfillment destination, or if the other containers have probabilities that exceed a threshold for being requested as part of a future order or are already requested as part of a pending future order in which case the other containers are to be moved closer to the order fulfillment destination and/or placed as a frontmost container of a slot rather than be pushed deeper into a slot and be blocked by one or more other containers. Accordingly, the modified set of robotic operations may require more movements or more time to complete than the determined (at **708**) fewest robotic operations. However, the modified set of robotic operations reduce the operations and time needed to access containers for future orders, thereby reducing the overall time and overall number of operations performed by the robots to fulfill a set of orders.

(56) Process **700** includes selecting (at **712**) one or more robots to execute the modified set of operations. The selection (at **712**) of robots is based on the current state of each robot. For instance, controller **201** tracks a position of each robot based on signaling provided by the robots to controller **201** as they retrieve, place, or move containers from the racks or based on previous operations that were assigned and executed by each robot. Controller **201** also tracks whether a robot is idle, the number of operations that a robot has to complete, and/or performance history of each robot. Controller **201** selects (at **712**) the one or more robots that are available or will be available in the shortest amount of time and that are closest to the positions of the containers that are to be moved as part of the modified set of operations for accessing the particular container. For instance, controller **201** selects (at **712**) a first robot to move a blocking container and access the particular container from a front side of the slot where the particular container is stored, and selects (at **712**) a second robot to retrieve other containers from a back side of other slots and to push those containers into the back side of the slot where the particular container is stored in order to advance the particular container closer to the front side once the first robot removes the blocking containers.

(57) Process **700** includes activating (at **712**) the one or more robots for coordinated execution of the modified set of operations. The coordinated execution involves determining dependencies between different subsets of the modified set of operations. The dependencies include waiting for a removal of one container from a particular slot before another container can be inserted into that particular slot or before other containers in the particular slot may be shifted toward a front side or back side of the particular side. Accordingly, the coordinated execution involves a specific sequencing with which each robot of the one or more robots performs different subsets of the modified set of operations to advance the particular container to a frontmost position and to retrieve the particular container from the frontmost position with the fewest number of robotic operations and/or movements of other containers that also optimizes the future retrieval of the other containers.

(58) Process **700** include moving (at **714**) one or more containers that block the particular container based on the one or more robots executing a first subset of the modified set of operations, adjusting (at **716**) a position of the particular container so that it becomes accessible or within reach of the robots' retrieval element based on the one or more robots executing a second subset of the modified set of operations, and transferring (at **718**) the particular container to a target destination based on the one or more robots executing a third subset of the modified set of operations. Accordingly, the one or more robots autonomously access and transfer the particular container to the target destination in an optimized manner without human intervention while simultaneously optimizing

access to the other containers that were moved for fulfillment for more efficient fulfillment of future or pending orders, wherein the more efficient fulfillment corresponds to completing the future or pending orders in less time and/or with fewer robotic movements than if the other containers remained in their original position.

(59) FIG. 8 is a diagram of example components of device **800**. Device **800** may be used to implement one or more of the devices or systems described above (e.g., the robotic retrieval system, controller **201**, robots **203**, etc.). Device **800** may include bus **810**, processor **820**, memory **830**, input component **840**, output component **850**, and communication interface **860**. In another implementation, device **800** may include additional, fewer, different, or differently arranged components.

(60) Bus **810** may include one or more communication paths that permit communication among the components of device **800**. Processor **820** may include a processor, microprocessor, or processing logic that may interpret and execute instructions. Memory **830** may include any type of dynamic storage device that may store information and instructions for execution by processor **820**, and/or any type of non-volatile storage device that may store information for use by processor **820**.

(61) Input component **840** may include a mechanism that permits an operator to input information to device **800**, such as a keyboard, a keypad, a button, a switch, etc. Output component **850** may include a mechanism that outputs information to the operator, such as a display, a speaker, one or more LEDs, etc.

(62) Communication interface **860** may include any transceiver-like mechanism that enables device **800** to communicate with other devices and/or systems. For example, communication interface **860** may include an Ethernet interface, an optical interface, a coaxial interface, or the like.

Communication interface **860** may include a wireless communication device, such as an infrared (“IR”) receiver, a Bluetooth® radio, or the like. The wireless communication device may be coupled to an external device, such as a remote control, a wireless keyboard, a mobile telephone, etc. In some embodiments, device **800** may include more than one communication interface **860**. For instance, device **800** may include an optical interface and an Ethernet interface.

(63) Device **800** may perform certain operations relating to one or more processes described above. Device **800** may perform these operations in response to processor **820** executing software instructions stored in a computer-readable medium, such as memory **830**. A computer-readable medium may be defined as a non-transitory memory device. A memory device may include space within a single physical memory device or spread across multiple physical memory devices. The software instructions may be read into memory **830** from another computer-readable medium or from another device. The software instructions stored in memory **830** may cause processor **820** to perform processes described herein. Alternatively, hardwired circuitry may be used in place of or in combination with software instructions to implement processes described herein. Thus, implementations described herein are not limited to any specific combination of hardware circuitry and software.

(64) The foregoing description of implementations provides illustration and description, but is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the possible implementations to the precise form disclosed. Modifications and variations are possible in light of the above disclosure or may be acquired from practice of the implementations.

(65) The actual software code or specialized control hardware used to implement an embodiment is not limiting of the embodiment. Thus, the operation and behavior of the embodiment has been described without reference to the specific software code, it being understood that software and control hardware may be designed based on the description herein.

(66) For example, while series of messages, blocks, and/or signals have been described with regard to some of the above figures, the order of the messages, blocks, and/or signals may be modified in other implementations. Further, non-dependent blocks and/or signals may be performed in parallel. Additionally, while the figures have been described in the context of particular devices performing

particular acts, in practice, one or more other devices may perform some or all of these acts in lieu of, or in addition to, the above-mentioned devices.

(67) Even though particular combinations of features are recited in the claims and/or disclosed in the specification, these combinations are not intended to limit the disclosure of the possible implementations. In fact, many of these features may be combined in ways not specifically recited in the claims and/or disclosed in the specification. Although each dependent claim listed below may directly depend on only one other claim, the disclosure of the possible implementations includes each dependent claim in combination with every other claim in the claim set.

(68) Further, while certain connections or devices are shown, in practice, additional, fewer, or different, connections or devices may be used. Furthermore, while various devices and networks are shown separately, in practice, the functionality of multiple devices may be performed by a single device, or the functionality of one device may be performed by multiple devices. Further, while some devices are shown as communicating with a network, some such devices may be incorporated, in whole or in part, as a part of the network.

(69) To the extent the aforementioned embodiments collect, store or employ personal information provided by individuals, it should be understood that such information shall be used in accordance with all applicable laws concerning protection of personal information. Additionally, the collection, storage and use of such information may be subject to consent of the individual to such activity, for example, through well-known “opt-in” or “opt-out” processes as may be appropriate for the situation and type of information. Storage and use of personal information may be in an appropriately secure manner reflective of the type of information, for example, through various encryption and anonymization techniques for particularly sensitive information.

(70) Some implementations described herein may be described in conjunction with thresholds. The term “greater than” (or similar terms), as used herein to describe a relationship of a value to a threshold, may be used interchangeably with the term “greater than or equal to” (or similar terms). Similarly, the term “less than” (or similar terms), as used herein to describe a relationship of a value to a threshold, may be used interchangeably with the term “less than or equal to” (or similar terms). As used herein, “exceeding” a threshold (or similar terms) may be used interchangeably with “being greater than a threshold,” “being greater than or equal to a threshold,” “being less than a threshold,” “being less than or equal to a threshold,” or other similar terms, depending on the context in which the threshold is used.

(71) No element, act, or instruction used in the present application should be construed as critical or essential unless explicitly described as such. An instance of the use of the term “and,” as used herein, does not necessarily preclude the interpretation that the phrase “and/or” was intended in that instance. Similarly, an instance of the use of the term “or,” as used herein, does not necessarily preclude the interpretation that the phrase “and/or” was intended in that instance. Also, as used herein, the article “a” is intended to include one or more items, and may be used interchangeably with the phrase “one or more.” Where only one item is intended, the terms “one,” “single,” “only,” or similar language is used. Further, the phrase “based on” is intended to mean “based, at least in part, on” unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Claims

1. A method comprising: receiving a request for a particular container from a plurality of containers, wherein the plurality of containers are distributed across a plurality of slots, wherein each slot of the plurality of slots holds three or more of the plurality of containers; determining a position of the particular container within a particular slot of the plurality of slots based on signaling provided by a set of robots; selecting a first side of the particular slot from which to gain access to the particular container based on the particular container being blocked from the first side by a first number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a

frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot, and the particular container being blocked from an opposite second side of the particular slot by a second number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a frontmost position at the second side of the particular slot, wherein the first number of containers is less than the second number of containers; advancing the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot by removing the first number of containers from the first side of the particular slot using the set of robots, and by inserting the first number of containers into the second side of the particular slot using the set of robots; and transferring the particular container from the frontmost position at the first side to a target destination with a particular robot from the set of robots after advancing the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein removing the first number of containers comprises removing a first container of the plurality of containers from the first side with a first robot of the set of robots; and wherein inserting the first number of containers comprises placing the first container at the second side with the first robot after the first robot transfers the first container from the first side to the second side.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein removing the first number of containers comprises removing a first container of the plurality of containers from the first side with a first robot of the set of robots and placing the first container into the first side of a first slot from the plurality of slots that is a closest slot to the particular slot with an open container position; and wherein inserting the first number of containers comprises retrieving a second container of the plurality of containers from the second side of a second slot from the plurality of slots with a second robot of the set of robots, and placing the second container into the second side of the particular slot with the second robot, wherein the first slot and the second slots are different slots than the particular slot.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein advancing the particular container comprises: removing a first container from the first side of the particular slot with a first robot of the set of robots; providing signaling from the first robot that the first container is removed from the first side of the particular slot; and activating a second robot of the set of robots in transferring a second container into the second side of the particular slot in response to the signaling from the first robot.

5. The method of claim 4 further comprising: providing signaling from the second robot that the second container is added to the second side of the particular slot; and updating positions of a subset of the plurality of containers in the particular slot in response to the signaling from the second robot, wherein updating the positions comprises changing the position of the particular container to be one container position closer to the frontmost position at the first side.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein transferring the particular container comprises: retrieving the particular container from the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot with the particular robot in response to the signaling from the second robot and changing the position of the particular container to the frontmost position.

7. The method of claim 1 further comprising: selecting a first set of slots from the plurality of slots with open container positions over a second set of slots from the plurality of slots with open container positions to receive the first number of containers that are removed from the first side of the particular slot in response to containers at the first side and the second side of the first set of slots not being part of a future set of orders and containers at the first side and the second side of the second set of slots being part of the future set of orders; and inserting each container of the first number of containers that is removed from the first side of the particular slot to the first side of one of the first set of slots.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein each robot of the set of robots comprises a retrieval element; and wherein the retrieval element extends a distance that is limited to engaging a container at the frontmost position on the first side or the second side of the plurality of slots.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein inserting the first number of containers comprises: pushing a subset of containers remaining in the particular slot one container position towards the first side of

the particular slot in response to each container that is inserted into the second side of the particular slot by the set of robots.

10. The method of claim 1 further comprising: determining a probability of a first container, that is positioned closer to the first side of the particular slot than the particular container and that is removed from the first side of the particular slot, being requested as part of a future order; inserting the first container to a first slot of the plurality of slots with an open container position that is closer to the target destination than a second slot of the plurality of slots with an open container position in response to the probability being greater than a threshold; and inserting the first container to the second slot in response to the probability being less than the threshold.

11. The method of claim 1 further comprising: determining that a first container, that is positioned closer to the first side of the particular slot than the particular container and that is removed from the first side of the particular slot by the set of robots, contains one or more items for a set of pending orders, and that a second container, that is positioned closer to the first side of the particular slot than the particular container and that is removed from the first side of the particular slot by the set of robots, does not contain one or more items for the set of pending orders; inserting the first container to a first slot of the plurality of slots with an open container position that is closer to the target destination than a second slot of the plurality of slots with an open container position in response to the first container containing the one or more items for the set of pending orders; and inserting the second container to the second slot in response to the second container not containing the one or more items for the set of pending orders.

12. A robotic retrieval system comprising: a controller comprising one or more hardware processors configured to: receive a request for a particular container from a plurality of containers, wherein the plurality of containers are distributed across a plurality of slots, wherein each slot of the plurality of slots holds three or more of the plurality of containers; determine a position of the particular container within a particular slot of the plurality of slots; and select a first side of the particular slot from which to gain access to the particular container based on the particular container being blocked from the first side by a first number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot, and the particular container being blocked from an opposite second side of the particular slot by a second number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a frontmost position at the second side of the particular slot, wherein the first number of containers is less than the second number of containers; and a set of robots operating under control of the controller, wherein the set of robots: advance the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot by removing the first number of containers from the first side of the particular slot, and by inserting the first number of containers into the second side of the particular slot; and transfer the particular container from the frontmost position at the first side to a target destination after advancing the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side.

13. The robotic retrieval system of claim 12, wherein removing the first number of containers comprises removing a first container of the plurality of containers from the first side with a first robot of the set of robots; and wherein inserting the first number of containers comprises placing the first container at the second side with the first robot after the first robot transfers the first container from the first side to the second side.

14. The robotic retrieval system of claim 12, wherein removing the first number of containers comprises removing a first container of the plurality of containers from the first side with a first robot of the set of robots and placing the first container into the first side of a first slot from the plurality of slots that is a closest slot to the particular slot with an open container position; and wherein inserting the first number of containers comprises retrieving a second container of the plurality of containers from the second side of a second slot from the plurality of slots with a second robot of the set of robots, and placing the second container into the second side of the particular slot with the second robot, wherein the first slot and the second slots are different slots

than the particular slot.

15. The robotic retrieval system of claim 12, wherein advancing the particular container comprises: removing a first container from the first side of the particular slot with a first robot of the set of robots; providing signaling from the first robot that the first container is removed from the first side of the particular slot; and activating a second robot of the set of robots in transferring a second container into the second side of the particular slot in response to the signaling from the first robot.

16. The robotic retrieval system of claim 15, wherein the one or more hardware processors are further configured to: receive signaling from the second robot that the second container is added to the second side of the particular slot; and update positions of a subset of the plurality of containers in the particular slot in response to the signaling from the second robot, wherein updating the positions comprises changing the position of the particular container to be one container position closer to the frontmost position at the first side.

17. The robotic retrieval system of claim 16, wherein transferring the particular container comprises: retrieving the particular container from the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot with a particular robot of the set of robots in response to the signaling from the second robot and changing the position of the particular container to the frontmost position.

18. The robotic retrieval system of claim 12, wherein the one or more hardware processors are further configured to select a first set of slots from the plurality of slots with open container positions over a second set of slots from the plurality of slots with open container positions to receive the first number of containers that are removed from the first side of the particular slot in response to containers at the first side and the second side of the first set of slots not being part of a future set of orders and containers at the first side and the second side of the second set of slots being part of the future set of orders; and wherein removing the first number of containers comprises inserting each container of the first number of containers that is removed from the first side of the particular slot to the first side of one of the first set of slots.

19. The robotic retrieval system of claim 12, wherein each robot of the set of robots comprises a retrieval element; and wherein the retrieval element extends a distance that is limited to engaging a container at the frontmost position on the first side or the second side of the plurality of slots.

20. A non-transitory computer-readable medium storing program instructions that, when executed by one or more hardware processors of a robotic retrieval system, cause the robotic retrieval system to perform operations comprising: receive a request for a particular container from a plurality of containers, wherein the plurality of containers are distributed across a plurality of slots, wherein each slot of the plurality of slots holds three or more of the plurality of containers; determine a position of the particular container within a particular slot of the plurality of slots based on signaling provided by a set of robots; select a first side of the particular slot from which to gain access to the particular container based on the particular container being blocked from the first side by a first number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot, and the particular container being blocked from an opposite second side of the particular slot by a second number of containers that are in between the position of the particular container and a frontmost position at the second side of the particular slot, wherein the first number of containers is less than the second number of containers; advance the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side of the particular slot by removing the first number of containers from the first side of the particular slot using the set of robots, and by inserting the first number of containers into the second side of the particular slot using the set of robots; and transfer the particular container from the frontmost position at the first side to a target destination with a particular robot from the set of robots after advancing the particular container to the frontmost position at the first side.
